



*Benjamin Honey—American, Bantu, Igbo—born enslaved—freed or fled at fifteen, only he ever knew—ship’s carpenter, aspiring orchardist, arrived on the island with his wife, Patience, née Raferty, Galway girl, in 1793. He brought his bag of tools—gifts from a grateful captain he had saved from drowning or plunder from a ship on which he had mutinied and murdered the captain, depending on who said—and a watertight wooden box containing twelve jute pouches. Each pouch held seeds for a different variety of apple. Honey collected the seeds during his years as a field-worker and later as a sailor. He remembered being in an orchard as a child, although not where or when, with his mother, or with a woman whose face over the years had become what he pictured as his mother’s, and he remembered the fragrance of the trees and their fruit. The memory became a vision of the garden to which he meant to return. No mystery, it was Eden. Years passed and he added seeds to his collection. He recited the names at night before he slept. Ashmead’s Kernel, Flower of Kent, Duchess of Oldenburg, and Warner’s King. Ballyfatten, Catshead.*

*After Benjamin and Patience Honey arrived on the island—hardly three hundred feet across a channel from the mainland, just under forty-two acres, twelve hundred feet across, east to west, and fifteen hundred feet long, north to south, uninhabited then, the only human trace an abandoned Penobscot shell berm—and after they had settled themselves, he planted his apple seeds.*

*Not a seed grew. Benjamin was so infuriated by his ignorance that over the next year he crossed to the mainland whenever he could spare some time and sought out orchards and their owners in the countryside beyond the village of six or seven houses, called Foxden, that stood directly across the channel from*

*the island, and traded his carpentry skills for seeds and advice about how they grew and how to cultivate the trees and their fruit.*

*Benjamin and Patience and their sons and daughters and grandsons and granddaughters and great-grandchildren kept more and more to the island as time passed, but in the final years of the eighteenth century it was not as dangerous as it came to be later for Black man to range the land. Any able-bodied adult who kept peace and lent a hand surviving was accepted. So the story went among his descendants. So, Benjamin rambled around and found farms where he could help raise a barn or split shingles or clear an acre for crops and came home with seeds that quickened and struck roots and elaborated themselves into the shapes of his remembered paradise.*

*Roxbury Russets, Rhode Island Greenings, Woodpeckers, and Newtown Pippins. Benjamin Honey kept an orchard of thirty-two apple trees that began to bear fruit in the late summer of 1814, a decade after he planted them. Pippins were perfect for pies, Woodpeckers for cider. Children bit sour Greenings on dares and laughed at one another when their eyes watered and mouths puckered. Russets were best straight from the tree.*

*Benjamin Honey surveyed his orchard in the cooling air and sharpening, iridescent, ocean-bent sunset light, the greens and purples deepening from their radiant flat day-bright into catacombs of shadowed fruit and limb and leaf. It felt as if his mother were somewhere among the rows. She might step from behind a tree in a white Sunday dress that took up the shifting light and colors and smile at him. He inhaled the perfume, salted, as everything on the island, and took a bite of the apple he held.*

ON THE FIRST day of spring, 1911, Esther Honey, great-granddaughter of Benjamin and Patience, dozed in her rocking chair by the woodstove in her cabin on Apple Island. Snow poured from the sky. Wind scoured the island and smacked the windows like giant hands and kicked the door like a giant heel and banked the snow up the north side of the shack until it reached the roof. The island a granite pebble in the frigid Atlantic shallows, the clouds so low their bellies scraped on the tip of the Penobscot pine at the top of the bluff.

Esther drowsed with her granddaughter, Charlotte, in her lap, curled up against her spare body, wrapped in a pane of Hudson's Bay wool from a blanket long ago cut into quarters and shared among her freezing ancestors and a century-old quilt stitched from tatters even older. The girl took little warmth from her rawboned grandmother and the old woman practically had no need for the heat her grandchild gave, no place, practically, to fit it, being so slight, and so long accustomed to the minimum warmth necessary for a body to keep living, but each was still comforted by the other.

Esther's son, Eha—Charlotte's father—rose from his stool and one at a time tossed four of the last dozen wooden shingles onto the embers in the stove. The relief society inexplicably had sent a pallet of the shingles to the settlement last summer. There was no need for them. Eha and Zachary Hand to God Proverbs were excellent carpenters and could make far finer cedar shingles than these. But as with each of the past four years, summer brought food and goods from the relief society, and some of the supplies were puzzling to the Apple Islanders, like the shingles, or

a horse saddle, once, for an island that only had a handful of humans and three dogs on it. With the food and stock also came Matthew Diamond, a single, retired schoolteacher who under the sponsorship of the Enon College of Theology and Mission traveled from somewhere in Massachusetts each June to stay in his summer home—visible on the mainland in clear weather 300 yards across the channel, in the village of Foxden—and row his boat to Apple Island each morning, where he preached, helped with a kitchen garden here, a leaky roof there, and taught lessons in the one-room schoolhouse he and Eha Honey and Zachary Hand to God Proverbs had built.

Useless spalt anyway, Eha said, closing the woodstove on the last of the shingles.

Tabitha Honey, Eha's other daughter, ten years old, two years older than her sister Charlotte, scooted on her behind across the cold floor to get closer to the stove. She wore two pairs of stockings, three old dresses, a donated wool coat the society had sent, and the one pair of shoes she owned, boy's boots passed down from her big brother, Ethan, when he'd outgrown them. They were too big for her and she'd stuffed the toes and heels with dry grass that poked out of the split soles like whiskers. Tabitha wore another square of the Hudson's Bay blanket wrapped over her head and shoulders.

C'mere, Victor, Tabitha said to the cat curled behind the stove. Tch, tch, c'mere, Vic. She wanted the cat for her lap, for some warmth. Victor raised his head and looked at the girl. He lowered his head back down and half-closed his eyes.

I hope you catch fire, you no-good hunks, Tabitha said.

Ethan Honey, fifteen, Eha's oldest child, sat on a wooden crate across the room, in the coldest corner, drawing his grandmother and little sister with a lump of charcoal on an old copy of the local newspaper that Matthew Diamond had given him last fall the day before he closed up his summer house and returned to Massachusetts. The boy's nose was

red, his lips purple. His fingers and hands were mottled white and blue, as if the blood were wicking into clots of frost under their skin. He concentrated on his grandmother and sister and their entwined figures came into finer and finer view across the front page of the *Foxden Journal*, seeming to hover above the articles about the tenth annual drill and ball, six Chinamen deported, a missing three-masted schooner, ads for fig syrups, foundries, soft hats, and black dress goods.

Tell us about the flood, Grammy, Tabitha said, still eyeing the cat.

Charlotte lifted her head from her grandmother's breast and said, Yes, tell us again, Gram!

Ethan looked from his drawing to his grandmother and sister and back. He said nothing but wanted as much as his sisters for his grandmother to tell the story about the hurricane that had nearly sunk the island and had nearly swept away his whole family.

Eha went from the stove to the corner opposite where Ethan drew and tipped a basket sitting on a shelf toward him and looked into it.

I'll fix these potatoes and there's a little salt fish left, he said. A can of milk, too.

You want to hear about the flood? That old flood? Again? Esther Honey said.

Yes, Gram, please!

Please, Gram, tell us!

Well, that old flood was almost a hundred years ago, now, she began. Way back in 1815.

A HURRICANE STRUCK in September of 1815, twenty-two years after Benjamin and Patience Honey had come to the island and begun the settlement, by which time there were nearly thirty people living there, in five or six houses, including the first Proverbs and Lark folks, the ones from Angola and Cape Verde, the others from Edinburgh—Patience

herself from Galway, Ireland, originally, before she met Benjamin on his way through Nova Scotia and went with him—and three Penobscot women, sisters who'd lost their parents when they were little girls. A surge of seawater twenty feet high funneled up the bay, sweeping houses and ships along with it. When the wall of ocean hit, it tore half the trees and all the houses off the island, guzzling everything down, along with two Honeys, three Proverbs, one of the Penobscot sisters, three dogs, six cats, and a goat named Enoch. The hurricane roared so loudly Patience Honey thought she'd gone deaf at first, that is, until she heard the tidal mountain avalanching toward them, bristling with houses and ships and trees and people and cows and horses churning inside it, screaming and bursting and lowing and neighing and shattering and heading right for the island. Then she knew all might well be lost, that this might well be the judgment of exaltation, the sealed message unsealing, that after they'd all been swept away by the broom of extermination there'd be so few trees left standing a young child would be able to count them up, and their folks would be scarcer than gold. But not all gone. Not everyone. Patience knew. Some Honeys would persist, some Proverbs survive. A Lark or two might endure. So, for reasons she could never afterward explain, she snatched the homemade flag she'd stitched together from patches of the stars and stripes and the Portuguese crown and golden Irish harp shaped like a woman, who looked so much like a figurehead and always reminded her husband of the one on the front of the ship he'd been a sailor on, that had sunk off the coast and brought him to the island in the first place, and the faded, faint squares embroidered with Bantu triangles and diamonds and circles that he'd carried with him everywhere, that he showed her meant man and woman and marriage and the rising sun and the setting sun, that he always said were his great-grandfather's, although she in her heart of hearts didn't think that that could be true, and tied it like a scarf around her throat, and she took Benjamin by the hand and dragged him from their shack out into the

whirlwind. She swore it was a premonition, because no sooner had she and her husband passed out the door than the house broke loose from its pilings and tumbled away behind them, bouncing and breaking apart into straw like a bale of hay bouncing off a rick and into the ocean. Now that she stood in the open, facing the bedlam, her legs would not work. She was sure that this was the Judgment and what was to be was to be; it was useless to try to outrun the outstretched arm of the Lord.

Benjamin roared to her over the roaring storm, The tree, the tree! And he pointed to the tallest tree on the island, the Penobscot pine, at the top of the bluff. Benjamin pointed and leaned his face toward his wife's and pointed.

Up the tree!

Wind plastered his shirt and the rain lashed and streamed down his face and ran from his hair and lightning broke across the sky and thunder blasted against the earth and sea and he roared again over the roaring storm, The tree! And Patience thought of their grown children and their young grandchildren and cried to her husband, The children! And Benjamin looked beyond his wife and there were their children and grandchildren, drenched and shouldering their way against the winds and lashing rains, the ocean rising now up to the windows of the Larks' old shack and pouring into it through the broken panes, and the largest surging waves thundering nearly up to where his own house had stood not two minutes before and sucking all the earth right off the very rocks and into the black and gray and brooding jade Atlantic, and he cried, Go to the tree! And he ran toward his grown children and young grandchildren and grabbed two soaking little ones from their mothers and carried one each under his arms and ran toward the tree. And the wind roared and spun and they staggered against it, now nearly blown toward the bluff, now nearly blown back away from it. When they reached the tree, one of Benjamin and Patience's sons, I think she always said it was Thomas, stood on Benjamin's shoulders and the other sons and

daughters climbed up the two men and reached the lowest branches of the old tree and once they got their footing as best as they could in the middle of bedlam, the others tossed the waterlogged children up to them one by one. Once Patience had climbed into the tree, and Thomas followed her up from Benjamin's shoulders, Benjamin himself scaled the trunk like the mast of a ship and roared once more: As high as ye can climb! And all the Honeys in that old tree climbed with all their strength, the children screaming and crying, the men and women screaming and crying, until the whole soaked clan clung together and to the trunk in a trembling, grasping cluster at the top of that swaying, bending, mighty old tree snapping back and forth in the wind like a whip. And right then they all heard a greater thunder rumble from the clamor and the whole island quaked under them, telegraphing their extinction. And at that moment, Patience Honey, holding one of her grandbabies tight as could be against her side with one arm, and clenching the tree with the other, looked to the south, down the bay, and there she saw that piled ocean, all the trees and buildings and shrieking people and wagons and sloops and schooners churning in its saltwater guts, and an old sea captain named Burnham in his pilot coat rowing a dinghy on the blazing crest of it all, smoking a pipe, bowl-downward to keep the water out, crying for mad joy at this last rapturous pileup, and all of it, that great massif of water and ruin speeding right for the Honeys in their tree, which now seemed like a twig, a toothpick, a drenched blade of grass set against the immensity of that mountain range of ocean and demolition. What was always so eerie about it afterward, Patience always said, what was so terrifying about it that made her bowels feel as if they'd turned to sand, was how quiet it all seemed, like a breath drawn and held, right before it hit, how breathtakingly fast but nearly silent and so just plain beautiful it was, all those people and trees and ships and horses cartwheeling past within the billows. It wasn't silent, really, but more, so loud it was too big to hear. I

could not hear it for that second, because it was just too big a sound for my ears to hear.

The water hit the south shore of the island first and swallowed it whole and smooth. Then it hit the jagged bedrock spine running up the middle of the island and broke over it hissing like a saw blade. When it struck the slope of the bluff it exploded across the horizon in front of the islanders in the tree, hung up and suspended for a moment in an apocalyptic entablature, that Patience afterward always said looked in that instant before it all collapsed back together and swept along how the parted sea must have appeared to the poor Israelites. I was pretty well given up on it all and in that tree holding it so hard the bark cut into my arms and gave me these scars and holding that baby so hard against me I thought I'd crack it, drenched to the marrow and screaming and trying not to let go, but when that tower of ocean and ruination burst apart in front of me, in a blink, but deep as my soul, I saw a broad, dry avenue running through the middle of the sea, and it was thronged with shepherds and sheep and old ladies on donkeys, litters of children curled up asleep on hay in the beds of rickety carts. The parted ocean towered on both sides, sheer, smooth, and monolithic. And inside the water, a pell-mell cavalcade of Egyptian men and horses and chariots scrolled past, tumbling heel over headdress, fetlock over cannon, bumper over shaft. Most of the men wore linen tunics, but some wore leopard skins and feathers and had elaborate headdresses. Some of them were tethered to their chariots by leather reins and held longbows. Arrows and spears twirled among the men and horses and cars. Their black-lined eyes stared wide open, but they were all clearly drowned. And I knew what it was like when God parted the sea. And I knew that Moses was way up there at the front of the line. Not like the idea of Moses, but the man himself. The very man, Moses. When God opened the ocean. Then the waters collected all the relic and rubble back up and swept over the

rest of the island. The water churned and rose and rose up the Penobscot pine laden with the Honeys.

Patience looked down through the branches and limbs and watched the seething waters rise over her children's and grandchildren's feet, billow up their skirts and rise over their midriffs and up their exposed throats then into their sputtering mouths, and she watched their hair soak up the boiling waters, and she watched the waters swill Benjamin up, too, and she watched her daughter, Charity Honey, wrench free from the tree and tumble away in the wreckage clutching her baby son, David, in her arms, and the waters reached her feet and she felt something deep down in the bottom of the tree crack and give and the tree bowed and she was in the swift and roaring waters up to her waist. Then the tree levered itself back upright. Though it seemed not to swallow at her quite as greedily as it first had, the water still rose, and it reached Patience's collarbone and Patience always said she could still just see the top of Benjamin's head below her in the water, serene, almost, almost becalmed, tiny bubbles of air rising from his hair. And it was then, just as the water touched it at her throat, that Patience remembered the old flag she'd sewn for Benjamin from the bits and pieces of other flags and national rags and bedraggled patches, not long after they'd married and first settled their now drowning island, still tied around her neck. She always said later, I just decided right then that if we were all going to Judgment, I was going to fly our little flag until the last possible second. So, I hoisted that baby up even more and pressed it between the tree and my breast harder than I ever otherwise would have dared and freed my hand and somehow unknotted the flag from my neck and held it in my hand and held my hand up just as high as I could get it, and the wind took the flag up and snapped it and practically tore it from my grasp but I kept hold and there it flew. Then the water rose over the baby, who'd gone past wailing and just stared, wedged between my

body and the tree, dumbfounded at the pandemonium, wide-eyed and quiet as it burbled under, and the water reached my mouth and covered my face and went over my head, and still I held that foolish flag as high as I could, and the water rose up my shoulder, and the water rose up to my raised elbow, and the water rose up my forearm, and the water reached my wrist, and so there was just my one hand holding that motley little tattered flag sticking up above the surface of the flood, and the waters rose up my fingers, and just as my hand was about to disappear and that flag and all us Honeys be swallowed up in the catastrophe, the water stopped rising.

The surge struck the innermost of the bay, spilled onto the mainland, dumping the foremost of the ruin it had plowed along the way onto a campsite called Little Shell Cove, where a hundred years later campers still turned up trinkets from the calamity, and the cauldron of wrath doubled back on itself and withdrew, quaffing the people, creatures, pie safes, pews, and catboats it had failed to devour the first time caterwauling off toward the horizon.

The water stopped rising and seemed to pause. It was as if my hand and the sputtering flag were at the center of a great whirlpool guzzling the island down its throat but then the eddying slowed and stopped then began to unwind.

Patience Honey clung to the Penobscot pine under the water, the baby in her arms limp, eyes closed then, asleep against her breast inside the bosom of the sea. Patience looked down the length of the tree, into the garbled dark. Bodies clung to it below. Benjamin. Her cousin and best friend, Shekhinah Goodfellow. Deeper down, the island appeared to move. It began to revolve around the tree, like a dark stone wheel around a wooden axle. It was a whale—circling, nosing at Patience and the other fugitives newly arrived in his kingdom, until he caught sight of an ancient great white shark cruising through the schoolhouse, trolling