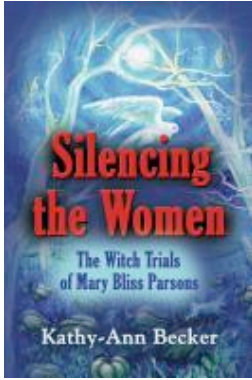


The background of the book cover is a dark, atmospheric illustration of a forest. The scene is dominated by deep blues and blacks, with highlights of green and white. In the center, a white dove is shown in flight, its wings spread, moving from left to right. The forest is filled with the intricate, glowing patterns of tree roots and branches, some of which are highlighted in a bright, ethereal light. The overall mood is mysterious and somber, reflecting the historical and legal themes of the book.

# **Silencing the Women**

**The Witch Trials  
of Mary Bliss Parsons**

**Kathy-Ann Becker**



***SILENCING THE WOMEN: The Witch Trials of Mary Bliss Parsons** is the true story of what happened to a Puritan woman who was too beautiful, too rich, and too outspoken for her times. Enmeshed in a web of jealousy and gossip, she struggled to overcome victimization by the harsh judgments of church, state, and gender expectations. How she survived in the fearsome wilderness is a love story told by a descendant.*

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# *Silencing the Women:*

*The Witch Trials of Mary Bliss Parsons*

**Kathy-Ann Becker**

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## **Prologue: Northampton, Massachusetts**

*Ancient memories welled out of the fragrant thawing ground.  
An old sorrow stirred in the raw earth where it had been pressed.  
Something had happened here long ago.  
Someone had been here, grieving, looking over the town.*

A disturbing event occurred during the early spring thaw of 1972. It was something that I could not explain and did not report. I was twenty-one years old, a recent arrival to Northampton. Drawn from Ohio by the love of my future husband, I had secured a new and ideal job at Forbes Library as Stack Supervisor. I had the responsibility of overseeing that books in the main collection were properly shelved with quiet orderliness and due care. When something unusual began to occur, I decided not to mention it in order to protect the decorum of my work-place persona.

The odd thing began on the first warmish Monday at the end of winter. That day the air was so fresh and the sun so bright that, on impulse, I left my homemade lunch behind in the stuffy break room. I walked right out through the high arched doors of the massive granite and sandstone building into the brilliant sunshine. The feeling of oncoming spring was elating. I decided to take a walk down the street. I had just turned out of the library yard and started the descent toward town when I was startled by a powerful sense that a person was in trouble. I looked around to see if someone might be in need of help. I could find no one showing any appearance of distress. I shrugged off the feeling of concern and went on, being a little more careful than usual in watching out for traffic as I crossed the intersection.

The next day I went out again. A bad feeling stopped me in exactly the same place. The sense of warning was very strong. Something was wrong, but I could not see it. On the third day, I left the library determined to walk fast and let nothing stop me. It was a plain, grey day with no wind and no hint of storm. Ugly heaps of filthy

*Kathy-Ann Becker*

snow remained near the curb, pockmarked with melt holes and bits of trash. Trying not to see any of it, I stepped over the spot where I had been bothered without breaking stride. With my next footfall, instead of moving ahead, I stopped. An invisible sadness held me heavily. I could not push through it without denying that I cared.

I scanned the nearby buildings. I wondered if perhaps a person inside one of them was trying to get my attention. The sidewalk where I stood lay before an old house with slightly parted curtains. I furtively peeked toward its windows. I watched for a face or any flutter of response. There was no answering movement behind the curtains or any sense of relationship between the house and the pool of despair just beyond its dooryard. There was another nearby building in the square, a weathered brick church with a massive wooden bell tower that filled the sky with the cool calm grace of an aged church that has sheltered its members for many generations. I felt no comfort from its congregation for the one whose grief filled this place.

Any source of worry was unidentifiable. I decided simply to wait there once and for all to see what would happen, trying to look nonchalant under the eyes of anyone who might notice. I stood listening and watching. When awareness did come, it was of the salt-stained sidewalk, of the ground heaving below it.

Beneath the concrete, living soils were imperceptibly flexing in the thaw. In tiny crevices between the fines of fragmented rock crystals and the residues of ancient humus, breathless air was warming. Long frozen energies were waking. A subtle earth-bound rhythm emanated from the darkness. An old, faint echo seemed to be vibrating within the hillside. The pulse of blood beating in my feet and legs responded with a sensation of warmth. My mind filled with a slow chant: "A woman stood here in great pain."

Standing in that place, a waking dream opened to me. A long skirt brushed across coarse grasses. At the whispering sound, buildings disappeared. Without church spires to punctuate the encircling mountain ranges, the broad plains of the Connecticut River spread out below, vast and primeval. Thin wisps of smoke from the fires of Indians and white settlers rose up from a sparsely habited plantation. Areas of human activity showed as dark specks upon the immensity of

meadowland. Although the open expanse was huge, it was dwarfed by the surrounding green forest of massive trees: elm, sycamore, maple, oak, beech, and chestnut. Only the sky held back the limitlessness of the reaching green canopy. Trees marched up and over the far horizons, covering chains of low mountains in dark greenery that turned black in the distance. Each shrouded range hid others behind it. The wall of infinity was penetrated only by the secret eyes of nature.

The vision that filled my eyes was vivid and bright. It lasted for only a moment. When it faded, I knew one thing. I was standing in the footsteps of a woman who had been here long before ground was broken for home or church. She was gone, but her story was not.

Retreating to the library, I began to search for facts, curious if the message in the land could be confirmed. Within faded books were bountiful histories of the early settlement of the Connecticut River Valley with descriptions of the great effort it had taken to travel overland across rivers, mountains, and swamps to penetrate this magnificent hidden paradise. Many great natural obstacles had barred the way. Then as now, the unusually oriented east west peaks of the Holyoke Range jutted in a long looming line across the valley. Before the face of these massive mountains, the southerly flowing river slowed and widened silently coiling into a huge oxbow. Not stopped in its way to the sea, the river's tongue licked a widening hole for itself through the mountains. Revenging bedrock ledges shredded the sluicing surge into a wild cataract. The river roared over rapids, dropping nearly sixty feet in a mist of tumbling foam.

Threading around these barriers of water and rock were narrow trails made by the feet of wild animals and the native people who followed them. Over these faint web-works of paths the white settlers had come; by horseback, oxcart, and by foot. For the woman whose skirts had rustled here in Northampton so long ago, the hard-attained view of this beautiful valley must have offered both promise and warning. The possibility of a ready escape from it had been left far behind. She had traveled to the brink of the absolute unknown with only a meadow to buffer her from the unrelenting heathen wilderness.

My curiosity brought me back to the hillside to revisit it with speculations. The soils had warmed under the weekend sun and

become stable. The bright slapping beat of sneakers and sandals and the ticking of high heels had replaced antique subterranean reverberations. The women who walked around me were shoppers headed at a brisk clip for the Green Street boutiques or patrons intent upon a purpose at Forbes Library and Smith College co-eds grouped for forays into town. Rooftops hid the mountains. Church steeples made peace with the endlessness of the sky. As a balm and a farewell to the sad woman from another time, I offered a stamp of my own feet upon the sidewalk that entombed the place where I had experienced her mystery. There was something I needed to know about this place. I did not know what.

One night twenty years later, my father called excitedly to tell me about his genealogical research. He announced with relish that I had inadvertently returned to a place where ancestors had once made their lives, where descendants still lived unknown to us. He had discovered that our ancestors were early settlers of Northampton. One of them, his great-grandmother of nine generations, had been accused of witchcraft.

“That means” he said, “that your multiple great-grandmother is the Witch of Northampton.” He paused for effect. As a minister, he knew how to deliver his points. The title of “witch” was unexpectedly unpleasant. Nothing my father said was familiar, yet his words rang intimately with my own uneasy thoughts about the unknown woman in pain upon the hillside. The earth at Northampton was indeed full of stories. Mary Bliss Parsons became a family research project. Images of her filled my mind. Sometimes I felt as if I were living two lives simultaneously.

She had been among the early Puritan planters at a time when the land at Nonotuck was the most northerly edge of settlement on the Connecticut River. Each man and family had been chosen for the skills they could contribute to the effort of building a peaceful, Godly, and profitable paradise. All the settlers labored with devotion in a land of new hope. Their survival depended upon wariness to the ever-present dangers. To them, the raw land was unredeemed of pagan sins and concealed a familiarity with evil. If disturbed, malignant spirits and old savage demons moved in disguise to visit inexplicable punishments of accident and ailment, affliction and torment. There were signs that the



Devil hid his cloven hoof prints among the deer tracks in the morning dew of the meadows. Overly familiar mice squeezed into the settlers' homes, skittering along the rafters to spy upon the God-fearing with little black knowing eyes, looking for openings to Satan-prick a soul. Incautious speech, an uncomfortable look, a suspicious action, the rancor of jealousy were all intolerable to the necessary vigilance. Every breach in the fragile balances holding people together broke bonds and let in fear.

When things began to go wrong in the young community, the cause had to be found. Fingers began to point at Mary Bliss Parsons. Because of her husband's uncanny successes, she was too rich. Her beauty was too distracting. The challenge of her intelligent outspokenness was too uncomfortably provocative. Eyes followed her. Festering in the insinuations of gossip, an ugly taint of doubt tightened inextricably around her. It is suspected, even today, that because of her pride, she caused and deserved her fate.

Court records spanning a time of eighteen years reveal the minds of those who sought evidence upon which to judge Mary Bliss Parsons as innocent or guilty. The testimony reveals an unholy alliance created by the elite and self-selected brotherhood of men who controlled government, religion, and the marketplace. To this, Mary Bliss Parsons, like all women, was expected to contribute only her contrition. Her accusers' words drip familiarly with the poisons injected by that which feeds greedily in webs spun of fear. Like all public tragedies, time has dimmed recollection. The effects still run in the veins of people living. In the echoes of the pulse of her blood are warnings that can still be heard.

It is said that the themes of time repeat rhythmically until the lessons are learned. We can meet the soft echoes of those whose blood we sustain. Muse upon the mind of Mary Bliss Parsons, who is gone three hundred years. Her struggle to reach grace is now in your hands.



## Chapter 1

### Suffer a Witch

**Boston Jail, Massachusetts, March 1674**

*My accuser told the Judge,  
"I know she is of the Devil,  
for I cannot have my mind  
from her."*

From this prison cell where I am kept, all my life seems so long ago. This time is like not living. The grip of the damp and cold shrinks my insides against my bones in shivering cramps and burning numbness. My neck and shoulders and all my joints pain. My empty arms ache to hold my babies; my hands to grasp a spoon, a broom, or any common thing from home. I must not think of my body except to keep it alive, but not to feel its hurt.

A week ago, I stood before the court to answer accusations of being a witch. I was clean, warm, and confident. I expected that the judges would never believe the petty accusations against me. I presented myself before the court as a sign of respect. I thought I would be going home with my husband that very day.

Instead, the Judges questioned whether I have the fear of God before my eyes. I realized that their first duty was to preserve the Massachusetts Bay Company, not to protect me. Suddenly it became apparent that my troubles were not about to end. The judges ordered that I appear before the next session of court. The next session of the court will not be held until May. That is almost three months from now. Worse than anything I could have imagined, they ordered that I be held in prison until then.

*Kathy-Ann Becker*

The world has seemingly gone mad. It is my enemies who cause me to be judged by man and by the deceits of the Devil. I have done no wrong.

I have my mind and my beliefs. That is all I have. Somehow, I must protect my mind from the fear and grief that threatens to overwhelm me here in the unspeakable horror of this jail. When the judges call me, I must be ready. By the time I come before the court in May to answer to the charge of witchcraft, I must know how to convince them of my innocence. I am innocent.

I pace this dark stinking cell in tight circles. I try to warm myself. I try to hold back the cold walls from smothering me. When I walk, I remember. I am a wife, a mother, an honest woman of forty-six years. I have nine good children living. The youngest is only two years old. My children, how I ache to be with them. My father would be shocked to see me here. How my mother must be suffering that she cannot save me. My parents fled England to escape imprisonment such as this.

I am not alone here. Eleven other women prisoners surround me. Their crowding presence is unpleasant and gives no comfort. None is behaving better than a trapped animal. Some have gone silent, but others clamor incessant moaning rants or prayers that are swallowed up by the hissing darkness that surrounds us.

Without day or night to guide me, I have begun to swirl into blackness without landmarks. Do not let me fall toward the death that threatens to consume me, nor to the darkness and cold, nor to this filth, nor to the jealousies of lies, nor succumb to shame. Do not let me slip away as an unrecognizable corruption to my husband, my children, and my mother. Help me to find a way.

Today, Lord, I declare to You my commitment to live. I have begun to create a discipline for myself. I have noticed that a feeling of light comes when I think back upon my life. I must refuse to see the walls, the floor, or the blank eyes of those around me, or anything that holds me here. Beginning this day, I will close out the ugly things around me that beckon me to lose my truth and trust. I will turn toward the brightness and color that once lit my days. I will practice recalling everything. Until the calamities are past, I will discipline myself to cry unto You through my memories that You may enlighten my darkness.

*Silencing the Women: The Witch Trials of Mary Bliss Parsons*

*Try me, O God, and know my heart: Prove me and know my thoughts; and consider if there be any wickedness in me, and lead me in the way forever. (Psalm 140: 23-24)*

**Chapter 2**  
**Instructive Stories of Evil and Resistance**  
**Recalling England**

*I can trust my thoughts only to You, my Creator. Here is my story. I pray that You will accept it as my offering. It is all that I have to bring to You.*

Do not take my withdrawal from the ponderous pomposity of earthly ministers who use Your name to crown themselves as pulpit princes to be a sign that I have forsaken You. No, my Father, for the sake of my family, accept me as Yours. Return to my soul the strength of those who came before me.

You know that my family was among those faithful saints elected by You to purify Your church of papist pomp. I am raised as one of those elected by You, Lord, to seek salvation, to worship in the pure simple ways You desire of us. We are the worshipful, whose work is to purify society and ourselves. It is difficult for us because the Devil has many devious ways to trick people into believing that they work in Your name.

From the first, when I was just a child, I remember becoming aware that many around us laughed at the way our brethren stubbornly honored the holy Sabbath. We were derided and called Puritans for living simply in the essence of Your Scripture.

The urgency of Your commands to resist evil is a necessity I suckled from my mother's milk. Mother insisted that I learn to hold fast to my faith even when all else was taken from us. I learned early that the earth is full of cruelty and dark places. Obedience to Your laws has been my only certain sustenance since I left my mother's arms.

Father told me stories about who we are and the promises we keep in trust with our bond of love for You. He told each of my brothers and

sisters the same stories, as they reached the right age to hear. Father's stories were given as a warning that even though we gather before You as Your faithful congregation, quiet avoidance of trouble offers no promise of protection.

The stories of my father were about the Bliss family and the reigns of wicked kings and queens who had tried to turn us from You. Long before I was born, generations of Blisses lived as farmers in the west country of England. Because of Your generosity, my family had prospered. They lived worshipfully and simply upon rolling meadows and gentle fields. They rejoiced when the Protestants of Europe overthrew the domination of the Catholic pope. They survived the turmoil of the Reformation. They remained hopeful that the Calvinist creed would at last eliminate the scourge of Catholic ceremony from their plain style of worship. Desire for purity in obedience to You was shown by their dress and in every aspect of their lives. They strove toward You in a world of imperfection, as my father said.

Father spoke of a time when there was a hope that the Reformation would end the oppressive divisiveness of religious disagreements. Instead of freedom came new laws. It came to be that one king succumbed to the temptation to exalt himself by royal theological presumption. King James had a new version of the Bible made, and then by his decree, outlawed all other English versions of the Bible except his own authorized translation. Possession of our Holy Geneva Bible became a felony offense. With our Bibles open before us, our plain observance of Sunday as the holy Sabbath became a criminal act to the Crown.

Father said that many of our countrymen bowed down before the power of such earthly rulers. Our brethren stood firm, bowing our heads only in prayer. These stories Father told me as a child make me understand that we who are known as Puritans are different and are special in our relationship to You, God. I am proud to be among those called Puritan.

Father's best stories were about our own family. Father told me about a bad thing that happened to our very own relative, John Bliss. Father lamented that under the reign of King James it had become quite popular to celebrate Sunday as a holiday for games and sports

and other follies rather than as a holy day for undistracted worship. That is how it came to be that one Sabbath, when Goodman Bliss was on his way to church, he happened upon a bear-baiting spectacle on the village green. He and the fellow who was with him looked away so as not to witness debauchery. They did not see that the enraged bear, tortured by dogs, had escaped. They stood in the bear's path. The panicked animal fell upon Goodman Bliss in its madness. He died of mauling there on the road, surrounded by gawking revelers.

Father said that even though our relative was probably a good man, he fatally ignored Your lessons meant to temper us to vigilance. Closing one's eyes to vulgarity does not hold its threat at bay. Father asked that I vow to him that I keep my eyes ever alert to the quiet workings of the hand of Satan.

To teach me that earthly kings were not our heavenly Father, my father told a story about himself. King Charles, who was King James successor, reacted to the steadfast resistance of our brethren by ordering his soldiers out into the country to enforce his laws. My father was among the brave English patriots who cut their hair to just below their ears as a sign that they were not King's men. The men's fashion at the King's court was for long and curling locks.

My Father said that, as a young man, he lived in a countryside growing increasingly violent with the King's excesses. Their only protection from the King lay in the Puritan domination of Parliament. As Father described it to me, one day all the men of his church rose up in full strength against the Crown. The thirty men of his congregation set out for London as an escort for their Parliament member. They intended to speak out their righteous concerns before the King and the Archbishop.

My grandfather, Father, and two uncles holstered their pistols into their saddles and rode with their brethren, mounted upon handsome matching iron-grey horses. Together in their battle against the evils that had beset England, the band of determined believers thundered into London astride their best horses. Their dark cloaks streamed behind them. Their black hats were set firmly against the wind.

They went to the floor of Parliament as planned. Father said they carried themselves with dignity as they stood as a group before the



assembly. The most able speakers among them spoke pointedly and eloquently. They did not know that among the audience at Parliament were spies for the King, waiting to identify those who spoke out against the monarchy.

On the way home, before they even could reach the outskirts of London, an army of King's men overwhelmed the entire party. They were wrestled down and arrested. The last Father saw of the beautiful grey horses, they were screaming in wild-eyed fear and fury, rearing and lashing their heavy hooves against the soldiers attempting to subdue them. He never saw his horses again.

Upon hearing the news of what had happened to his son and grandsons, old Great-Grandsire rode immediately to London to pay the exorbitant fines demanded for their release. The King's men stripped him of his money, then they beat him. He was dragged through the streets as an example of what would happen to those known to be oppositional to the Crown.

Fortunately, all the men of my family were freed. Father said that after they had been in jail for many days, suddenly a key turned in the lock and they were told, without nicety or explanation, to go. They walked back to the farm all the way from London, carrying old Great-Grandsire in their linked arms. Father said that they were unaware that their punishments had just begun.

Soon thereafter, the King's men raided the family farm. Soldiers confiscated our family's whole herd of horses and all the flocks of sheep. Only one ewe was saved because, in her fright, she ran into the house. My oldest brother, Thomas, remembers how he helped to hide the ewe under a bed. My older sister, Ann, told me that she remembers following our flock down the road crying. She tried to stop the soldiers from driving away her lambs, but they would not listen, and they mocked her.

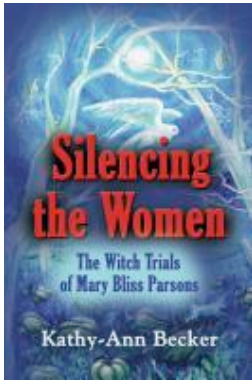
The King's men were not satisfied by their works of wrath, Father remembered bitterly. Soldiers returned to the farm to gather up all our family who lived there. They lined up my family for counting and recorded their names. My sister remembers that, as she stood there frightened, the soldiers yelled out taunts and insults. They called our men Round Heads because of their shorn hair. She said Father shouted

*Kathy-Ann Becker*

back at them that they were Strange Children for putting their faith in earthly kings. The soldiers grew infuriated. My sister says it was terrible. Some soldiers suddenly attacked our men. Father and my uncles struggled against them. The women and children were screaming. The soldiers were armed. They overwhelmed my family. The soldiers took our men away. Our men were not arrested, but they were made to march through the marketplace at Okehampton, roped together at the neck like cattle with twelve other men from the village. All of them were bludgeoned by the crowd as they went. Even though they became weakened from their beatings, Father said they were not subdued, just as I must never be. Father made certain that I understood what had occurred, as if it had happened to me.

Father left the farm to find work in the city of Rodborough. In his heart, the farm was never left behind. Father always intended to take us back. He liked to tell us stories of the farm that was always a beautiful place, where there were no scars to mark all that had happened there. The endless fields were green and divided by orderly stonewalls or hedgerows. He assured us that Grandfather was slowly rebuilding his flock of sheep and cows. Although there were no longer fine horses for riding, there were a few hefty workhorses. Father said the stone barn probably still had the sour-sweet smell of hay and milk. Father imagined that the thatched roof stonehouse was full of the fresh aroma of Grandmother's baking. These faint recollections, these precious family stories, these are all that remain to me of my father's English legacy.

*The blessings of endurance You have given my family in the past bind me to Your ways and preserve my life from the fear of those who seek to destroy my soul. Amen.*



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