

I keep a jar of clay beside my bed (published *Shenandoah*,
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The bones of the women waked them, nights, crying for iron. While the houses slept, the women slipped out of their beds and unhooked their doors, eased them open and shut. They rubbed the warm skulls of the hounds, who quieted. Bare feet slapped the creek path. They knelt on the bank and scooped handfuls of clay, squatting there, so as not to dirty their night dresses. Red clay slick between their teeth. They ate it from their hands. How they craved it, night and day, their bones aching for it. Mornings they dropped rusty nails in the stew, evenings they fried beans in a cast iron skillet shiny with rubbed fat, ever they gazed at their children through gray mists of anemia. All this though the earth bearing them was rich with the rust that made it a fight to grow anything there. Squash didn't fill, corn shriveled. Greens bolted, turned tough and bitter. But how that clay did grow women, women pale and thin, women waking early in hot sheets, with stained soles and knees and hands. Marked no matter how they scrubbed. How it tugged them from bed late at night, alone, and they never spoke of it. How it fought with their bones. I know, for it pulls me now.

In the book of Judges, I read about the massacre of the Ephraimites, who picked a fight with the Gileadites and then tried to escape. But the Gileadites caught them at the river, and said, *Ye are fugitives*, and said, *Say now Shibboleth*, which meant, ear of corn, or, stream in flood, from *shabal*, to flow. They said, again,

Say now Shibboleth: and they said *Sibboleth*: “for they could not frame it to pronounce it right.” Forty-two thousand slain that day, betrayed by accent, and Jordan’s stream swelled with dark blood. Not for the first time; not for the last.

My password is any word containing “oi,” vowels tucked between supple consonants, the word heavy with fuel for the growing, corn in full ear, kernels packed in silk. *Coil* sounds like *coal*, *foil* like *foal*. When I am home, these words smooth my path. But I have been away so long.

Stretch out your hand, the left one, the one belonging to the devil. A triangle spreads in your palm. My home, the seam angling between thumb and forefinger, is printed on every hand. The thumb’s ball makes Georgia, the flat below fingers North Carolina, the hand’s edge the seacoast. South Carolina in the middle, blood-warm and damp, rooted by tendons. Say the names of the wrinkled rivers: Santee, Saluda, Cooper, Congaree. Open your hand, and if you will not, keep it closed, put it fisted behind you, and listen. Let my slow speech give me away. My *soil* sounds like *soul*; my home will ever fill my mouth. At night I say, *How could I ever forsake you.*