Emily went out for a walk on her last day at school. Her family was taking her out of Mt. Holyoke Seminary; she was needed at home and she hadn’t been happy at the school. Her views were her own and educators did not always appreciate free thought. It was time to leave. But before she went back to the family house and everyone else’s demands, she wanted to go somewhere she’d never been before. She longed for the woods and for great distances. She’d often gone rambling as a child, collecting nearly 600 species of wild flowers, some never before seen. She liked to disappear, even when she was in the same room as other people. It was a talent, as it was a curse. There was something that came between her and other people, a white linen curtain, hazy. It made the world quieter and farther away, although occasionally she could see through to the other side. She had the feeling that if she went home, she would never get away. She thought of birds caught in nets. There was something inside her, beating against her ribs, urging her to do things she might not otherwise attempt. She had the strongest desire simply to get lost.

She passed the boundary of the school grounds and kept on. She had always been a walker. Being alone was her natural state. Once she was in the woods, she was a shadow. She recognized wildflowers the way someone else might recognize old friends:
velvet-leaf, live forever, lad's love. She stooped to pick a sprig of lad's love and slipped it in her shoe. Local people said it was a charm that would lead you to your true love. She did feel charmed. She went on, hour after hour. She spied red lily, wood lily, trout lily. She crossed two roads, then went into even deeper woods. The forest here was dark and green. The world looked topsy turvey. Day was night and night was day and no one on earth knew where she was. She had a wild, careless feeling that made her limbs feel loose and free. There was bloodroot in amongst the carpet of moss and leaves, and hyacinth, and squill. She had come to Hightop mountain without knowing it. At last, a place she had never been to before. She had been walking for almost ten hours and for most of that time she'd been caught up in a dream. There were black bears up here that could run faster than any man and weighed up to six hundred pounds. Emily weighed one hundred and twenty. She had read that injured bears sobbed like human beings, and that gave her some comfort. They were not so unalike.

She slept beneath a tree that night, sitting upright. She imagined she would have been scared for her life out in the open, for she was often terrified in her own room at home, even after double-locking the windows and covering the glass with quilts to ensure that no one could look in. Instead she felt an odd calm spirit. Was this the way people felt in the instant they leapt into rivers and streams? Was it like this when you fell in love, stood on the train tracks, went to a country where no one spoke your language? That was the country she was in most of the time, a place where people heard what she said but not what she meant. She wanted to be known, but no one knew her. There were shrews and voles in the woods, quiet little creatures, but thankfully no coyotes or bears came to call. It was cold and when Emily awoke in the morning she was shivering. Now that it was
daylight she saw that she had reached the top of the mountain. She made her way down, to the village below. There were brambles, thorn trees, yellow jacket nests, poison oak. She had never walked quite so far and was thrilled and terrified by her own bravery. Her hair was knotted. Her hands were raw. There was dew on her shoes.

Soon the sun warmed the air. Emily went on, past an abandoned house on the outskirts of town. There were rabbits in the yard. They too cried like human beings when trapped. The house at the edge of the woods was old with a thatched roof. What if she lived there? Who would ever find her? Who would know? When her brother and father searched for her, they would walk right past, not guessing she was inside. She could will herself to be invisible. They would give up hope and stop their search and here she’d be, safe and alone and free. She could make her clothes out of tablecloths, sleep on a pallet of straw, keep the windows open without the overriding fear she carried so close to her bones.

She went on, past meadows, through an orchard. There were white apple blossoms and the air was fragrant. If you looked up through the haze of white you could imagine there was snow, that heaven had opened, that the world was yours alone. It was a small town she’d stumbled upon and no one noticed her until she went past the Brady homestead, the oldest house in town. There was a man out in the yard, sitting in a chair in the sunlight. He was in his thirties, handsome, with a dark beard. He was looking up at the sky, so blue and cloudless, but somehow he knew she was there.

“Were you going to pass without saying good morning?” He had a slight accent, a charming manner.
“Good morning,” Emily managed to say. She felt as if she had swallowed bees. Perhaps she had been stung. Later a red welt rose on her wrist, one she didn’t notice as she stood at the gate. She was in a town she’d never been to, conversing with a man who had the nerve to speak to her as though he knew her, when no one on earth knew her. Likely no one in heaven did either.

“You’re not from here,” the man said. He knew that much.

“I was in the woods. Looking for wildflowers.” It was something of the truth. Enough.

“You’re not afraid of bears?” the man teased.

“I fear myself more than I fear any bear,” Emily blurted. It was the way she’d felt in her aloneness, the comfort she took in being on the mountain. What might she do next?

“So you’re fierce?” He didn’t laugh at the notion but asked in all honesty. He sat forward, shifted his gaze.

“I’m a mouse,” Emily said, suddenly shamed.

“I doubt that. Have breakfast with me,” the man called. He had a napkin tied around his neck. “I’m desperate to talk to someone interesting.” The dark-haired man wore a white shirt and a light colored suit. He was casual, the way too-handsome men often were. He bordered on rude, but he did have a tray of delicious looking food set out before him. There were muffins, and honey butter, and apple slices, along with a plate of bacon. Emily realized was starving. Still, she hesitated.

“Sir,” she said. “I don’t even know you.”

“I’m Charles Straw,” the man said. “My friends call me Carlo.”

Emily felt the bird in her chest, trapped in a net.
“Don’t say no,” this man Charles urged. “How many times does a beautiful woman walk by this old house?”

That was when Emily realized he was blind. She nearly laughed out loud. No one who could see would ever think she was anything but plain. She came in through the gate to take the chair that faced him. He felt her shadow graze his skin, and knew he’d drawn her in. He smiled. “So you’re not so fierce as you pretend.”

“It was you who suggested I was anything other than a mouse,” she protested. “What happened to your eyes?” she asked then. They were the most unusual color — a flat deep blue. If she had to describe them on a page she would say a lake, a door to heaven, pure and distant.

“You’re very blunt.” Charles laughed. “Or is it rude?”

“If you think I’m rude I can leave.” Emily hands were folded on her lap. She had no intention of going.

Her remark made him smile. He found her charming, unlike most people. “You’re very observant. It’s called River blindness. Contracted in South America. The cause is a form of worm too tiny for the human eye to see. I swam across a lake in Venezuela that was so deep local people said it reached to the far side of heaven. Unfortunately it turned out to be hell for me. That was when the world grew blurry. Though I can see you quite clearly.”

Emily let out a short laugh. She held up five fingers in front of his face and he didn’t seem to notice. “You can’t.”

“It’s true.”

“Impossible,” Emily declared. “I’m invisible.”
“Not for me. I see inside. One of the benefits of my tragedy.”

“Then perhaps it’s not a tragedy.”

“Life is a tragedy,” Charles said pleasantly.

Emily felt the sprig of lad’s love in her shoe prick through her stocking. She had said the very same thing to her sister only weeks ago.

“Shall I prove that I can see what no one else can?” Charles asked.

Emily nodded. “Please. Do.”

They sat there and nothing happened and Emily didn’t know what to think. Then Charles suddenly reached down.

“Did you catch a shadow?” Emily asked, intrigued.

Charles signaled for her to put her hand out. When she did he placed his hand atop hers and opened it. There was a tiny field mouse. Its feet were soft as the skin of a peach. Emily laughed, delighted. “You’re like an owl,” she declared. “You see in the dark.” And from then on although others might call him Charles or Carlo she called him her owl.

“He’s yours,” Charles Straw said. “He’s at your mercy.”

When Charles’s cousin Olive Starr came to fetch the tray she was surprised to find a young woman deep in conversation with her cousin, and even more startled to see a field mouse in one of the good Spode teacups. Introductions were held and Charles immediately asked Olive to give Emily a tour of the house and of the garden that had been put in by the first settlers, more than a hundred years earlier.

“Don’t be silly,” Olive said “I’m sure she has no interest in that old garden.”
“She’s a botanist,” Charles said.

“Amateur,” Emily added.

“And don’t forget to introduce her to the dog.”

“How do you know our Carlo?” Olive asked as she took Emily up to the old garden. There were granite steps and a white picket fence. The earth was a funny, reddish color, as if raw pigment had been added to the soil.

“Our paths happened to cross one day,” Emily said. She wondered if dreamers knew they were in a dream while it was happening, or if they had no idea that everything around them was purely imagined until the dream had gone.

“Which day was that?” Olive was a nurse and quite protective of her cousin. He was terribly ill, yet he insisted he must return to his travels. He had never been one to stay in one place. His steamer trunks were packed and waiting on the porch.

“Today,” Emily said.

They had reached the garden, ignored for many years. It was a wild tangle filled mostly with thistle. A clutch of larks and sparrows took flight when the women approached.

“It must have been lovely,” Emily said.

There was still some scarlet amaranth and a crimson larkspur, nearly six feet tall, the likes of which Emily had never seen. There was a row of ruby lettuce and some bright radishes that Olive had put in and now pulled from the ground to have with their dinner. The family lore insisted that only red plants would grow in this stretch of ground. Even those blooms that went in as white or pink or blue, turned in a matter of weeks. Emily took a bite of a small, muddy radish. The juice in her mouth was red.
“It’s a shame poor Charles can’t see any of his old hometown. And yet he’s going back.”

“To South America?”

“He insists. The Berkshires aren’t big enough for him. He says our mountains are hills.”

As a boy Charles had spent hours in the library reading journals by James Cook and Lewis and Clark and concocting an imaginary travel journal for himself. While the other boys in town where sledding and ice fishing, Charles was teaching himself Spanish and Arabic. He had always been daring, a naturalist at heart, fearless. When he was twelve he was out with the family dog, a young collie, when a fisher attacked. Fisher cats were large weasels so powerful and fierce they were the only creatures known to kill and eat porcupines, including the quills. Charles and the fisher fought wildly over the dog. The fisher hissed and growled and arched its back, burying its teeth in the collie’s neck. Charles kept his hands around the fisher’s neck, shutting off its breathing passage. It turned and bit him on the arm, but he managed to strangle it.

When Charles carried the dead collie up to his father’s house he was crying, but his face was set. Three years later he left town. He went to Harvard, which didn’t interest him, then on to New York and finally to South America where he worked as a liaison for American companies. He liked jungle living, the heat, the brackish rivers filled with fish that had pointed teeth. He had begun to dream in Spanish. He didn’t miss a single thing about Massachusetts, not the snow or the people or the proper homes, although there were times when he found himself thinking about Hightop Mountain and walking there with his dog.
Charles didn’t know his father had died until six months after the fact. His vision had already begun to fail by then. It might have been partially salvaged if he’d thought to come home. He could still see shadows, but even they had begun to fade. Emily’s presence had been faint, a mere breeze blowing across his face. Soon there wouldn’t even be that. That was why he was leaving while he still could. During the time he’d been with his cousin Olive he’d been training a dog to take back to South America, as a companion and helpmate. It was tied up behind the house. When Emily saw it on her way back from the garden she marveled, delighted. “Is it a bear?” she cried. “An ox?”

She crouched down and petted the huge, gentle creature.

“It’s a Newfoundland. My cousin thinks the dog will guide him along the Amazon. It will probably die of heat prostration. Or Carlo will.”

Charles had already hired a local boy to travel with him to New York and help with the luggage. Then Charles and the dog would embark by ship for Venezuela. Emily stayed for dinner. Charles told her about otters that were as big as tigers, and tiny wild pigs with long tusks, and spotted wild cats that loved their aloneness so well they screamed when they came upon another of their kind. She felt as though she could listen to him all night long, and she nearly did. Then it was too late to go. Her excuse for being in Blackwell was simple: she’d gotten lost in the woods. It was partially true, and therefore neither a sin nor a lie. They were happy to take her in as their guest. Before retiring, she went outside with the little box in which she’d kept the field mouse all that day. She opened the box and set him free. Charles had said he was at her mercy, and so she did the right by the poor thing. But the little mouse stood frozen. “Go on,” Emily
insisted. She felt that trapped thing inside her and nearly wept when at last the mouse ran away, off into the woods behind the yard, to the owl or hawk that surely was waiting.

That night, sleeping in a stranger’s house, Emily found herself thinking of a way to keep Charles from going. It was a wild frantic thought. She had no right to it, yet there it was all the same. She rose while it was dark and went outside to sit with the dog. After a while, she took a shovel from a shed and started out through the sleeping town. The young Newfoundland followed her, waiting while she crept into the yards of the houses they passed. She found peonies, quince, snowy phlox. She dug up two small rosebushes, one with tea-scented flowers, the other with a scent that reminded her of burned sugar. She pilfered lavender, stargazer lilies, basil, rosemary, sage. She carried her loot back to the house, then went back out again, this time to the woods. She made a pack of sorts out of her petticoat, which she tied onto the dog. He dutifully carried the specimens she found. Four o’clocks, Sweet William, lemon mint, swamp pink, tuberose, trillium, marsh clematis, barberry, witch hazel, mallow, honeysuckle, loosestrife. She took only scented plants, specimens that announced themselves with their odor. Each flower would be a part of a Blind man’s garden, a thicket of fragrance in which even the poorest wild weed might be miraculous.

She worked all that night. The soil in the old garden was indeed red and by the time Emily was done she looked like something out of a devil’s dream. The dog had soil dusting his fur as well. Emily took a bucket, filled it at the well, then washed her feet and the dog’s paws. She wondered if the mouse had been caught or if it had found its way home. She wondered if her family had realized she was gone, if her brother was
searching for her door to door, if Charles would be content with what she’d crafted, a place of beauty he couldn’t find anywhere else, even if he searched the whole world over.

Dear Owl, she would have written if he could have seen a note, a letter, or a plea. Surely you’ll see this. All you have to do is breathe in and there it will be. All you have to do is stay.

She slept so deeply she didn’t hear him leave. She was still muddy, and the sheets she slept on were peppered with specks of red earth. The dog was on the floor beside her bed when she awoke. Charles had left him as a gift. My dear Mouse. The weather would not have been right for a dog such as this, he wrote in his note to her. It would be cruel to take a northern creature there. She supposed that he was right. The deep, relentless heat of the jungle, the fish that bit through flesh with sharp teeth, the worms that could take your sight away, but not all of it, not everything. There were still shadows.

Her bother was in the yard talking to Olive. He had been searching and had come to take her home. She wondered what she might have said or done if Charles had asked her to leave with him. She wondered if he hesitated as he stood in the garden. Anyone else might have guessed the garden she planted would be white, but Charles had imagined he could see it all before he went away, the flash of scarlet, the trail of blood, the inside story of who she was.