



NEGRO CHIMNEY SWEEP

David Mills

*(Beyond the Flue: 18th century enslaved
New York chimney apprentice)*

Down here: blankets we have to collect soot become the blankets we use to collect sleep. But just before *dawns*, temperatures would dip, brush and scraper slung over our underfed shoulders, sweep cap clutching our necks. We'd head 'long Pump Street past Catherine Lane. Scorchin' morning with our yawps, we'd snap dawn's silence: *Sweep-O Sweep!* Master Tobias headin' us to 'cute angles and dirty work—to owners who'd wait 'til the fat cooking of Christmas 'til their weep holes almost choke on suckling pig and *Yorksire* puddin'. But I'm hardly fed—

if my stomach's howlin', his poke fatter. Life: nothing but to and fro: bushels of soot packed in twilight dragged from hearth to courtyard, fertilizer for farmers sifted for lumps; money from dust in master's pocket. Sticky stuff in a blanket, emptied and filled. Again and again. No Franklin Stove in this cellar: so I huddle with other apprentices for heat. Wads of *New York Gazette* stuffed in cracks in the walls so the weather doesn't always get its ways. What was my bag by day becomes my bed by night. My tattered breeches' waistband turned down—a pout. Ease out of 'em. Underwear or buff it? Buff it. Even in this cold—gummy puffback on

my drawers and calves. My clothes, skin and cover covered with soot. Blackened blanket on top blackened blanket underneath. Skin between: I'm a charred sandwich. Sore. Swellin.' Wheezin.' Sleeping in the black. Spine wrenched. My should-be-blooming bones squashed

from twist and scrunch; limbs wrung from luggin' bags of soot twice
my teeny self. Stuff peppers my throat, snakes to my gingambob.
Memories: is embers growling and hot in my head.