Praise for *The Mare*

"In this age of hyperbole, when superlatives are used so often that they have all but lost their meaning, here is a writer who actually deserves them. With her new novel, her first in a decade, Mary Gaitskill shows herself to be accomplished and daring enough to go somewhere she has never been before. Urgent, scalding, and unexpectedly compassionate, *The Mare* is a revelation" Rupert Thomson

"A thoroughly compelling read … redemptive and moving, *The Mare* offers as much fresh air for the author (and the reader) as it does for her characters" *Spectator*

"Visceral and haunting, and the telling, with its shifting first-person narrative, is nothing short of masterful" *GQ*

"A poignant, beautiful coming-of-age story about race, class and motherhood" *Woman and Home*

"Penetrating … confronts, head-on, white privilege and black victimhood" *Daily Mail*

"A timely examination of the pains and pleasures that follow one woman's attempt to bridge the yawning gap of understanding between two races" *Sunday Express*

"Her voice captures a child's mixture of insight and innocence … As a model for getting back in contact with the natural world, this is a delirious dream. As an acknowledgment of what human beings fail to offer each other, it comes closer to being a nightmare" *The Times*

"A novel about race, class and, as Gaitskill's convincingly drawn characters show how different worlds collide, the seemingly unbridgeable gap between the two in America" *Daily Express*

"Gaitskill's telling of her clash-of-cultures novel is both expansive and intimate, and daring in her confrontation of racist attitudes and how women view other women … Gaitskill [has an] unerring ability to give her characters utterly believable voices, as well as complex inner lives" *Glasgow Sunday Herald*

"Gaitskill embraces without reservation the tradition of the love between misunderstood horse and misunderstood child, then lets it loose in a modern, racially fraught world of gangbangers and domestic abuse. In *The Mare*, not just horses and girls, but also mothers and the childless are all world-weary females, abused, exhausted by life, united in their desire for safety, love, freedom, and power. Gaitskill's novel is not a children's book, but it is a book about what children long for, and how we long for the same thing many years after we've left childhood behind" *New York Times Book Review*

"A novel about the knee-smashing effects of minority poverty and the corrosive tonic of liberal guilt … here, without a drop of condescension, is fiction that pumps blood through the cold facts of inequality" *Washington Post*

"Gaitskill puts raw faith, here, in the primal intimacy of a creatureliness that is common to all who live and breathe, regardless of species, race, gender, or class. Her trust in that commonality is breathtakingly vulnerable, among the greatest risks of her career" *The New York Times*

"Gaitskill takes a premise that could have been preachy, sentimental, or simplistic – juxtaposing urban and rural, rich and poor, young and old, brown and white – and makes it candid and emotionally complex, spare, real, and deeply affecting" *Kirkus Reviews*

"I finished *The Mare* on the subway yesterday and cried. There is magic in *The Mare* though it's unclear whether the heroine, Velveteen Vargas, can actually hear horses talking to her or whether this is her intuition or a projection of her hopeful mind and heart, and it doesn't matter which, ultimately. A lot of the book is about the distance between what we think or hope or imagine other people are thinking and feeling and their actual thoughts. No one is better than Mary Gaitskill at describing moments of being able to sense what someone else is feeling, either accurately or so close to accurately that the distance between your two consciousnesses recedes temporarily" Emily Gould

the Mare

MARY GAITSKILL

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The Browns . . . loved each other, deeply, from the back of the soul, with intolerance in daily life.

—*National Velvet*

Velvet

That day I woke up from a dream the way I always woke up: pressed against my mom's back, my face against her and her turned away. She holding Dante and he holding her, his head in her breasts, wrapped around each other like they're falling down a hole. It was okay. I was a eleven-year-old *girl,* and I didn't need to have my face in my mama's titty no more—that is, if I ever did. Dante, my little brother, was only six.

It was summer, and the air conditioner was up too high, dripping dirty water on the floor, outside the pan I put there to catch it. Too loud too, but still I heard a shot from outside or maybe a shout from my dream. I was dreaming about my grandfather from DR; he was lost in a dark place, like a castle with a lot of rooms and rich white people doing scary things in all of them, and my grandfather somewhere shouting my name. Or maybe it was a shot. I sat up and listened, but there wasn't anything.

That day we had to get on a bus and go stay with rich white people for two weeks. We signed up to do this at Puerto Rican Family Services in Williamsburg, even though we're Dominican and we just moved to Crown Heights. The social worker walked around in little high heels, squishing out of tight pants like she's a model, but with her face frowning like a mask on Halloween.

My mom talked to her about how our new neighborhood was all bad "negritas," no Spanish people. She told her how she had to work all day and sometimes at night, keeping a roof over our heads. She said it was going to be summer and I was too old for day care, and because I was stupid she couldn't trust me to stay inside and not go around the block talking to men. She laughed when she said this, like me talking to men was so stupid it was funny. But I don't go around talking to men, and I told the social worker that with my face.

Which made the social worker with her eyes and her mouth tell my mom she's shit. Which made me hate the woman, even if my mom was lying about me. My mom acted like she didn't see what the social worker said with her eyes and mouth, but I knew

she did see—she saw like she always does. But she kept talking and smiling with her hard mouth until the social worker handed her a shiny booklet—she stopped then. I looked to see what had shut my mother up; it was pictures of white people on some grass hugging dark children. Mask-Face told us we could go stay with people like this for two weeks. "It sounds like hell," whispered Dante, but Mask-Face didn't hear. We could swim and ride bicycles, she said. We could learn about animals. I took the booklet out of my mother's hands. It said something about love and having fun. There was a picture of a girl darker than me petting a sheep. There was a picture of a woman with big white legs sitting in a chair with a hat on and a plastic orange flower in her hand, looking like she was waiting for somebody to have fun with.

My mom doesn't write, so I filled out the forms. Dante just sat there talking to himself, not caring about anything like always. I didn't want him to come with me, bothering me while I was trying to ride a bicycle or something, so when they asked how he gets along with people, I wrote, "He hits." They asked how he resolves conflict and I wrote, "He hits." It was true, anyway. Then my mom asked if we could go to the same family so I could take care of Dante, and Mask-Face said no, it's against the rules. I was glad, and then I felt sorry for saying something bad about Dante for nothing. My mom started to fight about it, and Mask-Face said again, *It's against the rules.* The way she said it was another way of saying "You're shit," and the smell of that shit was starting to fill up the room. I could feel Dante get small inside. He said, "I don't want to go be with those people." He said it so soft you could barely hear him, but my mother said, "Shut up, you ungrateful boy! You're stupid!" The smell got stronger; it covered my mother's head, and she scratched herself like she was trying to brush it off.

But she couldn't and so when we left, she hit Dante on the head and called him stupid some more. Going to this place with bicycles and sheep had been turned into a punishment.

Still, I had hope that it would be fun. The lady I would stay with had called to talk to me and she sounded nice. Her voice was little, like she was scared. She said we were going to ride a Ferris wheel at the county fair and swim at the lake and see horses. She didn't

sound like the lady with the big legs, but that's how I pictured her, with a plastic flower. I thought of that picture and that voice and I got excited.

I got up and went out into the hall and got into the closet where our coats were. I dug into the back and found my things I keep in the old cotton ball box. I took them out through our living room into the kitchen, where it was heavy-warm from all the hot days so far. I poured orange juice in my favorite glass with purple flowers on it. I took the juice and my box to the open window and leaned out on the ledge. It was so early there was nobody on the street except a raggedy man creeping against a building down below us, holding on to it with one hand like for balance. He was holding the wall where somebody had written "Cookie" in big red paint. That was because this boy called Cookie used to stand there a lot. He was called that because he ate big cookies all the time. We used to see him in Mr. Nelson's store downstairs and we weren't supposed to talk to him because he was from the project over on Troy Avenue. But I did talk to him and he was nice. Even if he told me once that even though he liked me, if somebody paid him enough, he'd kill me. He wouldn't want to because I was gonna grow up fine, but he'd have to. He said it like he was making friends with me. We stood there talking for a while and then he broke off a piece of soft cookie and gave it to Dante. He said, "Stay fine, girl." A little while later a cop killed him for nothing and his name got put on a wall.

I took my things out of the box and laid them out on the ledge. They looked nice together: a silver bell I got from a prize machine, a plastic orange sun I tore off a get-well card somebody gave my mom, a blond key-chain doll with only one leg wearing a checkered coat, a dried sea horse from DR that my grandfather sent me, and a blue shell my father gave me when I was a baby and he lived with us. My father gave me two shells, but I gave the brown-and-pink one to this girl Strawberry because her brother died.

I held the blue shell against my lip to feel how smooth it was. I looked up and saw the sun had put a gold outline on the building across from us. I looked down and saw the raggedy man stop against the wall, like he was trying to get the strength to breathe.

After Cookie got shot I heard these men talking about him at

Mr. Nelson's. I heard his name and this man said, "Suicide by cop." I thought, What does that mean? so loud it was like they heard me because they got quiet. When we left, my mom whispered, "Gangbangers."

On the street, the raggedy man stretched up against the wall, his arms and hands spread out like he was crying on the red-painted word. For a second, everything was hard and clear and pounding beautiful.

The last time I saw my father I was almost ten and Dante was four. We had to leave our old apartment in Williamsburg, and my mom was staying with a friend and trying to find a new place, so he came and took us to Philadelphia in the car with his friend Manuel. I remember blowing bubbles on the fire escape with his other kids from this woman Sophia; she had soft breasts pushed together in a green dress, and she made asopao with shrimp, and mango pudding. She never liked me, but her girls were nice. We slept in the same bed and told stories about a disgusting white guy in history who cut people up with a chain saw and danced around in their skins. And the littlest girl would rap Missy Elliott, like, *I heard the bitch got hit with three zebras and a monkey / I can't stand the bitch no way.* And it made me and Dante laugh, 'cause she's so cute—she's only three. There were dogs going in and out, and Dante was scared at first, then he loved them. It was fun, but on the way back in the car, my father took my emergency money out of my pocket to pay the tolls and didn't give it back. Manuel was in the car and he made fun of me for being mad. Then he came to New York and started renting a room from us.

My father sends Dante a dollar in a card for his birthday sometimes. Never me.

I put down the shell and picked up the sea horse. I never met my grandfather, but he loved me. He talked to me on the phone and when I sent him my picture, he said I was beautiful. He called me "mi niña." He told me stories about how bad my mom was when she was little, and how she got punished. He sent the sea horse. He said one day my mom would bring me and Dante to visit and he would take us to the ocean. I remember his voice: tired and rough but mad fun inside. I never saw him and I almost never talked to him

on the phone, but when I did, it was like arms around me. Then his voice started getting more tired and the fun was far away in him. He said, "I'm always gonna be with you. Just think of me, I'm there." It scared me. I wanted to say, *Grandpa, why are you talking like this?* But I was too scared. "Even in your dreams," he said. "I'm gonna be there." I said, "Bendición, Abuelo," and he answered, "Dios te bendiga." A month later, he died.

I put my things back in the box. I looked down in the street. The raggedy man was gone. The gold outline on the building was gone too, spread out through the sky, making it shiny with invisible light. For some reason I thought of a TV commercial where a million butterflies burst out from some shampoo bottle or cereal box. I thought of Cookie's face when he gave my brother a cookie. I thought of the big-legs lady in the booklet holding the fake orange flower, looking like she was hoping for someone to come have fun with her.

Ginger

I met her when I was forty-seven, but I felt still young. I looked young too. This is probably because I had not done many of the things most people that age have done; I'd had no children and no successful career. I married late after stumbling through a series of crappy relationships and an intense half-life as an artist visible only in Lower Manhattan, the other half of my life being sloppily given over to alcohol and drugs.

I met my husband, Paul, in AA. I only went for about a year because I couldn't stand the meetings, couldn't stand the language, the dogma. They tried to make it sound like something else, but that's finally what it was. Still, it helped me quit, no question. And I met Paul. It was six months before we even had coffee, but I immediately noticed his deep eyes, the animal eloquence of his hairy hands. He was fifty then, nearly ten years older than me, and still married, but living in the city separately from his wife. It made him nervous that I stopped coming to meetings, and though he'd never admit it, I think that tension gave our slow courtship a stronger charge. We eventually moved to a small town upstate, the same town he'd moved from, where he made a good living as a tenured professor at a small college. A lot of his income went to support his wife and daughter, and we lived in an old faculty housing unit long on charm and short on function. Not owning didn't bother us though. We were comfortable, and for a long time we were happy with each other; we went out to eat a lot, and traveled in the summer.

When people asked me what I did I sometimes said, "I'm transitioning," and very occasionally, "I'm a painter." I was embarrassed to say the second thing even though it was true: I still painted, and it seemed like I was better than I was when I showed at a downtown gallery twenty years before. But I was embarrassed anyway because I knew I sounded foolish to people who had kids and jobs too, and who wouldn't understand my life before I came here. There were a few—women who also painted at home—whom I was able to talk

about it with, describe what art used to be to me, and what I wanted to make it be again: a place more real than anything in "real" life. A place I remember now just dimly, a place of deep joy where, when I could get to it, it was like tuning in to a radio frequency that was sacred to me. Regardless of anything else, nothing was more important than carrying that frequency on the dial of myself.

The problem was, other people created interference. It was hard for me to be close with them and to hear the signal at the same time. I realize that makes me sound strange. I *am* strange, more than the bare facts of my life would suggest. But I have slowly come to realize that so many people are strange, maybe the word is nearly meaningless when applied to human beings. Still, people interfered. And so I created ways to keep them at a distance, including my increasingly expensive habit. What I didn't see, or allow myself to see, was that drugs created even more interference than people; they were a sinister signal all their own, one that enhanced and blended with, then finally blotted out, the original one. When that happened I got completely lost, and for many years I didn't even know it.

By the time I got to AA, art had all but gone dead for me, and I credit my time in those stunned, bright-lit rooms for waking it up again.

When we finally moved out of the city, I began to feel the signal again, but differently. I felt it even when I was with Paul, which did not surprise me—he was not "other people." But I began to feel it with other people too, or rather *through* them, in the density of families living in homes, going back for generations in this town. I would see women with babies in strollers or with their little children in the grocery store, and I would feel their rootedness in the place around us and beyond—in the grass and earth, trees and sky.

To feel so much through something I was not part of was of course lonely. I began to wonder if it had been a mistake not to have children, to wonder what would've happened if I'd met Paul when I was younger. The third time we had sex, he said, "I want to make you pregnant." I must've had sex hundreds of times before, and men had said all kinds of things to me—but no one had ever said that. I never *wanted* anyone to say it; girlfriends would tell me a guy had

said that and I would think, How obnoxious! But when Paul said it, I heard *I love you*. I felt the same; we made love and I pictured my belly swelling.

But I didn't get pregnant. Instead my sister Melinda died. I know the two things don't go together. But in my mind they do. My sister lived in Cleveland, Ohio. She had been sick a long time; she had so many things wrong with her that nobody wanted to think about her, including me. She was drunk and mean and crazy and would call saying fucked-up things in the middle of the night. When she was younger, she'd hung around with a sad-sack small-time biker gang, and now that she was falling off a cliff—my guess is they were too—they didn't want to talk to her. I didn't want to talk to her either, but I would, closing my eyes and forcing myself to listen. I would listen until I could remember the feeling of her and me as little girls, drawing pictures together, cuddled on the couch together, eating ice cream out of teacups. Sometimes I couldn't listen, couldn't remember; she'd talk and I'd check my e-mail and wait for her to go away. And then she did.

She had a stroke while she was taking a shower. The water was still running on her when they found her a few days later. It was summer and her body was waterlogged and swollen. Still, I could identify her, even with her thin, tiny mouth nearly lost in her cheeks and chin and her brows pulled into an inhuman expression.

Paul went with me to clear out her apartment. I hadn't been to visit her for at least a decade—she always preferred to visit me or my mother, and I could see why. Her apartment was filthy, full of old take-out containers, used paper plates and plastic utensils, boxes and bags crammed with the junk she'd been meaning to take out for years. Months' worth of unopened mail lay on every surface. There was black mold on the walls. Paul and I stood there in the middle of it and thought, Why didn't we help her? The obvious answer was, we *had* helped her. We had sent her money; we had flown her out to visit on Christmas. I *had* talked to her, even when I didn't want to. But standing in her apartment, I knew it hadn't been enough. She'd known when I hadn't wanted to talk, which was most of the time. Given that, what good was the money?

"You did what you could," said my mother. "We all did." I wanted

to say, *You did what you could to destroy her,* but she was crying already. I was glad I didn't say anything; my mother died of a heart attack a month later. When my sister and I were teenagers, my mother had acted like Melinda was nothing but an aggravation who had contributed to the end of her marriage. But then she would play cards and clown around in the kitchen with her like she never did with me. Toward the end of her life, Melinda was always on the phone with our mom; she'd even pull over and call my mom on her cell if she was lost on her way to wherever she was going, which was often.

When the shock was still wearing off, I would go for long walks through the small center of town, out onto country roads, then back into town again. I'd look at the women with their children; I'd look into the small, beautiful faces and think of Melinda when she was like that. I'd imagine my mother's warm arms, her unthinking, uncritical limbs that lifted and held us. Shortly after Melinda died our washing machine broke and I had to go to the Laundromat; I was there by myself and this song came on the radio station that the management had on. It's a song that was popular in the '70s about a girl and a horse who both die. I was folding clothes when I recognized it. The singer's voice is thin and fake, but it's pretty, and somewhere in the fakery is the true sadness of smallness and failure and believing in beautiful things that aren't real because that's the only way to get through. Tears came to my eyes. When Melinda was little, she loved horses. For a while, she even rode them. We couldn't afford lessons, so she worked in a stable to earn them. Once I went with my mother to pick Melinda up from there, and I saw her riding in the fenced area beside the stable. She looked so confident and happy I didn't recognize her; I wondered who that beautiful girl was. So did our mother. She said, "Look at her!" and then stopped short. *They say she died one winter / When there came a killin' frost / And the pony she named Wildfire busted down its stall / In the blizzard he was lost.* It was a crap song. It didn't matter. It made me picture my sister before she was ruined, coming toward me on a beautiful golden horse. *She's coming for me I know / And on Wildfire we're both gonna go.* I cried quietly, still folding the clothes. No one was there to see me.

It was a year later that I started talking about adoption. At first Paul said, "We can't." Although he didn't say it, I think he was hurt

that I hadn't really tried to have *his* child, but now I wanted some random one. Also, his daughter from his first marriage, Edie, didn't want to go to school where he teaches and he'd promised to pay her tuition at Brown after his ex-wife had thrown a fit about it. Even if money weren't an issue, he didn't think we would have the physical energy for a baby. "What about an older child?" I asked. "Like a seven-year-old?" But we wouldn't know anything about the kid, he said. They would come fully formed in ways that would be problematic and invisible to us until it was too late.

We went back and forth on the subject, not intensely, but persistently, in bed at night and at breakfast. Months went by; spring came and the dry, frigid winter air went raw and wet, then grew full and soft. Paul's eyes began to be soft when we talked too. One of his friends told him about an organization that brought poor inner-city kids up to stay with country families for a few weeks. The friend suggested it as a way to "test the waters," to see what it might be like to have somebody else's fully formed kid around.

We called the organization and they sent us information, including a brochure of white kids and black kids holding flowers and smiling, of white adults hugging black kids and a slender black girl touching a woolly white sheep. It was sentimental and flattering to white vanity and manipulative as hell. It was also irresistible. It made you think the beautiful sentiments you pretend to believe in really *might* be true. "Yes," I said. "Let's do it. It's only two weeks. We could find out what it's like. We could give a kid a nice summer, anyway."