

*Author's note: This excerpt from my novel Spider in a Tree (Small Beer Press, 2013) is set in 1750, after the congregation in Northampton voted to dismiss their minister, Jonathan Edwards. Of the people mentioned below, David Brainerd was a young missionary whose journals Jonathan Edwards edited and published; Leah was enslaved in the Edwards household. The passage Jonathan Edwards traces in the air is from "The Nature of True Virtue," from Works of Jonathan Edwards vol 8, Ethical Writing, ed. Paul Ramsey (New Haven, Yale University Press, p 544).*

Mr. Edwards, walking in the woods outside Northampton one afternoon the summer after his people so thoroughly and publicly rejected him, saw a crow flying from shadow to shadow beneath the trees. He stopped to watch it land on a high branch. Half hidden by leaves, it began to call with its whole body, tail lifting and falling as it cawed.

Another crow cawed in return, and, as Mr. Edwards seated himself beneath a maple, he saw a third jump from a rock to the grass. Crows were birds that had too much traffic with the earth, he thought, as he leaned back and watched a squirrel, summer fat, leaping heavily among the branches with a small clutch of maple leaves in its mouth. He looked up at the radiant mass of leaves, from which the crow on the limb began to sound anguished, and so, too human.

Mr. Edwards groaned in answer. He thought about his grandparents and daughter buried in this place; David Brainerd, too. He thought of Leah. All his children had been born here, and this was where his wife had come to be, if not fully, then deeply, known to him. He thought about the years of exceeding labor and difficulty in caring for the souls of these people, now so filled with spite, who were witnesses to how he had spent the prime of his life.

Shifting to try to ease the stiffness in his back, Mr. Edwards noticed a black feather on the ground. The tufts were matted in clumps. He observed the hollow in the white shaft from which the ink would flow if he were to use it as a quill, and, although there were bits of membrane flaking from the tip, it had broken off into a sharp point. Mr. Edwards couldn't recall that he had ever written with a feather from a crow, but he could see that the line it would make would be very fine.

He reached for the feather, feeling as if he might be taking something wicked in his hand, but the impression dissipated as the wind came up. The flock of crows was gone. He felt grass and sticks poking through his stockings. He didn't consciously notice the ants climbing his shoe, but used the feather to scratch his calf. Then he raised it toward the ruffling leaves above him to trace something not yet written into the air:

*Therefore there is room left for no other conclusion than that the primary object of virtuous love is Being, simply considered; or that true virtue primarily consists, not in love to any particular Beings, because of their virtue or beauty, nor in gratitude, because they love us, but in a propensity and union of heart to Being simply considered; exciting absolute benevolence (if I may so call it) to Being in general.*

His legs were itching (later there would be rings of red bumps around his ankles), so he stood up, feeling, despite everything, true union of heart to being. He could not put it into words, but, finding that he did not have to, he dug his heel into a chunk of fallen bark as he blessed the place, along with some of its inhabitants and the whole length of its river valley stretching in peopled fields beneath the hills.

He kept the feather, which he never cut into a pen.