I've destroyed the pages, still ink-wet, that began the story this way:

'The child, left alone in a grand house, was content to prattle in empty rooms, pretending that the painted subjects of the reproductions on the walls could carry on charming conversations with her. However, they didn't simply indulge her wishes (she wished they would all be nice, and tell entertaining stories), but behaved like real people do. A Rembrandt self-portrait had frequent dark moods. An Eve, prone to loneliness, delighted in collaborating with the girl to invent fanciful names for the many meek beasts roaming her garden. In such company, her solitude was not wretched.

She was forbidden to disturb the Master and his muse behind the closed doors of the workshop. She waited with extraordinary good-nature for the duration of her daily exile until evening, when they emerged at last as her father and mother. The child must therefore be absolved as blameless.'

From those cowardly, deceitful papers, only the final sentences can be salvaged:

'Our long captivity in the house was a consequence of a pock that rose on my skin. A house harboring pox must be quarantined. I brought on our curse.'

It is not silly to think this. Things in balance are precarious. A painting stored in a room that is 64 degrees instead of 65 will crack. A speck of mold can rot an oil-painting in a matter of days. A fluctuation of a degree, an unseen spore of mold—these are ruinous. Small as they are.

No one explained how patient a curse can be, how it bides its time. How the duration of a sentence is as long or short as the sentence itself desires, independent of its conjurer. For five days I sat in my quarantined room in perfect health, without a single blister to justify my sentence. First boredom, and then its companion, miserable fantasy, convinced me that my parents had organized this plot together. There was no pox. I could hear my parents arguing through the walls. I thought my father proposed leaving me on a hill with my feet nailed together. My gentle mother countered that I should instead be put in a large wicker basket and floated down a river so I might wash onto the shore of some other loving parents. The sores, when they finally boiled to the surface and burst, were a relief from the decadent self-pity of those daydreams.

My father did his best to nurse me at my sickbed. Dabbing the pocks with creams, calamines, aloes. More often than not, I sent him away so I could scratchscratchscratch freely, without his warnings that I would only make it worse. The sores were not excruciating, but steadily maddening. Like the minor rituals of torture by nibbling mice, drops of water, pricks of pins.

Anyway, it was my mother I longed for, to paint me with ointments.

Finally, the painting of a little deer with the head of a woman spoke. "Leave it alone" she said, "You'll only make it worse. You don't want that." She'd been silent and unimpressed by my misery until now.

The prancing deer's hide was pierced with nine arrows. Her wounds were clotted, blood-black. Beside the mutilated creature, my blisters looked shallow and petty.

It seemed impolite to inquire how she'd come to have the body of a deer and the neck, face, combed hair of lady (her impressive antlers protruded from a fashionable chignon). Instead I asked, "Why don't you remove those arrows?"

"If I gnaw at the shafts, I might snap the arrows off, but that would drive the barbs in deeper. I would do more damage than the hunter."

"Who?" I asked.

She sniffed the air for the smell of his boots. "Can't you see him in the picture?" she whispered. "The hunter is coming." The little deer stood alone in the center of the composition, but I said nothing.

The little deer confided "It's not the pain that troubles me—although my wounds itch horribly, they are beginning to fill with fleas—it's the morbid dreams that pain brings. When a twig snaps, I imagine the hunter coming closer. The screaming crickets fray my nerves. Do you know what I mean? I tell myself stories, to take my mind off it. Would you like to hear one?" I would. "But if you pick your blisters," she cautioned, "I'll stop at once. Agreed?" I agreed. I sat on top of my compulsive hands.

"A little woman," she began, "married a giant of a man."

An inverted Jack Sprat and his wife, lean and fat. They were both painters, and in keeping with the disparities of their bodies, she painted on tiny canvases with minute detail, while he painted on the most sprawling surfaces he could find, the walls of skyscrapers. Her fame fell as short as her diminutive stature. His reputation was as robust as his potbelly. The woman was in fact so small because she'd been a sickly child. When her paintings were finally showcased for everyone to see, her sickness had turned her into a cripple. She couldn't move from her bed. She would surely die without ever seeing her own exhibit. So, she demanded that her giant husband carry her canopy bed to the gallery, which he easily hefted onto his broad back. Her final wishes granted, she died in that very bed a few days later.

The deer-woman froze, her delicate ears erect and quivering. As if she detected the hunter's footsteps in the distance. I followed her frightened eyes.

My father stood in the doorway, listening.