

“But this ~~ain’t~~ *her* mouth,” Paul D said.

“This ~~ain’t~~ it *at all.*”

So Stamp Paid did not tell him how she was,

scratching on her children like a hawk on the wing,

how her face beaked,

how her hands worked like claws,

how she collected them every which way

one on her shoulder,

one under her arm,

one by the hand

the other shouted forward into the woodshed

filled with just sunlight and shavings now

because there wasn't any wood.

The party had used it all,

which is why he was chopping some.

Nothing was in that shed, *he knew*, having been there early that morning.

Nothing but sunlight.

Sunlight, shavings, a shovel.

The ax he himself took out.

Nothing else was in there except the shovel—and of course **the saw**.

“You biggittin’ I know her before,” Paul D was saying. “Back in Kentucky. When she was a girl, I didn’t just make her acquaintance a few months ago. I been knowing her a long time. And I can tell you for sure **this ain’t her** mouth. May look like it, but it ain’t.”

SO STAMP PAID DIDN'T SAY IT ALL. INSTEAD HE TOOK A BREATH AND LEANED TOWARD THE MOUTH THAT WAS NOT HERS AND SLOWLY READ OUT THE WORDS PAUL D COULDN'T. AND WHEN HE FINISHED, PAUL D SAID WITH A VIGOR FRESHER THAN THE FIRST TIME, "I'M SORRY, STAMP. IT'S A MISTAKE SOMEWHERE 'CAUSE THAT AINT HER MOUTH."

STAMP LOOKED INTO PAUL D'S EYES AND THE SWEET CONVICTION IN THEM ALMOST MADE HIM WONDER IF IT HAD HAPPENED AT ALL, *EIGHTEEN YEARS* AGO, THAT WHILE HE AND BABY SUGGS WERE LOOKING THE WRONG WAY, A PRETTY LITTLE SLAVEGIRL HAD RECOGNIZED A HAT, AND SPLIT TO THE WOODSHED TO KILL HER CHILDREN.

