



2021 Pamphlet Series

ELLIS ELLIOTT

# PROMISES



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**Cover image:** *Appalachian Landscape with Figure carrying a Scythe* by **George Hetzel (1826-1899)**. Oil on canvas. 30 x 22 inches. 1875. **Public domain**.

## PROMISES

At length I had the pleasure of seeing the tops of my native mountains, which presented to me a most cheering prospect, a joyful recollection of happier days when I could go to my home with no fears of my path being intercepted, or waylaid by the cruel murderers.

The mountains were full of men wishing to get through the lines, but I told them many were anxiously awaiting my return and promised to be back soon.

—Daniel Ellis

from *The Thrilling Adventures of Daniel Ellis*, 1867

## TRAPDOOR

Dearest Martha, we've made it across  
Powell's Mountain and the Cumberland River.  
The rebels sometimes so near I heard banging  
pans and hollering closer than coyotes.  
I return homeward soon only to head back,  
bring more through the lines. I console myself  
my stay will one day be for good. Granny Grills  
claimed to be heading to our homeplace soon.  
I pressed to her palm striped cinnamon candy  
for the children. Tell Dan just one piece.  
She insisted I take pocket tokens of protection  
and drink tea potions I did not need, but chose  
to believe. Keep the trapdoor unlatched beneath  
our bed; stand the rifle within reach. My solace  
is seeing you in my dream, black hair sopping,  
singing at creek's edge

## APPALACHIAN TRIOLET

Continents yawned and spilled oceans  
once, ancient shoreline, my backyard  
of silver scales, salt for potions.  
Continents yawned and spilled oceans,  
offerings of bones, rare tokens  
for conjuring, lifting life scars.  
Continents yawned and spilled oceans  
once, ancient shoreline, my backyard.

## COUNTING BACKWARDS

I lie still in bed, counting backwards  
in time with the lift and lower of my chest,  
slowing my shivers. I listen and wait  
for Daniel's high-pitched trill, his signal  
no rebels in sight, he's made his break  
away from our home and back to his men, again.

I sawed the circle of trapdoor underneath, wide  
enough for him to slip through for time beside me.  
My skin smells of horse and sweat and I taste  
his grime on my lips. My thin nightgown  
damp with him.

The lock is latched between his world  
and mine. I count the days since my blood  
last flowed, hold my stretched belly and pray  
to fallow fields on an old moon, please no more.

I count the days until she comes, cob pipe  
between her lips, rivers of wrinkles etched  
above and below. Granny Grills will bring  
skullcap for Sis's black moods, primrose  
and a plug of tobacco for mine.

I listen for Daniel's high-pitched trill, his signal  
he's made his break away from our bed  
and I am alone, again.

## LINEAGE

I think of Aunt Sarah,  
mother's sister, stories told

of her leaving before she even lay down  
on her marriage bed. Her hair stone straight

and blue-black like mine, she'd never sent word  
of her whereabouts. *Sinful*, they said, *to just up*

*and go, leave everything behind*. I think of her  
straight spine astride an ebony horse, hair plaited

with intricate design, her thighs gripping its flanks  
to gallop faster, carry her somewhere she can't be  
found.



## ABOUT THE WRITER:

Ellis Elliott received a bachelor's degree in English from Rhodes College and is currently enrolled in the MFA program of Queens University. For more than thirty years, she taught dance and owned her own dance studio. Elliott has also studied and taught yoga for the past ten years. She and her husband have a blended family of six grown sons. Elliott enjoys mixed-media art and art journaling, paddleboarding, running, kinesiology, and choreography.

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