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Fireweed

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Fireweed

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Abstract

Fireweed is a novel following a family in the North American fur trade of the 1830's. The son of a mixed race parentage and only surviving child of a natural disaster, the protagonist, titled only as the boy, must navigate the complex relationships his father has established between independent trappers, the burgeoning United States military, and the Anishinaabe peoples. The father's dealings have culminated in the loss of the mysterious iron safe he possesses, which houses what each interested party desires, as well as a truth the boy fears the most.

The novel examines time and the American identity through a speculative past, merging the American expansion west and the earliest northern territory grabs in Michigan's expanding statehood. Time is collapsed both for the reader, and for the boy, who begins to see his father's progression of the fur trade into a darker blood-letting of early pioneers and native people's alike. In order to engage the merging of histories, the novel looks to shorter forms such as the novella in seeking to explore its own genre. Works such as *Building Fiction* and *Narrative Purpose* influenced the design of the novel to merge itself with the novella through syntactical compression and an elusiveness situated in an impressionistic narrative darkness, which obscures as well as expands in an effort to enlist readers in their own formation of this new narrative of the American west.

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Chapter 1: *Fireweed*

The old wood came again creaking. The boy watched from the stair. Despite his fears and the dark and the old sound that outside played its violences, the boy through the long cold that curled his hands and the dense night wind tried to hear in this night's voice the voice of his father and father before him. He had only his candle and held to the lick of warmth. Framed by the stair he could smell nothing but the dry dead walls of the home, and with another groan of the shivered old house he tugged and shook on the lowest step as if to tell himself that it would all hold together.

In the rooms of the house was the safe and was the family and was the gun and peltry and the boy. In the rooms of the boy's heart these shapes did dance for him in the night.

In the rooms of the house above him the father lay awake on top of the blankets with the cold that covered the mother. The man breathed and his eyes tracked over the nails and joints. The father's inner workings rolled and clicked together over the days. The mother slept. The boy had a brother and in the locked shared room the brother slept for he spoke no language the boy knew and the father would not look at him. This is how the nights passed.

Beyond the walls of the house, cast from the tree line briefly in howls came carried the shattered limbs of the wood and the snow melted into hard sleet against the pine. The wind rattled in gusty breaths, rattled in under the seam of the door to touch at the boy. He curled his toes away. The boy took the lip of the stair and shook it. He moved his split fingers around the rim of the broken bit of ceramic that housed the candle, felt the life in his fingers on the rough surface. He feared the knocking at the door. It is

another time now, another place. The father, the boy's, cups his broken face in big hands and the rough warmth of them is all he feels, the burning of his face running into his father's hands. He hears his father, what his father is saying to him, though they are pushed by others running he does not know for his father closes his hands tighter and lowers his face into this blind he has made and says stronger in the heat dark of this new place, You are my son, and the boy thought of the gun for the first time again.

He sat watch, but now away from the window where shapes flickered. He had put his things for watching away, he had put thoughts of his father away but he would not sleep. He sat on the stair. In this way the night swayed. The boy thought of the grandfather as if in doing so he could touch the right thing, the right action. He thought of the gun and what he had failed to do. The night swayed with the house and all outside the house quieted again. The boy sat and his mien iron. The boy protected the fortunes of the house like an old iron-headed gate while his father listened above. Along the wall he was a ghost by the candle flame. His image billowed and waited for a return. He waited. Snow fell and then the sizzle of sleet and hard ice. Down through the layers of the house he sat watch, sat locked in his heart, waited there in the dark for those half-forms and shapes to come roar through. He wanted to walk around so his father might hear him but he feared it.

The boy remembered the first time he held the gun, and thought again of getting it. It is bigger than him. He is hungry. He is set loose, set lost in the forest. He learns early to eat the bark and green. He is tired and he does not know where his shirt has gone, melted from him and among the roots he thinks. He looks over his shoulder, where new

forest opens up to him, where maybe he will see the white peeking out of the greens, greens turning black. He is smiling at this thought, imagines it, this white wink, something slipping away. A rustle ahead of him and then he is looking at the glint of a star in the bushes. He is frozen, the rifle is a line across his chest as if he were to lay down with it. He tastes the powder in the air before he hears the ring and it catches him like a clap and before it crashes over him it is luminescent and blinding. He waits. When the terrible sun dies away from him he is alone in the forest under the night and he is hungry and he is tired but he sees he is not alone. Splintered wood, a hole, rests in the green bark by him. From its darkness pours a sour wind. As he stares his brother emerges from the bush and the glint of the gun sight hangs chained above the brother like the moon, and the brother has made a mistake but the boy cannot know this. His brother has made a mistake and cannot speak and moves the muscles of his face but the boy cannot see his brothers face in the darkness, though he hopes, hopes it is a crescent surprise.

The boy sat, shuddered under the damp cladding with the cold of the rooms entrusted to him, the key over the night sticking him through the pant patch pocket occasionally and urgently until he tired of it again, left it beside him, on the mantle over the stick strewn hearth, close enough to the window where you could possibly see it through the thick yellowed glass, left it in one of the rooms and forgot it and left his body slack on the bare wall someplace else in the small house. Between the flashing of the candle he seemed to sag and seemed to snap into shape. The orange flame played at the color on his skin. The house was quiet. Crouched in his heart amidst the rubble of the darkness poked the shape of the safe. Its dimpled carapace sat oiled and a gleam.

The old wood came again creaking and again the boy wished to hear him, pressed into the wall to hear him, if only so that he would whisper through, Run.

And he says, You are my son.

The boy woke and stretched himself. He felt the warmth of the candle on his face and turned the uneven edge of the ceramic in his fingers before he knew it was night still. He squeezed the wick out. He thought of the men who might take it, the men his father described. He would run from the knock, from the torch fire at the window, he would run from the man with the limp. The boy went from the stair to the parlour. He scuttled through the storeroom. The shadows followed his eyes. In the corner where he knew his father could not hear he put some bone to his mouth, slavered over it. The walls would keep them together, he thought, keep them in. Satisfied he moved again. In the half-light he forced his strength on locked knob of the door behind which sat his prize and rattled it with the knocking wind and galloped through an empty room and gave silent shrieks and danced o're the panes of light and another and tread gravely the parlour and crawled to the threshold to unlock and relock the door, and in the dark the silhouette rose of this shriveled animal thing and for a moment the boy watched at its shadow play at the lock, undoing the lock and ramming it across, repeated until it became the sole sound of the door calling through the house. And he watched and took his hand from the door and stepped away. His father's eyes glittered from the top of the stair.

The brother slept locked away, the mother dreamed the red dreams of her youth, and time rounded the house again. What devastation would it visit upon him. It lay thick over the floors in dust, it could not be pierced by light. The flame came again and he kept

it low, below the windows. His hands pressed toward the melting top. He thought he should let his brother out, see what he might do. What had their mother taught him in secret, whispered in the room beneath crooked stacked peltry, in the room where in the safe piled her voice like gold, the room to which he now carried the key. They were apart, his father voiced from the old wood creaking, and the boy plucked his skin.

When light fell broken over the muted furnishings and the sounds of dawn steamed from the earth they would come to collect. He had seen the trade before, seen his father's ledger, though never here, never in the house. Hand upon hand, bale upon bale, the fur collected, the stamps cut away, hot sigils repeated, the animal marked for the new world that dawned for them. The father dealt in flesh. Peltry steaming from between the tree, still cool and wet as running water. It is another time. The father tells the boy, Look here, and the boy turns from his own flesh under the sun. The father tells the boy, See me now, watch, and the boy watches as his father's hands dance out the trap and the boy sees beyond the articulation of his fingers the giants running the woods, and running that transplant the roebuck the European dealers knew so well into their corral, and the boy sees their planning and their craft, the boy sees their beating hearts beneath the night wind as they wearily lock the stick gate, he feels their skin dry, he waits to remain to peer inside.

Men from the small supply company would come tomorrow and buy, and buy it all. There was the back room and all but the safe, worn edged traps and gleaming boxes, black powder and barrels of it, whiskey and ornamentals, rot and old estranged life. The father thought the house would be chewed up, the timber stripped, sold, the nails melted

down, but this was not to be. The Americans would sell the furnishings, the trade goods, the tools and craftings, and from the claim of the seated house after waiting and selling every furred thing they would sell the timber, flagged and float it dead down water, and then the rock and the dusts they would sell, and after the land would yield more still, splintered by the map and sectioned and squared away and cordoned off so that they might just sell a few small more times, and perhaps one or two of the nails may have escaped, and these, now beyond their own time of work and place buried in the dark body of the pine these too might exchange hands, roll rusty across an open palm, glassed for the looking, and sold again, and sold, to the noisy procession which stands always outside the rest of time. The father had sold it, he had told the boy this and only him and given him the key to protect this first sale in the night. We are going away from here, the father said to him, though the boy did not know where. And the boy thought about the house and its walls and the others inside. Would the caravans run north or south? With mules and big beasts they would come, and lower down the hills empty wooden caravan beds bare but for heavy chains for the safe and they the buyers seated perhaps naked amongst their chains on the wood beds so that even more might be carried away across their backs. These were perhaps the men who looked out through the darkness toward the house, the boy thought. And yet his heart held more to fear.

This place would go and after he would know what would become of them. The boy thought over the house and its walls and their release from them, he thought he would like the mother and the brother to join them, but he did not know who this journey was for. He listened to voices in the dark. The boy hoped the father would take a few of the nails with him, for the boy knew where they had traveled from. He curled blanketless

on the cold stair. Then it would be done. He had only to wait down the dawn. He watched the door.

It is another time, he remembered, and then over the top of the house is always the moon, casting false shores on the woods and the floorboards and the tops of their heads, trying them to walk a little further. It is the boy and it is the brother, and the boy makes his mind. He is going to turn around, turn back, run. The father waits for them somewhere in the darkness. If he listens he hears the voice of the grandfather but he does not. He is walking between the dark boles and the yips and hollers but they are yet alone. Only the dry crackle of the forest floor leads them on. The moon pushed further into the room and the boy curled his toes away from it. The boy is turning back now, away from the moon and where it lay on the bare road. He listened and heard nothing of his father awake up the stairs nor the men who surely moved out through the night just for him, for the key. He looked to the front door and thought it lay opened but it was closed. He looked to the locking bar but in the dark could not see it.

There is in the weft of the boy's mind some fragments still of that night which he will tell no one and which cannot be recalled by him nor the grandfather who was not present nor could be, nor the father whose sole purpose lay fixed on the face of the caravan driver visible by the lobe of lantern light, and perhaps some of the others of that night those unruly participants might have pieces of it but those pieces had scattered into the world along with them. The boy does not wish to recollect. And those unruly night-things held onto memory as an act of accident, the vandals not caring for but what they

ran off with, arms of treasure, pork, corn, and whiskey, metals and flints and salt, and after they waited for the father to call them again, for debt bound them.

The house the boy protected loomed large on the knot of hills and bent with the trees. In lockstep they cracked and creaked like clicking fire and waited to burn low. In the house were many rooms, bending and bowing, and the boy sat there and here and stood outside the door to his brother's locked room and tried the key to it.

The boy haunted the house and in the furrows of the boards and slats and shingles accumulations shifted, poured down, perhaps down into the crease of the safe where it all lay heavy.

And the boy slackened again. The late hour had settled over him come down slowly in particulate and bowed the fragile concentrations already chewed and eaten at through the timorous vigil he held to. Winking he left the solidity of the home behind and it is another time. From his sit he stepped deeply, nevermind the twisting of the candle flame and the nub of the dry munitions crate set and now cold by the window for his watch, for the leaves and the grass hold some warmth for him, too, and the distant color of rust, of time in compression, sending itself back to him. The boy sat and leaps into the leaves. His brother squinting back runs on ahead of him through the wood. His figure grows diminutive and rumples and pops out of sight over the hill head. The boy sat curled on the stair in the cold and then he straightens the rifle strap and kicks off through the short scrub after his brother. The house groaned under the long night.

All around the woods were spinning down orange and browned. He raises the rifle through the trees and lets the flat silver sight of the gun hold the midmorning. The rear

trigger is warm. Farther out over the rolling landscape a faint few crashes did rise, the elongations of his brothers steps dying over the gullies and hills and yet carrying just a little farther each moment back to him and in each moment preserving in the next crash. The boy crosses the shallow ponds and dimples of water in which grass lays suspended. The pine divides the sky between them, and the boy cocks his head to see the steps across the horizon. He pinches a little of the wild rice his mother has wrapped for them and eats, saving it in his cheek. He eats grain by grain.

The boy stood on the stair the glow of the candle stiff across his back, his face in shadow as he looked through the open doorway on his brother.

The boy walks like his father from bole to bole, carrying in the hunch of his shoulders the weight of the task at hand and nothing more. He crouches bow-legged in a stoop, his eyes over some bit of branch or the trace of a foot in the soft wet earth an act of repetition and briefly making in his mind the same image of his father, thinking what his father would do and how it would look. The boy feels the brother always over the next rise, mounting the landscape at a matched pace, unraveling the path they knew by the mother's blood and it sloping down now for some time steeper into the dry peeling heart of the place. It is this blood the boy fears, it is of a people and a place. He looked at his hands in the half-light which stretched out to encompass the brother asleep. The noon sun covers his tanned face. His brother is still ahead.

Before the boy is to chase his brother through the sloping forest his father his Pa comes into the house and his shirt is bloody and as the boy backs out of his father's way he hears the hard soles of many bare feet in the parlour, pouring through the door. When

the father sees the boy he places his hand over his mouth and is pushing him into the back of the house and the boy can smell the blood coming through his shirt sleeve and the father speaks in the words he's heard only from the mother. His Pa is pushing him, holding him, folding his hands tight and hot over his face, folding him up beneath a pantry shelf and closing the door until the thin line of light is bright over the boy's wild eye. He sees little. His Pa is speaking to his mother and when he raises his voice the footsteps threaten to come into the back room but their sound stops again, his father works the words over them and the steps wind back, he contains them, keeps them at the door. The boy knows he speaks a magic.

Where is the boy, he is saying and the boy understands him, understands he means his brother, and he knows the men at the door cannot. She points to the pantry and the boy can see her. The other one, he says to her. You know I mean the other one. His fingers part her hair between them and they are lost in its darkness. She does not speak, but points to the little high window where the treetops shiver. The father knows the men will not leave the house, they are stubborn men, tired men. The men are owed. The father deals in flesh and blood. They will leave with something. These plans are arranged.

Come, out of there, he says to the dark crease of the door.

The father's hands are tearing to pieces against the long hasty nails of the window frame, so deep they are, and yet he tries against them. His hands shake. The mother watches for movement from the pantry and then leaves for the parlour. The boy does not know how he does it but he does, the father tears it away and his hands are red. The window is red and pieces of it are over the floor and now he hurries, quickly he tells the

boy, and soon the boy can feel the draft on his face as he is held up. The father holds him beneath the arms and arches the boy feet first and the boy cannot escape his face. The way the father stands by the window he is almost smiling but it is just fear and teeth and he looks like a prisoner himself who has found the door open, return him to his old life. This is the way he sees the trees. But he takes the boy and puts him through the window and drops him into the grass. The boy hears the strange magic again and it is his father barking above him now, high enough is the window. The butt end of the rifle is put through the window and the boy steadies it and it pushes him, away from the house, before he can fully take it. His father's face moves by the window and then it is her hand there, golden and new. She makes a fist and it hangs there until he opens it with a touch and she reveals a cloth and this he takes. Then she is gone. The boy from the tree line sees the father move by the window and then he is gone. He waits. He knows he is to get his brother who is only just ahead. He sees in the window the long oval of his mother's face, and he does not know her tribe. He does not recognize it but he knows that she is a great beauty among them and commands their respect, and as she hangs in the distant window he knows she longs not for him but his brother. He claps the rifle to his back and kicks off.

He wears his Pa's clothing, the garments hang from his limbs like tarpaulin. There is blood on him and from his father's blood he is sent into the world again and he closes his eyes against the sun. Towards his brother he is aware that his steps are breaking a great silence.

In and around the house the pine wood rattled and the boy relocked the door to his brother. He resettled on the stair. He felt the well wall.

The old wood came again creaking. The boy felt the cold over him like an old coat. His small hands wrapped about the thin banister. In the warp of the walls the dark fluttered. The boy saw the faded image of the safe in his mind. He knew its darkness. Ahead was the large door his father had carved beyond the boy's time in the snow with hands crackled in blood. The door knocked into its frame and the boy sought the end of the locking bar. Wouldn't they have come now, he thought. Come crept between the howling of the wind. There were others who might come. He imagined: each man arraigned in the weight of the fifty-calibers and each softly clinking in chains and pieces of the heavy sleigh needed to carry their hearts' intent and subsumed themselves into the silence of the gun-barrel blue night, themselves a part of and inked into the seamless rotary of the woods and home and crystalline dark.

The boy loomed through the fractured surface of the glass, the parlour window imperfect and yellowed. Behind him he felt the stretch of the hall and the waiting safe and more, he heard within its iron walls a terror, felt the heat hidden away in its compartment, felt it on the back of his neck. He set the candle down on the sill. His hands shook. The night held more hours yet and them taking their time. And he feared. The horses pinned a distance away from the house too far to see for caution of them snorting hate for the cold while the men, the trappers and enlisted and renegades all, the desperate and the betrayed, would be set to fixing the sled for work. The torches they would not need or want and had cast aside, and yet the boy felt their flame and could see their eyes

scanning the wood and he looked to the candle on the sill, it an alert, a call to them by his own hand. He opened his eyes and dashed it from window and fell to the ground with it, pressed himself into the black box beneath the sill, clutched for some other place in which to squeeze himself as shadows moved over the moonlight beside him. His drool hit the floor from his open mouth. His skin was the color of the boards. It was his Pa whom they wanted he said.

It is under the moon. He is walking back toward the road, toward the caravan and its hanging globe of light. He is deciding still, is crossing over this threshold back and forth like a windup man. The boy carries two rifles and already he is tripped up, falls over. His brother is walking home, the boy keeps the rifle his brother brought though its shot is fired. He moves by a felled tree and he knows what he will see when he crests the ridge: the forest will be on fire, the hottest it will ever feel he thinks, he feels it already, he stops, he curls into the dirt.

The old wood came again creaking. The boy sat on the stair and listened. Had he gotten here in sleep or by choice, he did not know. He felt no heat, and there was no light, and he found no candle near him. The house rattled as he stood, shook, chattered. He came by the parlor. Drops of melted wax dotted the floor and held the moon. He moved on. Below him now was the powdery crate, a white hole projected around it. Without his knowing the moon had stretched long and longer like ruminant teeth towards the hall where beyond the rooms still rattled and seethed in the dim smoke of uplifted gunpowder and the rot of the inventories. He sat down on the crate by the window and looked down the hall where the locked door was. There too was his rifle, the gun he had put back in a

fools courage and which he now wished he had. He felt the presence of the room, the door and the hatch-work wearings on the knob, and felt the key in his side and the patterns of calluses on his father's hand when it had been put in his. The air played at the loose hairs about his head. He took the candle from the floor by the loop of the broken cup on which it had stuck and brought it to life. He sees his brother in gold and light, alone on that stand where he found him in the autumn wood.

From inside the house he heard a knock. He waited out the wind and the groan of the pine woods and when it subsided he waited and there it came again. He listened. It came from the locked room. It came from the locked door, from inside the safe he thought, emanated from the safe into the deep thrum of pine unmistakable and insistent. He felt it softly shake the house. The hairs on the boy's neck were needles. The boy ran for the stair, for his father. Thoughts of the gun vanished in the smoke of the candle which in another time spits white ash into his eyes, he is running, ducking through the low branch. He knows what he has done.

But nothing came. He waited, perched on the bottom step. The boy's hot breath bloomed even in the dark. He waited. His ear grazed the spindles. The boy crept higher, so that he might look upon the father's door which remained closed to him. There the boy stopped, and there the boy thought he saw in the dark where the paint would have flaked from the bedroom door, the only color laid upon the house. His father's hands had stroked the wan russet color into the wood with his hands until it bled into the hue of his mother's liking and she spoke to him as he worked in the language the boy did not

understand. *But she had taught him, his brother.* The boy gazed upon the door. He watched the unseen leaves of paint come unfurled.

And far away the boy's heart carried him, he closed his eyes and his heart carried him closer to the father. Far away his heart slowed and he saw too the haphazard circle in the beaten ground, the color of the clearing mute and dull and possessed wholly by the fire of torches hungry for the branch beneath the wrapping, the men holding them no more recognizable by their faces than the block fists raised solitary and holding the fire. Their lidless eyes of shadow and mouths agape in hollow darkneses. Monolithic brow and cavernous cheekbones, a nose that had lost its end, a cloven ear. Exteriors of gnawed fur and a detachment that whispered hunger. The boy put his nose between the spindles of the stair, felt them cool his face. He could see his Pa his father and men like him shifting beyond the tree line.

Altogether in the smoke they crowded the end of the footpath, whose own ends sat innumerable, split and full and wide back over the mossy smoke touched grounds to where the old fortress glory now a dead shell had once stood, Michilimackinac by the shore, and the serpentine woodwork of the vanished garrison where behind men, women, and animal cried through the songs squeezed from a clumsy fiddler's cold hands to the tune of coin and the chink of glass beads and maybe teeth too. Each all swirled down into riddled pockets, each all run from gatherings like the father's. His Pa went on ahead, from the half of the trees which were gone again the next moment and then returned as the fire grew tall and weak and threw its light. The wind and trapped stale smell of grief settled again, and the men worked. His Pa came by the lit belly of a man in uniform. The

soldier, some distant private, spoke French and the boy's father nodded through it. As he spoke the soldier cast his shadow from the horse and that shadow rippled into stillness and danced away into and out of the other dull fires kept close together in the human crowd, and from the fire like a child's paper toy the shadows of the gathered did dance and the layers of the scene all repeated; the black the fire the rise of pine the half face of a man the jaw of another under the night.

There too was the face of his father. The boy on the stair in the cold tried his imitation of it, he saw: the blade of the jaw contracted like chewing but on nothing of substance and the rigor of the face compounded by the fire so that he seemed to command even the small movements of the shadows cast over him, even as he evaluated the usefulness of the soldier's before him. His Pa spoke up past the flame and above the soldier into the abyssal sky as if in communion with something other entirely. His face glistened, sheathed in sweat and the trail of it coming down on the one visible side of his uneven nose and the nose itself unsolid, came down further itself in the flickered torchlight and cooled like dripping wax the next moment. The father licked his bleached lips and laughed back his head. His eyes were black under brow. His Pa clapped the ass of the horse and its rider kicked at him and rode off. Before he needed to say the men had moved, ordered themselves to the task even as he must have turned his eyes upon them, as he wiped his neck with the opened white collar. A few of the torches had been staked into the earth and the rest killed. A man ate something from a bone and the others parted around him. The light in thick glassed liquor bottles glared first and on the men holding them second.

The boy in the house waited on, crouched as if hiding behind one of the many trees, waited for the men to commit their crimes, and as the house rattled once more he turned to look over his shoulder, and he sees in the warm sun his brother dashing behind the boles as if in play.

Beneath the woolen and leafy cloak of the darkness the men unloaded their peltry. Pa watched. The men cut and bound and inspected. Hands that held the knife bent ties over its edge and pulled, clipped the musky thread already deteriorating against the matted hairs and releasing the spring of the animal whose bodies they had stolen back into the wood for a moment more, the stacks of flesh soft and expanded like lungs filled again. The rotted pile smoked thickly in the dirt, the brands of other governments of men cut from the pelts if carelessly placed nearer then edge and these signs cast into the fire. Each man carried peltries strapped about him across shoulders, back, chin, and brow, no longer men but in the routine and motions there the pack animals they replaced, their faces slack and minds put to the work of the flesh. Each pelt came inspected and held high to light. Stretched out they blacked out the man behind and no longer dangled but moved as if of their own accord, string sinews pulled the animate fur draped like ghosts in the empty night. Then the furs fell, piled, and one by one the souls beneath discarded their bodies for the free and open dark in conjoined and wordless efforts. Pieces of muskrat elk beaver otter roebuck wolf a grotesque all animal came into being and stitched whole and passed apart in the same motion. The select were piled before the tramp and the rover, counted and valued beneath crouched forms and dirty feet, and the peltry more than conquest memories in their new bundles. And then they were taken away strapped to beasts in obscene bales to wait in outside the lighted ring. Pa gathered the peltry and

beast and men here and bound them together. The father dealt in flesh and blood and greed. He burned what he could not use, what he had stolen from ink stained tongues blue coats red coats *enemy! enemy!* those clerks and the mangeur de lard and the pioneer and all themselves a new animal to poach from the cold interior swamps, these men who had not a finger long enough to touch him.

The boy's black heart did smolder in that old house.

The men under ragged employ finished and the peltry spirited from there and yet the men lingered and drank and spoke. And from the far end of the beaten clearing the sudden crack of hoof beat shot silence into them. A few who still wore the blue gray sack coat sought the top few buttons and put them back in place. A few more returned from their animals or took to a half lean into bark with rifle over shoulder. The sounds and clop of hooves multiplied and softened and then the two riders ran their horses into the remains of the camp.

The riders slowed and moved into the center of the ring. The second rider broke off and he moved his gaunt form by the burning stink of hair as if ushered, drawn to it in the gleaming eyes of the gathered. The fat rider doffed his clean blue cap and the silver at the front of it lit up like the boy's rifle sights, as the boy in another time spins the gun end about the mute brown clearing his brother chooses for his unintended escape, the lowest point in the wood where everything comes together and flattens.

The boy is laying in the muddy leaves and the leaves fall still around him and settle. He squints down the rifle at his brother. He's got him, their father and their mother wait for them at the house, where the boy knows his brother will be given up. But the boy

waits to see. His brother has built steps into the tree but he is not shooting, he has no prey. Now the brother waits. He smiles at the boy, and though he is in the tree the brother waves him down, beckons him from the hill and puts his foot on the top plank nailed to the big black cherry tree.

Come out for the night then, the fat man said. *Morris*, someone called, someone whispered. Yes, fat Morris said, and he looked at the stars. The boy looked up with him into the heavens and there were no stars to see and only the dark timber supports of the ceiling. The enlisted men stood only a little straighter and still drank from the bottles. The gaunt man had dismounted and taken the bayonet and rifle from one of the drinking soldiers and prodded through the burnt heap he identified by smell, though there were no brands or signs with which to make meaning.

Where is he, said fat Morris. The man's wide night eaten shoulders sat perfect and straight, his place in the saddle a leisure for one accustomed to the accrued weight of lyed corn and bear grease stuck between the ribs, and when he shifted from side to side to better see the vagabonds at the edges of the woods the boy thought of the churning motions of a top. Though the boy could not imagine him there any longer, he could feel where the father's gaze must have fallen on the camp like the rasped end of the fire light and the fat rider Morris seemed straightened too, his back in the saddle stiff and searching the still dead air that fell hot upon him, nothing found but felt in the empty space among the boles where black eyes yet lingered.

Where is he, he said again. The fat Morris pulled from his belt a paper. He unfolded it and flicked it open for the wood to see.

Murder, transactional disputes, transaction outside government sanctioned garrisons, failure to exchange in factories, property theft, destruction of commerce, destruction of civil peace, denial of contract, escaped imprisonment, treason against government officials. Morris clattered the yellow paper.

You deal with a vile wretch, whose constant wintering has maddened him, it has, it is known. He has committed miscegeny, they say he is an indoctrinated of savage devilry. It is to this man you change currency? he shouted. You blacken your palms.

When fat Morris traveled the circle again the enlisted men had gone. The torches burned low. Morris kicked his horse into a gallop and then spun about to show the rest the paper. He urged forward, closer. The horse danced nearer and the men fell back.

He's enslaved the fool savage's daughter and starves the efforts of men, women, and American children who live the pioneer hardships of the garrison. Any information will be consigned an award listed here under the authority of the United States Government. Read it here, if you don't believe. Read it here men.

The fat Morris whirled through the dark and smacked his reins at them.

He's stealing from every one of you, every soul, Morris shouted.

He's not been signed yet.

The boy whispered through the spindles of the stairwell for his Pa.

The place has no name, the boy said and cursed it.

The boy in stupor continued his dark viewing. The rider folded the paper and tucked it between belt and belly and his companion swatted the few stragglers back unsteadily to their horses. But the fat Morris had not finished.

Bring back the savage, Morris roared.

Bring back the peltry, he cried. We knew each other once. Did you know? I can tell you all there is to know about the man. Hear. He is a war mercenary. He killed his own kind. He is a murderer. He is fatherless, abandoned as a child. He has abandoned his service. He lies with a squaw, he has squaw kin, he has a squaw boy that I know of. He uses them, as he uses you. There is a reward! It is here, that I know. He is hidden in the swamp. Come claim him! I know how he uses you, I know. He has dammed up the Saginaw trade, come claim him.

From the log he lays alongside he sees his brother on his back nearly naked now against the wooden slats projecting from the black cherry tree and despite the distance the lines of his ribs show having had only a little water and no food yet, not for some time now. The brother is trying to see his animal, move beyond flesh. The boy knows the mother has given this to him, he knows the father would not.

The boy thought of his father watching the riders, thought of him leaving through the dark and then his Pa would have turned back then, right then on hearing what the man Morris had said, would have turned and spoke truth to the rovers and the riders, would have cast the lies aside, would wait for his moment a few feet from the light, would have wanted to, might have but cautious, might have for obligations he thought, but for his family. The boy imagined these things, imagined but did not know.

The old wood came again creaking. The boy sat at the base of the stair, listening to it. The door stood firm and cold swept beneath its lower eye. The boy could hear it. All around him was the buried glint of nails and wood slivers and dry webbing. He felt the grandfather's hand in it all. Across the floor and washing over the arches of his bare feet was the great rattle and gust that had squeezed its way into the cracks and pores of the home, rolling across the floors as an unseen fog, a push and force across the boards and not a feeling other than the tint of coldness and the motion. It came to pour unflagging and full from beneath the sap colored floor over the boy looking up into the dark of the ceiling and the cold rising, pouring over his brother in the locked dueling bedrooms they shared and the blank sightless gaze of the father awake and the mother whose name the boy denied himself enmeshed in the faded grays of the Iroquois blanket; swept up over all and down again, plunging past the stair and channeled by pressures beyond the dried power of the hoarse inner walls back into the small black room locked with the key the boy now clutched, over again the ill-legged table and fitting chair, the edges and spines of fishbone, honed steels and irons and the strapped head of the axe, the strop and thongs hung with trump-lines and the snares above the lintel. It hung over all strangeness in the room and the legged chest and its gleaming black hide and the dry scent of danger stirred within but falling back now, tending back, pulling sharply beneath the floor, into vacuum, away from the weak dull glow of fire beneath the door. The boy had listened and followed. The boy had struck the candle.

The boy felt the history in the great little house in the woods, and the night his lens. The boy felt the morning had a long time yet to come. Down the narrow pine slant of the hall stretched the lurid dark of mouthed patterns cast from the raised candle flame. He took

the key from his pocket yet he dared not go in. Rather he gazed behind him, not into the lantern effect but its beat across the walls, the artery and hand and fire melding into the movement his heart knew, the long sweat and exhaustion of night strained every part timid in every resolving step.

And in him sudden came like the flash of spark and heat of hammer stroke the left red welt of fear, predestined since the first hour, as the light slipped away from the crack of the door and the primitive dead-bolt drawn and racked by his father's hand and his own eye, and he the boy could hear the men in that distant beaten circle begin to speak to him, their whispers under the window frame and under the floor he had pressed himself to. In him the hollow rattle of bone rasped. He dropped the key. The boy went to catch it and dropped the candle too, and in its waxen hollow the flame rolled around him as he pressed the metal opener into his flesh once again. And as the fire rolled his chest resonated of an older wilder strife that crept on padded foot back into his black ruinous heart. And as it rolled it cast shapes from him across the walls he did not wish to see. And then the first rippling torch fires did seem to pop into the night from the windows until he grasped the candle still and they were gone.

The boy hurtled towards the locked room. The candle flame breathed with the home as he drew nearer it. His hand caught the wall and it stung him in his haste. Though he could not know it was the ragged teeth that bit the wall into form that did the hurting, the pine carried and stacked by the red skinned men the father commanded and constructed by the men he pocketed, with the nails the grandfather had left behind hidden with the land as his only inheritance and only trace. But not before he put words in his

son's ear to lead him years later alone and cold and shivering over the hollowed stump deep in the woods, an old ghost's previsioning. The father had seen only a cold swamp. The father could not eat or sell it, the cache was left for a future the father had not known. And years came. Enlistment, an endless wintering, a gleaming marriage, a new trade, a promised child, a deal sealed in blood. But he had not forgotten. The grandfather spoke to him, and in the father's sleeping mind a fall of glittering did shimmer in his head. And when he returned for a second time to the bark trove waiting the father built the home on the spot, the secret pathways of the grandfather the old trapper become the heart of his own. And the house thrummed.

And then the scope of the boy's candle broke briefly, the flame for a moment driven back under the weight of the gasp which had escaped from the locked room at his nearing approach, and the smell of animal came and darkened and he could not avoid it.

The boy believed through the house the grandfather had called it all together though he did not know why, why now why in the night, this night, when the boy feared it the most. But the boy saw. In the clearing in the wood the men and the riders too spoke the same words, and two men grappled in the dirt ring. The grandfather spoke the words, confessed them. The father and the red man grappled.

The boy saw. In the wood a young man is running. He races over gnarl and root which spreads blind beneath his feet, the tendrils caring not how deeply or darkly they delve. The man races over them all, he is hot and quick. The man draws a brisk line through the woods, his face a bright trail by moonlight, a flash in the dark stuck with bits of leaf, the spines and whips and scragged dead cold and gathering slash his face, cover

his eyes, rest atop his shoulders. He runs on and the boy tried to look upon his face but he could not. The dull green splotches cover him well, he is too fast, the young man chasing the forest. By moonlight a whorl of clattering reflection follows him, and after he leaves the boughs still again. And yet around his thin frame he is impenetrable, he races he tires yet he cannot stop, the boy saw this. The boy wanted not to see but the night ran on. The boy saw the young man's ragged nails chewed to nothing, eaten whole he is so hungry. This young man, an enigma to his own kind, presses his back to the trees, he listens. The boy listened. He thinks he can hear faintly the turn of old wheels smudging through the earth.

The boy watched and saw briefly the gaunt run of his face but he did not know him. The young man runs, he sees the wagon stalled and without a stop he runs upon them in the suffocating night and jumps without a sound and it is only inside he freezes solid. The wagon shakes but a little, the man is so light. Two men work the wheel from the earth and one lifts his head at the motion the other curses him.

The drivers fumble at the wheel in the dark, long enough between the cursing and vain acting amidst the bench seat for the light which gutters out, long enough delayed for the other weak form mistaken in the dark while he rummages and them never sensing his shapeless heat. But the boy watched. The young man gathers in the quiet, he gathers by touch and smell not a breath behind the cursing and the striking of flint, not breathing himself it would seem, but moving as the driver's shadow might as the driver adjusts his cap the young man gathers by smell the spice of meats. The young man ropes twine about his shoulders, his arms risk another canvas bag, his arms are so full now. And there, a

rifle, another, he cannot stop now, cotton canvas he feels the weft. And the driver holds the lantern aloft, not recognizing his shadow as false. The young man watches and follows and when the young man is unable to heft another indefinite black weight the young man's shadow falls out of the driver's back and the driver turns. But the young man kicks himself out of the wooden frame, thumping away into the dark ahead. He runs ahead of the flash and shouting and the shot zipping off the bark skin beside him, stumbling with the uneven bundles he has absconded with. In the clumsiness of exhaustion and desperation he strikes a passing trunk with the end of a rifle length and falls. The boy watched the ground resettle under the blanketed form of the man, and then the hard rattle is through him and he is man again, his aches reclaimed again and he breathes again. The boy watched the depleted body slung with manged and pocked furs clumped in dirt carry his tremors into the earth far from there, trembling still after the old collapse hours from then, the trembling man falls beneath the trees to find something he has taken worth eating.

The boy knew what he had been shown. He stepped from the door and more, he knew where it would lead him. The boy walked the hall again and in the house, between when the candle smoked and wisped and rose full, points of light in the wood slivers ends replaced that first stronger one, a hundred eyes and watching him as if they saw the boy the same as they saw the walls into which they were now seated first rise, the same as they saw later years of hard silences between the family falling like sheaves of time, after the long boot clunks echoed of the father's pride, after the repressed unwanted gurgling of intestines arranged in chorus to greet the father's greasy empty palms. The boy knew this. They saw cycles of hunger, cycles of fear. The specks of light showed on the walls

like dawn, they stood hard and frozen long enough to see the face of the boy in that moment, that pale golden face like his mother's and the dark hair, modeled after the rigor of the father and more, the boy's face holding the black glinting eye of his brother, a look in which always swirled like the hall and its black gasping current the light of an empty fire, an eye in which swirled those searching torch fires of the Astor men and red-tongued dealings and red-blooded sons and the tamped metallic filling of the safe. The boy's eye surfaced guiltily and he blew the candle out.

The boy knew the things in his heart converged. He felt himself occupy the dusky corpuscular tunnels, grow weary and lost. To him in the house always things were happening. To him the men like trees in the smoke-choked air were speaking the tongue of his mother. He denied them. He clutched the key in his meager pocket. The boy put it in the lock of the door.

The boy is climbing the ladder. He knows that when he reaches the top he will decide whether or not to bring his brother, who shimmers golden and rocks himself as though he were asleep. The boy knows if he does he will not bring him to any good. When he reaches the top he takes his rifle over his arm and sets it down between them. His brother's clothes make a pile near a bend in the branch. The boy tries to put some of the rice into his brother's mouth and like a game he places the rice on his lips and waits but his brother does not move. The rice stays on his lips. The boy pinches the brother's nose and he coughs the rice all over himself.

He is smiling. He is talking. The boy does not understand his words but he moves his hands so the boy knows. The boy is in his ritual, the boy is the first thing he sees

when he opens his eyes, he tells the boy that he must be an animal. The brother eats from the tree. He tells the boy to close his eyes. He tells the boy to listen. The wind comes into the leaves of the tree, no he says to the boy, listen to the fish swim by. The boy listens, he hears between the leaves the dry clatter of their scales by his head, and then the boy opens his eyes and sees them. A god in the big wood.

The boy directs his brother too weak to resist him. He sits his brother down by the crooked ladder, takes him over the shoulder as though he were a blanket. The brother is looking at the ground as it moves toward him. It is his father's the boy is thinking. It is safe the brother is thinking.

When they reach the bottom the boy directs the rifle end in his brother's direction in much the same manner, calm and reluctant. He wonders whether he should tell his brother or should he shoot him or should he tell him run. The boy chews on rice.

Let's go my brother, he says.

The boys move much the same. They walk in step with one another. They are born of the same time and place, born together you could say. One is settled down into the smoke of a longhouse. He is first and his father stiffens as the first is set on the ground he loves him so. Worse is to come for the father, when they tell him he cannot have his son. They tell him he is not his, he is not owned by the father. Look at his skin, the men say. Look at him. They smile red smiles, they feel joy. He is little of you, they say. They move to take him. The father stands strange against the mud clapped wall and the naked men and women lining it. The father wipes sweat from his face. A moment, he says. He puts his hand up. No decisions, let him have a moment without decision. The

men ignore him. The baby is scooped up. Stop, the father says. He is a whisper outside their huddle. Let me take him. Let me hold him for a moment, the father says. He is not yours, the men say. Their voices fill over one another in protest and some of them push the father back. The man holding the baby dries the baby's cheeks roughly with the back of his hand. He's no use to you, the father says. The crowded room is silent, they shift where they stand, they do not talk, a few children gurgle, they watch. The father sits in an orphaned dining chair. The boy, he says, it cannot speak yet. He is worthless to you. What a waste he will be. The father waits and they huddle still but the man stops brushing the boy clean. French, the man with the baby says. French, he says. What a waste, the father says. You want him to speak American. You want him to talk to the America states, or you'll have to leave here. The men in the room laugh. From a squint the father sees a few rifles appear. The man with the baby plays with the wet little leaf of hair on its head. We catch, he says. But you aren't alone, the father says. We take the animal, the man is saying. There are always others, the father is saying. Give me the boy and the mother. The smell under the smoke sours. Trade with me, the father says, looking around. Give me them both now and gather them later. The mother is on her back, on the ground, watching the smoke spiral out of the roof. She is waiting for what he will do. Give me them now and we have business and when you take the boy you trade wherever you want, wherever you go. The mother is looking at the father. The red man is looking at the baby. This is the boy's dream of his birth.

The brothers walk. The brother is wearing the boy's shirt, the boy did not want to climb up again to get it. The brother is walking ahead of the boy, and the boy thinks, he is my prisoner. He is like my prisoner.

The father is holding the child, his firstborn son. They are walking through the door of smoke into the cold. He returns to the shelter he has wintered for two years now, that he has not left for two years now. The ground is hard and frozen beneath the blanket. He sits with the child in his lap. The father examines the boy's face. Already the father's mind is rattling something together in its dark recesses.

This is the year the father leaves the tribe with his wife and child. This is the year he roves, this is the year he will find the nails hidden away in the swamp, this is the year of his trade. He no longer returns to Saginaw. The father is watching the birth of his son, his second boy, the brother. He carries the new baby and places him on the old chair seat out in the grass. The night air is warm and comfortable. Behind him the house wall raises up and the clap of hammers seal themselves away. The father swaddles the baby. From where he sits it is all lined up, and he spies the house coming out the crest of the child's bald wet head. The air is clear and sweet. He takes the child and examines the black eyes. He gives the baby still slick with red to the mother.

They walk along, in a chain. At last, the two boys reach the house, without much happening or said. Beneath the evening glint the boy sees the window where it is knocked out. He directs his brother toward the front. He thinks he can see the mother's eyes. He directs his brother and they keep some distance to the door and the boy looks down the twilight twinkle of his sights.

It is always evening in the house, the house is always settling. The boy thought these things and more before he opened the unlocked room. The cold trembled him as the door drew inward.

As the two brothers near the slip of the rock under the front which spans out a cold welcome from the open door three men come to meet them. Their bare feet meet the cold rock and their faces stand are without expression. The boy feels their eyes on his skin and he is terror and horror. The boy stops. The boy sees red and black paints move across their bodies.

The cool of autumn comes in with the night, and as the sun sets the thrown brown leaves turn to clatter. The brother is too ahead of him, the boy sees. The men wait by the house and the brother is still walking when he looks back at the boy, confusion steals his expression. The brother speaks with his hands when the men begin to walk forward. The boy drops to his knee and fires the rifle.

The boom startles them, he does not expect this. He waits, still in crouch with the thin smoke. The men are stopped and looking around them and from the middle of them blood runs down his thigh. He shakes again as he did when the ball hit him and blood is steady out of him. The ball is lost, gone into the house somewhere, pulled into the wood. The man inspects the hole in his leg. The two are still speaking to the middle man and he kneels. The boys fingers are like mud and he raises the rifle but there is nothing to charge it with. The shot man says something in his watery speak, and the closest man goes and takes hold of his brother by the arm and begins to walk him back toward the house. The brother comes along like a large doll. The boy feigns to charge the rifle and the remaining man lopes in his direction. His face is without expression the boy sees. The man comes over the little slopes and divots in the grass barefooted but the boy cannot hear the rustle and breaking of the stiff dry weeds over his own breathing. He raises the rifle like a spear

but it is no use. The running man stops and in one motion picks the boy up and raises him, and when they are face to face he speaks to the boy and smiles. Behind them the other men are still talking when the second shot is fired. The man is still smiling for a moment before his blood blooms onto the boy.

The remaining man no longer holds the brother's hand but his knife, and as the sun sets it holds the light. Across from him by the door is the father in gun smoke. The second rifle is between his feet, has slid a little further out on the stone. The father and the man move in the same moment.

The boy is laying down. He pushes the man aside and the man gurgles like a child and the boy knows that he is dead. He looks to see what has happened, he reaches for the rifle. The kneeling man still bleeds but around his leg is a tie. When he sees the boy he tires to stand. The brother sits on the ground. He is starving. Beyond them the boy sees the edges of his father's face as the lone man grapples him across the threshold of the house with the gun between them. Then they are gone.

By the time the boy collects his brother the man he has shot hears the sounds from within the house and when he calls he hears no response he wants and he climbs to his feet. They watch him, holding the leg stiff as if it were simply another item from his belt. He scrabbles over the leaves and up over the hillside and when he reaches the top the boy hears the soft scrape of feet come from the door. His father levels the rifle as he leans into the frame and the boy can see he has blood on him that covers the old stains. He fires and the limping man's head dips into the sun and disappears behind the rise. The boy thinks to charge the rifle, but first he must pry his brother's hand from his, and after he moves to

where his father lays in the door jamb but it is too late. The boy sees the welling from the father's side. He knows he cannot leave him. On the floor behind him is the broken head of an axe and a crude bone knife whose alabaster surface up until this moment still holds the yellow sun. Then it goes out.

The unlocked door pulled inward. The boy stood alone in the cold. The congealed clasp gave way to the room which ebbed and flowed from the candle light. The smells and sounds and strangeness of the room fell against him. The smell of the furs unsold and stacked and rotted and the damp crated powder that had sifted slowly out of the porous bags flecked the air. He stepped into the room. His hand by the heat of the candle burned, and he stretched it out as if to spare himself and so the dim glow fell over the names of men over boxes and etchings and sigils and brands; he could not read or recognize them, these names and notes of place and garrisons lost to time, moved from distant dark places here for the light of his candle to hit them. And in the room were the lines of shelves and tables arrayed with these objects foreign to him, and the iron pointed traps. And in the room were zones of darkness, holding the flat pattern of the gun barrel racks and the smeary parted hairs of furs and the gleaming ribcage of stacked barrels, all visible like the beginning edges of an old map, maybe the oldest, and beyond the maps ink lines the boy felt lead deeper, past the long split pine table looking as if it smelled of blood, as it did when it held the stilled eyes of the boys first kill which stained the boy even as it did the table, and he moved further where the two guns sat high above all the others, his father's gun and his, laid over top each other just, imprinted upon one another. The boy stood before the black iron legged box in the corner.

The old wood is here creaking. The boy's toes curl into pain. His body curls under the body of an old tree. It is surely another time, and another time the boy will see it. He feels he could lay here until the stars are gone. He wishes to close his eyes but the voices in the snap of the branches do not let him. He thinks he listens to the grandfather, the one whose ghost the boy thinks resides in the house and the one who fled north and left his son the boy's father behind. The boy does not often think about this but now he does. The voice falls on him like ash. His father waits on the road. As he lays in the warm black ground beneath the leaves and grasses where he cannot see is the scratching of some small thing. He waits so that he might imagine it. He imagines a beetle under the leaves that glows like a ruby, its belly segments shuttering the light over the hidden floor, distantly scattering its light over the hidden floor of the world where the boy feels their passing heat occasionally in between the darkness.

The boy is retreading his steps. He is going back. Not to the old house, which creaks now with the woods it grows alongside in memory, but a scant dirt path no wider than a few horses where he and his father will meet again. He follows the slice of the pathway he knows his father has taken, has mentioned to him, and so the boy knows the path by his father's words. His words have become a place to the boy unto themselves, he navigates them as he does leaf or rock, dip and crag and gulley. Their pits he knows. He knows the subtle shape and line of them, and through them his own mind's curve. He knows these words. He pauses atop a flat rock which shines. In the distance a little fire glows.

His father is alone.

I turned him back, the boy says.

The boy's thin boot bends over the stone. He waits for a reply and when it does not come he waits for something out of the darkness to break them apart. The air is dense. Finally, the father talks to the boy and the father's eyes are glassy. Finally he says to the boy,

Go up and see the road.

The grandfather is always telling the boy, run. The boy is always calling his brother down from the tree stand. The boy will always see the young man in furs and guns wait and watch gleaming in the shadows of the boles.

The boy is on the road. The boy is holding the rifle, and his name is on the stock where his father has placed it. In the distance the heads of the horses heave by one another in grotesque efforts. Their outlines are enshrined in the whipping lantern attached to the front bench. He feels faintly the turn of old wheels smudging beneath the iron hooves. He hears the men atop shouting to one another, to the back of the line. His father has told him they will be safe. The boy is mistaken. This is their arrangement, the grandfather is always telling the boy through the trees. The boy can see even now the red men moving alongside the road, though they are quiet. The father gave them his word and his word the boy knows binds them all together. He is thinking what shape this word makes in their heads as the caravan slows and at last the horse's grin comes down to snort in his face.

Ho, the driver says again.

I said get out of the path boy. Or my horse will eat you.

Over the globe of light the wormy green flat cap and sleepless grimy eyes of the man did pop. By the way the man's mouth is slumping he wants the horse to go on and do it or hopes the boy will fear he does. When the boy does not move the man waves his cap over his own face as if he slept. A firebug occasionally lights up the road. The man's bulging eyes risk coming out as he swirls them around and down at the small winkled form below him.

Your ears work? he asks.

A new pair of eyes poke from the canvas tarp tacked to the top of the driver bench. That's his boy there, comes a voice.

What, says the driver. He puts his ear to the flap with the eyes and they whisper more to him. The driver's head is near the lantern and his dome is so bright it is but a ball. So, he says, turning back to the boy and brushing more sweat from his face with the hat, What does he have to say? Does he want a word? I know the game, lad. The man's eyes spin wild in his head.

No, says the boy. He directs the rifle up between the horses and the three long necks shriek.

The boy is stiff like a lead figurine, a little soldier he has played with once before. The fire comes shrieking out of the husk of the caravan and the boy will not look away. He watches the brothers, sons, the women and the children, his family by blood, carry off the peltry and the blankets and the drink and rations. And the rest is all too easy to set

alight, too easy to seize on the road without the men and provisioning and forethought to protect it by water, all of it avoidable. The native took their fill. The boy knew it would all piece itself together in the safe. Fire streams over the wood, catches in the low branches and they run. Whooping and half-naked in skin pants and thick cloaks for the show of it, the tribe that is beckoned and just as quickly cast away, its members given freely like any other bits of smoothed glass or fired clay because of the stolen face of his mother. The boy sways. He hears the men chanting from the wood. He stands next to the rifle nearly as tall as him on the hill of the road, and he sees in their red skinned dancing who owns the night, that blaze not in the eyes of the wild men nor the reflective browns of his mother, nor in the same stare he catches from time to time cleaning the rifle, his own brother standing just outside the doorway always watching him in the room in which the boy then saw it all, his working in the room itself the successful matriculation into fury and despair. His brother gives him back his own same face like a mirror except for those eyes. But the boy has not taken part even in his father's eyes, or his thoughts, or what he decides to do to the other men of the caravan, and so on the road watching the fire the boy did not double him either. He turns to face the blaze of the caravans and his Pa is between him and what he has done. The boy looks into the front fiery husk of the long trail that burns into the night. He sees his brother climbing down out of its ashy mouth. The boy thinks he can hear his father's silence over him, coming all the distance from the road.

A metal squeal sounded and the boy turned. He held the candle in the open doorway. The boy had retreated but now the image of the dimpled iron box settled in his mind, the cool slab of the interior bare, and he could not leave. He looked to see it fine

and where it sat. With the morning the boy knew they would fly from here. Why had they not come to take him, he thought, but the house lay hidden. Finding the house would take time, and after the army rogues plotted the routes of the competing traders and factories and tracked the paths of the new pioneers, the house would be emptied and gone.

The safe sat untouched, and the boy wished to crawl inside, let it take him far away. Away into the same darkness extended through the moon-ridden slant of the walls and scrolled and un-scrolled into the melting curls of snow and joined the high darkness hidden by the fur tree. He closed his eyes, felt it lift him, felt himself raised off into it much like the current of air now that started to pick at the hairs on his head. From the darkness he felt on his eyelids the spots of fire from where the men who raced fawn into pens waited. Too easy for them, he thought, after the killing and gift-giving and roving, these people around a harsh fire circled and gathered for the family's arrival, for their own flesh and blood and the father and the two boys. Waiting for the end, together.

He pulled himself away from the words which could only be the grandfather's and left the room. The boy put the key in the lock and locked it before he knew he left the candle.

The boy ran his hand through his dark hair and his sharp face relaxed. When he opened the door again the safe was gone. The candle sat beside the door and he lifted the candle off the packing crate to abrade the dark. It was gone. He squinted through the smoke or the darkness that bit his eyes and drew the panic from the pipes of his heart. He went over to where he thought the safe had always been and saw it was gone. It had dropped through the floor. In front of him beside the curled wooden boards which had

been too soft and weak to hear in defeat was a hole, into which he stared but saw nothing, and into which he stuck the candle and felt the cool damp air sticky on his palm before it blew out the light.

And here he felt a full unplugged breathing of the darkness from beneath the house. The old wood came again creaking and the walls shook. He reached, he felt the solid wood keg and then it pushed against him. The house shuddered and the walls began to shake. In the darkness the boy could feel it all; all the couriers assembled for him around the pith and his brother's breathing, a horse's snort and the grandfather's whispers, his own breath as it fought the air and the rising vapors. He backed into the table or had it moved into him and then he grew cold. He felt around and touched and the darkness dazzled him.

He turned for the door. The boy thought to move but the word was louder now, the boy thought it spoke to him, thought the house spoke to him as the invisible current pumped onward into the room. The boy thought he heard the first faint lapping of water deep below him before the thump and shudder of movement just ahead, and the boy tried to crouch against it. He stumbled and a keg knocked his legs away and he climbed over it still in darkness and heard the tumbling of the barrels further against the wall behind him and then below him. He reached the door for the crack of it still held some light and then it shrank and he realized he had slid. He scrambled up and reached for the handle. His hand touched air. He slid down, against what he knew to be the dried bristle of the furs and the bales that had come undone and he tried to grasp them and waited to hit the table with his feet, and then the floor pulled away beneath him. He closed his eyes. Nearby his

head something rattled and the silent face of his brother rose in his mind, and then he hit the water. The cold clasped him, and he flung his arms in froth and panicked his way to the surface. He felt the splash and hard flutter of boards dropping around him. It felt as though he had dropped into a lake. He looked up and there were no stars. Out of the darkness like the chewing of teeth came the groan of the old wood and the boy protected his face and struggled his limbs weighted with water and rose and sank and looked up and lost sensation.

The end of the winter of 1832 and the last snow the father would see. From outside the squat cabin wherein the medical doctor examined the boy's limp form and questioned the story of him the trees glistened in ice between the dark. Despite the melt settled over the interior of the peninsula the cold roughed the body and the men and women of the small garrison hid indoors, all except the father and the few stationed in the bare snow-swept yard. The men shivered and huddled and occasioned a stray pale breath toward the father and the chain at his wrists. Word had spread by now, moved even through the cracks of sleep to those who dreamed, as the man who had seeded terror and stolen even the paltry sum skimmed from their own sparse dealings had come to justice. And in the night they spoke of him, though in the father's mind the crimes of the boy

weighed heavy and none other. The father despite the cold and the long night to these gossipers had walked beyond it somehow. Men had searched the woods and failed, coin tugged from betwixt soldiers fingers, rumour drunken from as only the deepest cup can be swilled. The enlisted said he had walked only a day, he came barefoot and unscarred, how else could it be? The independents said only a night, only a few hours, he was so close to them, all this time, they had helped him after all, only a few deals, only a trade, all his terror. And as they spoke, in their minds old wheels freed, in their minds through the murk of drink and old greed spun thoughts of treasure, and they dared peer again. Over the father's shoulders were thrown a few skins and blankets all enmeshed, and below them it was clear he was naked but for his new soft shoes. He rocked a little forward and then its inversion and the iron bands sitting on his thin ankles callacked.

The fort under the moon revealed itself derelict, a fort of bone and refuge for the desperate, and beyond the pocked walls a deep whistle rose through the shifting trees and the soldiers watched it pass above them and away and shuddered as if rid of an old ghost. And somewhere, beneath the groaning wood of the retiring garrison within the dungeon of the barracks, poked and moved again by midnight chatter, somewhere the garrison commander dressed himself. Against the backdrop of the snowdrifts which carried competing glows from the cabin window candle and the moon, the father waited. And though it had not yet ended and he felt close to it still, it clung to him strangely, and he brushed the doubt aside. In his mind rose the image of the house, and in his mind rose the image of the hole which had eaten it.

He raked muck from the little ghost in the mud.

He was pulling muck from the little limp, his hand in a moment run through with the weedy grass and hair and the pronounced bone of the boy's skull. The gritty wet in the age of his hands.

The noise and heat of his breathing collapsed on the bald embankment where they lay, an eggshell of ice and mud. His thoughts came sluggish. He could still find the mother and the other boy first, before he went back in. The father shook and the moonlight framed him and the boy where they lie. Behind their collapsed forms was a hole in the land and the house falling into it, and the father felt himself sliding back. He shivered beneath the wet clothes and watched as another piece of the house fell into a clatter. He felt breathing, and not the boy or his own but the hole. He put his ear to the frail shape of the boy. A little rasp. Above them peaked the distant edge of grass. The father's legs shook and then pushed off through the mud. He began again. After he would go back in. He returned to his work the boy.

The snow off the window blew and pooled in little drifts, warmed and stuck and blown again into the warm yellow pane. Inside the doctor sat at the table. Before him spread a leather bag and the old man had his military coat about his shoulders and it frosted through the glass. His fingers ran over the tiny metals and he delicately tempted at

a few and his small eyes considered and his face was only a swarthy patch in the white of his beard and thin oily hair. The candle beat upon the father through the window.

Cupped clay back to its own, mud clapped to ground. The father climbed and pulled mud from the boy in turn. His arms worked to throw it off them. It was as though he rearranged a doll in the dirt slung snow.

The father pressed thumbs into brow, and they were. Sweat and cold dripped from the end of his nose onto the boy who lay motionless. His heart through his hands shook. He climbed and the boy cradled to his chest. He would go back in. The father walked, stretched out of his body and his life. The two collapsed again.

He wiped around eye socket, drew them in, hollowed them of mud, the delicate spines of the child's eyelash stiffening. Frost reformed and glared in the moon and he broke it from the boy's body.

He had gone back in to save him. He had gone back in to save him. He had escaped and gone down the slope and the splinters into the water and bumped into him in the cold listing dark. The father thought.

They climbed. He wanted to lay down. Behind him he could hear the wood had thawed and stilled, come alive, come snapping again. Had he not already escaped? He wanted to lay down flea bitten with the cold. He could feel warmth leave him. He heard

the gear-work wind-up go again, the furred chatter of strewn leaves sucked into the hole's deep breath. He braced his back against it, felt woodland debris fall over him. Then it all flagged and grew quiet again. He crawled.

He dragged the boy his son. He feared to close his eyes for he knew he would find them opening into the pit again. Steam pressed from his craggy head into the sky and he watched it go. He squinted against the high moon. He crawled. He pulled them together higher.

When he tightened his hand into the muddy ridge he felt the grass and cried silently. He held the boy in an arm and the grass with another and looked down at the limp form and could not let go. He waited and reserved and listened as the wind groaned within the old wood above him. In a move he slapped the boy onto the level earth like an old rag. The father dangled from the slope. He hadn't the strength to join where the boy lay yet and he breathed and then the father slackened.

The father was watching the gatemen when the window beckoned him with a knock, and he turned and went into the medical cabin. When he returned outside he was not alone and with him was a private who had stayed with them from the gate and another man whom the father knew to be a Frenchman named Cheval. The Frenchman by his uniform was the gateman's superior and they spoke and Cheval rattled the cuffs to show him. The private had been the one to spot them on the road and he had been the one

to open the gate. When the private left the father and the Frenchman spoke in English and then in French, and the man picked his teeth between the words in some delight and spoke freely and the father all the time watched over the man's shoulder where the private had gone back to the gate. Now the gatesmen spoke huddled and Cheval offered the father snuff from his breast pocket. The private's pale face shined in the dim torch fire. The father asked him if the commander was coming and Cheval said nothing. In the silence against the wind Cheval pulled from the last shaved end of his tobacco its fire and tossed it away into the snow.

The father asked the Frenchman about the doctor and the boy and what the commanding officer's rank was and what was his name (Harcourt, the Frenchman said, his eyes spots of light beneath the lip of the cottage roof.) and the father asked where his lodgings were, exactly. Cheval laughed into his palm. He tugged on the father's chains and then told the father all he knew. The Frenchman lit the mouth of a pipe stuffed from a crude tin slip with a multitude of little dents where the man had beaten it out of a rounder shape. Despite the cold Cheval's collar remained undone and the big buttons held the orange of his pipe's end and dimmed when he gave it to the father. This was the man who in another time had shuffled the peltry bales from the Northwest Company off Astor's American ships in New York for Astor's own American Fur Company, and when law came and left Astor's conscience untroubled of his Canadian competitor, the Frenchman shuffled the American company's bales to tax Astor himself. And this he did with the father. Before this he roamed the northern wastes and had done his own wintering. Cheval with the butt of his rifle flipped over the overlapped cloak and laughed when he saw the father was still naked and said something and the father did not laugh. Cheval

had once told the father he'd met a man much like him in the northern regions in a twinned city. He had explained this to the father, how the city was split by water and he had showed this with his hands holding a pipe. He had told the father the man he met gave his love to an Anishinaabe woman and together they had many children were very rich, and that the father was much the same as this man, and when he said this Cheval had pressed his hands together and then turned the left upside down. He'd said that together they made different faces of the same coin. In 1814 the Frenchman had heard the northern twin depot burned and so stopped his journey through the interior of the Michigan territory and directed himself through the flaky cold toward work.

Where is it? The Frenchman asked, and the father looked in through the window where he knew the doctor roamed and where he knew the boy rested from the cold. Where is it, Cheval asked again.

The Frenchman had once shielded the father from two men, two brothers by the name of Morris, who Cheval knew to be here in the garrison now, waiting for it to die. He said nothing of this to the father, and simply asked should he rush to bring the commander and the father shook his head and Cheval laughed. Then the man asked in English to tell him the story and the father pieced together what he hoped to hear when he began to tell it again, and he spoke for Cheval and for himself.

When the father woke he did not know how much time had passed nor where he was but he felt the spike of grass in his palm. The boy breathed.

Already the earth had hardened around the boy, torn grass and mud and snow and water from where the boy's wet clothes drained all frozen over. The father saw the boy's breath fog still. The father willed him to warm.

He looked down the slope and back at the boy and felt his arm shake as it held him to the slope and he pulled himself over the ridge and lay there. Overhead the air seemed to cease and boom. He had lost track of the house's fall. It seemed to go on. When he rolled over on his stomach the house fell again into the hole and he heard the loose ground slide away. He rolled and put his face into a silty divot, felt his breath come back warm from the mud. He would go back in after he recovered her.

When he woke his face had dried and was shot with small stones. He lay before the woods like some ritual. Prostrate before the span of dark wood he felt eyes on him, felt them like warm stones. He needed to find the other son and his wife. He looked down into the hole and saw the light break and dance as fragments hit the surface of the water and watched as a current pulled these things away. It had had a pull and he felt it still against his body, the mindless sucking current wanting him under the ground.

He tried to lift the boy out of the ground but could not.

The father fell to his stomach again to wait. He would not move except for his eyes and as his body woke they beat hot over the slurry. Behind him he sensed the hole had widened and that they should move from here. He thought it must have always been

widening. It had snuck up on him and had been sneak crawling through time to get at his back, now in this moment, eat him up in the bloodless snow.

The father heard little of how the water chewed away at the pieces of the house, wooden splinters in the mouth still churning, still grinding, the underground motions slow and unseen and putting their inchoate teeth to each sodden morsel. He could not see it and would not look at the change to echo in him forever.

Half the house must have stuck to the cliff like a wetness, its collapse frozen and refrozen and all staged and all stages of its failure and degradation locked into a cascade. And every so often another section divided, cut away, slid into blackness, replaced through the haze of sleet and moonlight that stuck to the father's eye that he could not blink away. He thought he saw the boy stir but the father was only cold and shivering and did not know it. Around them slush flaked weakly from the exposed grass and the father grasped vainly. He could feel the waters thrash still, the imprint into which he had descended coming back to its hoof, its force and print coming back to his body. Under the moonlight he felt his head dazzle with ice.

When he finished the doctor stood at the door and the Frenchman withdrew. The doctor had on his spectacles and they hardly larger than his own eyes, and through them he scrutinized Cheval as he returned to the warmth of the cabin. It was only when he had gone that the doctor spoke.

You do not have to wait outside, the doctor said.

The man tells me he found you by the departing wagon, though he does not say why he was down there at the caravans. The doctor's nose in the cold had turned malmsey and moved to where he could see the Frenchman inside.

No doubt looking for a drink, though the man hardly ever has a bean on him. A known martinet.

The father did not answer on either side and the doctor straightened the coat over his shoulders.

Come inside now. I do not like the cold, the doctor said.

The gate was lit and the men still huddled there and from the small perch the form of a man leaned over the wall in the darkness.

A Pale Face. Ho, a pale man for the door! Open it, open her up, the man on the wall cried, and the gate was set into motion. The father watched as a few soldiers came through the huddle and unloaded a small few smuggled goods and then left off drinking quietly toward the barracks door.

The father followed into the doctor's cabin.

Inside Cheval sat at the rough table, and when he saw the door close he stood and took the chair beneath it. With a hand he propped it under the window and lay himself down again in its cradle, and between his legs watched the father sit across the doctor at the table. Cheval let his rifle alone by the door.

The doctor stoked a little fire and sat and spoke about the boy and his condition and the warmth came over his back and across the table. The father listened. Across the table the doctor sat older still than the father expected. He had a small patch of bald in his thinning head and the hair raked over it, and the elbows of his shirt bald also and when the doctor spoke he spoke evenly and with his hands and he spoke with punctuation. He told them both that he was not from here and did not like the cold. The doctor explained the procedure of amputation when the father asked, His back?

The doctor paused, and then said just fine. But before he could speak again the father asked more. His legs? His arms? His feet? His eyesight, had it diminished? And the doctor did not know the last for the boy had not opened his eyes yet.

The Frenchman wet the pipe he had finished tamping and had been waiting and held up the ugly flat plane to the candle behind him on the ledge. He examined the doctor and tucked it into his mouth.

The father looked out across the dim plain of the forest floor and lost sight of his arms. He felt he had lost them somewhere beneath the snow, blue and all the night snow blue, each color receded out before him into the next, marked clearly as though for his inevitable arrival. He breathed out and inhaled the crystal snap of top snow. His had eyebrows frozen over. Below in his arms the boy lay entombed in the earth onto which his skin here or there spotted. Crystals topped his head and here the boy lay a prince.

Beyond the scattered tree line where the snow lay in soft shelves the father saw a figure crouched. Powder blew off and crackled against the prone form of the father. He watched. As he waited so did the figure and when he convinced himself that it was no thing to fear and no thing at all, he moved to pull up the boy and the figure moved instead and crouched again between the roots without regard for the snow, and moved, and moved, until it faded into its own color. The father called out but there was no return. His voice found he called out without regard for the figure, and called the name of his wife and the native name of his other son but the figure did not return nor did the others. The father touched for his belt but the hard edge of the knife was gone and so too was the belt, and in his mind rose the water running beneath the earth.

With care he put the boy in the crook of his arm. Put his warmth over the boy. His breath thawed a round depression in the boy's mud thickened chest, and the father noticed blood gathering inside the hollow. He wiped away until he saw no more and watched steadily for it to rise out of the boy's chest and saw nothing.

The father picked the boy up, his hands clenched with ice.

The father knew many men who had whispered to him of ghosts in the house. The skin tarps and birch bark houses had circled the home before but never near it, always under the cover of the branches where now their remnants shuddered under the snow and wind as refuse and even his son now curled below his chest had spoken the same, and the father looked to see the house collapse again and wondered if it had not set them loose. The father roamed these stories in his mind.

He grasped again at the boy and walked the distance of the hole and when he returned he thought it lengthened. The father pressed the boy for warmth and saw breath and moved out through the trees and the woods shimmied for them.

As he walked between the trees he cried out for her as if he had not already saved her. The house trembled and he already carried her down the stair and when he returned the rooms had gone. He called out for her.

He cried out for his sons as if he had not already found one. At times he saw the figure and followed it and lost it and spun himself back around. He held his child up.

The top layer of powder stung each bare foot hot. He had left his wife the mother at the edge of the tree line and now she was lost too. He was looking for her, he circled the house and the hole though he did not know it. It seemed to grow and grow. He could hear the house fall again. He needed to find his wife the mother and his other son, he thought. The father did not go back into the water. He held his child up. He looked into the hole. On the mud plain of the collapse lay a few thrown crates and from these pulled old bales and from these the stink of flesh. He wrapped the boy in fur and strung the rot around his shoulders. He tried again.

When the moon was highest he called her name, cried out in her father's tongue, her given name, the names he called her. He cursed her, his wife his blood. He threw his voice out like hooked twine in the darkness and these ends did not return, nor could he find their aims. He walked and could not tell what he carried, so rotted and so wet. His arms slacked with strain, the boy hung at his knees. He thought of the hole, he wanted to

go back into it, return to from where he came, to return what he had found. The wood walked unevenly. He had not found the other down there.

By the moon it would seem no time at all had passed though to the father this wore falsely. He worked to move inside his shirt so as not to break it like glass. He felt the steel edge of his mind frail and flake. He felt he had fallen a great distance though he had gotten out in time, had not fallen into the pit at all. To him the first rumble had woken thoughts of cannon fire, that old swirl of war the north knew beyond treaties where every man feared the uniform. He thought they had come for his treason. When the door knocked in its frame he had thought of heavy chains strained to snap in the frost though he knew they would not do it this way. He had wrapped her in his old cloak, and yes, here he had given her the knife amongst his other things. As he carried her, her eyes held him motionless in the room and he treasured their tarnished look and he knew they belonged to an older people with older gods that waited dead in a time separate from his. This was the vision marbled in her eyes. They watched him quietly as he gave her his belt; this was where the knife had gone. He took her down the stairwell whose bend had worsened when he turned back. He called for their children and set her in the snow.

The boy's head began to move and he stopped and the boy stopped moving as well and he shook the boy and the father felt his own head turn to ice too. He stood. Was it the boy that had moved or him who put him in motion. He thought of the heat from the burning wagons. The father tried to start again and tripped over the boy and they fell. If he left the boy in the snow he would surely die and he thought then the boy would haunt him, more than before, more than he haunted him now. He watched the pale breath

stream from his nose, bundled warm in the rotted furs. He feared to be alone in the woods with the boy.

He looked at the child and thought of the possibility of love and of love's gentle shape and it took on limbs before he put it the thought aside. The father walked and saw things in the woods that could not be. Behind the trees he thought he saw the grandfather. He felt warm leaves hit his face. Behind the father branches snapped, and he watched the home fall again. He saw the boy's arm drooped unset. The father limped on and when he had gotten far enough he saw the path behind him curved. He saw how many times he had circled himself bent back to the dark gravity of the pit.

When Cheval relit the pinch of tobacco he looked above into the window behind him and the soldiers outside returned to the gate and left their breath upon the glass. The men here do not like you, I think, the doctor said.

The father sat as before.

If this is your story I want to hear it finished but perhaps it is time for others to hear it as well. The doctor directed this at Cheval and the Frenchman returned without looking and said,

Why not tend to the boy. Tend to the boy. Don't talk with him Ellis.

And how is it, again, you found this man and the boy on the path, the old doctor said.

The night wind brought itself through the seams of the small house where the doctor waited with the two men and where before the doctor had waited late in the night for his wife to return with the bottle that would help the doctor off to sleep. While he waited for her he shook in the bed where the boy now slept. And outside the cabin where the three and the boy waited the old fort groaned and from its depths already moved the figures of the brothers and when the shared room made a sound they froze and waited in half-dress, crouched beneath the bunk like ghouls between the moonbeams. When the barracks stilled they put themselves to motion. Their belongings they stuffed rough into the canvas bag and drew the knot. In the den of the barracks stacked beds sat rank and in the heat crawled with lice and shapes which longed for their blood and they walked between the rows without shoes. These the ragged souls crept, the brothers named Morris. A fat man and a thin mute, they overlooked the things they had pilfered from the dreaming enlisted. Above them in the second floor was the commander's locked room and the long table where they ate and the two crept the stairs, up, up. In the second floor a few men drank by candle and murmured of the prisoners. When the corner drunk paused to make out the two coming up the climbing figures stood in silence. The soldiers turned from the bench, the firelight not strong or young enough to reach and reveal the men on the stairs. One of the drunks who was their superior and a clerk asked what they were doing and still the figures had silenced and seemed to measure the room and the bright knob of the commander's door gleamed dully in the light. The clerk pushed from the table and from his bare chest hung the army coat unused, and the drunk asked their names

and each their ranks and the clerk moved again toward the stairs when the brothers faded down their slant. The clerk drunk and only half certain in his ability stood stupored over the rough hewn cut of the stairwell and did not call down after them but stared transfixed until his companion beckoned him to return.

The Frenchman was asking the father to show him his feet. How far did you come, Cheval asked, and laughed.

Already on the table the doctor's hands wavered and he wrung them and blew into them and put them below the table, and when he rose to speak the father was watching him already.

He thought always of the safe and he could not deny it. The father called her name and for the other, and he hoped by some strange dark gravity he could pull them all together again and up the safe too, his voice stronger at just the thought of it and he working his voice out of the frail body strong and magnetic. He stepped over a felled tree whose cups of mold had turned to rock and he heard her call out to him. Light from the moon veined the trees and her cry lingered fainter and blew away. In the father's hand the boy's blood beat weakly.

The mud covered the boy and his arm slipped from the furs had coppered. The father stopped and tucked the arm into the furs and stiffly turned to where the voice had started from. They looked a toy soldier scraped of color.

In the father's heart he recognized he knew he should not leave it. He felt his power there still. He felt its power over the boy in its black bottoms. When he found the mother he thought, then he would decide how he should go down into it.

Over the next rise she was begging the forest, he could hear. He knew his other boy was dead now. He had not named him. He climbed with his legs hackneyed and down the slope she was not there.

Distantly he felt the hollow blackness of the hut, the smoke from rotted wood fires burning low and thick and blue. He lay in debt since the beginning. He had looked into it, into the trunk where his father had left him the glittering nails and his poor fool aspirations, and seeing this, and yet he returned. He the father removed them and he heard the house collapse again, and briefly in his mind fully he saw the safe floating there on the surface of the water as though the lightest substance. He stood transfixed by the shimmy of the black waters and wanted to climb down to get it and in the crooked forest holding the boy he swayed.

And from the waters emerged the boy just as silent and still, bobbing pale and his bronze colored eyes searching for some image in the night sky. The father held to the boy tight, as he had in the waters and as he had in the hut and when the father opened his eyes he saw the braves that surrounded him: all around them faces pushed through the walls of snow and wood, eagle nosed braves black brow black eyes black paint, red as the night sky they were. Was it Astor who sent him or himself? The broad boles rattled laughter to the top and the father and the dying child stood waiting.

The father returned from the room where the boy slept and the doctor escorted him. In the room the father had seen the bed and the doctor's scant few belongings and a window. Cheval left the chair and stood.

Private gate came, Cheval said in English. Cheval gestured toward the window. He told me to look out.

The doctor Ellis went to the window and leaned against the glass.

What do you see Ellis, Cheval asked, and the father sat down at the table and looked between the two but Cheval shook his head.

I see men, the doctor said.

The commander and our lord is coming here he said to say, Cheval said.

The gate man?

Yes.

Yes, but no, this is more. What else did the man say? This is more than his arrival. I would say he has already arrived. A scant few men left here at the fort and most thick upon the yard now. If it is the commander he has had them roving for a time now. He's got them running around out for something, the doctor said.

The private at the gate also said they found a hair, Cheval said.

The doctor leaned away from the glass.

Hair?

Cheval ran a hand through his short dark hair and curled it with his fingers.

Redskin, he said.

What do you mean by this? Ellis asked.

The fire in the small room had been sending its cracks into the air and on the ground where a loose iron plate lay in front had piled a little silt plain of ash. The old doctor wiped his head and then his hand on his shirt. His coat lay around the back of the chair and when Ellis returned to it he checked the pockets as though he had buried some value within them.

You old drunk, said Cheval.

Quiet up. And stay seated, yes you. Sit down there. Yes. Don't break it. I have only three left, I can have only one guest at dinner, my wife complains. But we do not leave this room. I do not want to invite what is happening outside in, do you understand? Harcourt will come. He is most likely already awake, though for you or the mad wind outside I do not know.

The father sat back down.

Where are the rest of the men in this camp, the father asked. The old doctor Ellis obliged him, for already he wanted to talk of other things.

Withdrawn and thinned like a mist. The stabilization of the region is now demanded elsewhere. Many aid in the relocation west. The native is so surrounded it does

not know which way to sell itself, no more do they sit outside the walls in force. The trade is dying. Men aren't pulling the same money from it, they complain. Their beds have shrunk in width and thickness, you should have seen this phenomenon first hand, and now so thin, so much lost sleep. You can probably choose one or two of them.

When nothing was said the doctor addressed Cheval who watched the window.

Surely you did not leave the pioneer with all your treasure intact, Ellis said.

When he saw the old doctor was not going to relent Cheval produced a thick brown bottle from the interior of his coat and old Ellis drummed the table.

I knew it. I knew he did, he said.

The doctor went to put out two glasses and the Frenchman poured and poured. The father thought on the window in the doctor's room and watched the snow.

Blood was running from the boy's arm to his and blotting in the snow and the father thought he was following the mother, the distant figure dancing ahead of him which again disappeared. The father saw ghosts he knew.

The father had trapped many in the box. Too many years long of backwards dealing, and just as his bare feet punched through the snow he had seen many tamped down the same into the hard ground, their bodies folded without resistance into the bare interior of the safe. When he put his hand in the safe he made truths and traded them and

put them to life in the world. The red men would laugh at this medicine. He had taken his own pieces and put them in his own iron bag like a tooth is placed and thereafter transcended into great power and like the red men he told himself he did it for the people the safe governed, this was the purpose of the safe and this had been his purpose, to govern over a dark land without governance. He saw the woods had stilled and the wind quieted and all ahead emptied. A hand came to rest on his shoulder.

That's enough now, the doctor said but Cheval poured and the doctor did not stop him.

Outside was the sounds of chains and men, where three struggled to move the fort's cannon for travel in the snow and mud. The father watched by the window. Fire in the hearth snapped like teeth and the doctor began to tell a story about a man who, shot and lived, had then traveled a circus to show the hole that saw straight through him. When he finished Cheval moved his large brow and contemplated the watery face in the cup.

About how much did they pay him doctor? he asked.

When the doctor put his glass down the door knocked but the enlisted men had already become too warm and sat where they were. The father watched the private crunch across the snow toward the gate and the commander kicked the cabin wall with his boots and came in. Cheval poured his drink and the doctor stood.

The commander whose name was Harcourt took in the room and the father's chains and the small weak table where the others sat.

Stand up.

The commander's nose fell so straight it made the little blunderbuss he gripped one handed look crooked. He directed the Frenchman with the butt as he carried it backward like it was any parcel.

Cheval reached through the curly black mop for his absent hat and stood and sipped from the dark twist of the glass.

If the men of the little outpost had grown hungry in the absence of the native and lonely in the endless shift of the militias into the old war legion and into the army regular which once again rose against its old foe color, the gaunt of Harcourt's cheek cried the hungriest and in his expression across the pocked and ravaged skin the assemblage of men embodied in his command wore flat and heavy. The man was known to wear his old black coat faded grey and walk the narrow plank running the width of the high fortifications at night. By those nights the wall gunners he sought to encourage by the sound of his step thought him a ghoul, for indeed, they never saw him climb the ladders.

Harcourt's nose fell so sharp and rough when he pat the man down Cheval was surprised the buttons of his jacket remained.

Sir.

The commander removed his coat from him. The Frenchman held to the drink as the commander tugged the wool jacket around his body. When he had it Harcourt gave the coat a shake. He put his ear to a pocket and shook again. The room had his attention, and Harcourt fluttered the coat out like an old blanket. Satisfied, the commander fished through and took out the few coins and another glass bottle only a quarter full. This he smelled and then put on the table in front of them. The coins he put in his pocket. Something in the weft of the jacket caught the commander's eye and without regard for the room and he was lost to scrutiny.

Cheval set down his drink. The father had moved by the hearth and stood next to the doctor when Cheval grabbed the tail of his coat. The doctor swayed. Harcourt without hesitation kicked the Frenchman square in the chest, so that when he fell he cracked over the flat of the chair and landed on all fours amongst its remains. As Cheval rose, Harcourt tossed the nappy coat over him. The doctor managed a gurgle and the commander waited for the formless Cheval to put his arms through the sleeves before he sat down at the table.

Do not make me fine you thrice, Harcourt said to Cheval, who struggled to button the jacket closed. Now you sit man. Harcourt directed his attention to the corner of the room protected from the hearth and the moon fell on his back and by the darkness broadened him.

The cabin was silent and then the sound of chains began again.

When the father had sat he saw the commander sat before him like a judge, for Harcourt leaned over the short table with the gun the gavel and crutch. Despite the cold

sweat developed along his hair which spiked thin and furious, and for a moment with the collar of his checkered night shirt peaking from the cowl of his coat he looked years sick. Listen to me, he said, and the pale shake of his face loomed.

Listen to me man; tell it to me and all. I know of you, yet you have come here. Warrants and stories of you, yet voluntary you sit chained. I woke at your name, sit still in the sweat of my dreaming.

Harcourt knocked the gun against the table and the bottle jumped.

I want to know you and there is a strangeness to the way you sit. And more curiouser, I do not know whether I should like it. Now, if you do not tell the tale this man knows you, and here Harcourt nodded to Cheval who stood next to the doctor.

Not a word of that man is to be believed, the father said.

I don't doubt it, Harcourt said at last. But god you're naked man. Give me the truth and I will clothe you.

Harcourt groped for something in the folds of his coat and then gave up.

But if not I will make him tell it in your stead, and Harcourt said this pointing to Cheval.

And before I alight your eager tongue to its fullest, I must tell you in full of your descent into imprisonment, for this is its first step. You are naked and soon barer still. For you are my prisoner under the law. Even in here, at the edge of the world. And here my voice makes the bars that hold you. My voice holds back the wild, the children of the

night, the immutable heart of man, and all other things that creep against the heart of our southern laying democracy. So let me spin you the dimensions and make no misunderstandings. For it is not just the story of you I want, but your dreams.

Here, in the medical cabin of the garrison whose name had perched upon a few maps but no longer, the father learned what he had already from his informant. This was the eve of its destruction. The fort and the few log buildings had attached itself to the supply of peltry coming down out of the northern interior and so risked its position some distance from the waters and so in time had waned. The trade came slow and uneasily. A battle had struck in upon the doors in the first year and left its mark and still the men feared to hear the woods rattle and shake like the tumble of arrow shafts though the age of such things was over. And when the meager processions of the native came to pitch camp and trade outside the high bare walls, the wood of the gate woolen and chewed by maybe these same people, these same families, the old fort veterans then drank more merrily than any night before and in the morning lay the sicker and bedded while the young men made a pelt or two from an old flint or the odd metal smoking tin. These old men lay beneath the covers. The commander knew but stopped to ask the father, why would these old veteran men come to the edge of the world if not to trade, what else would it come to? Harcourt mused and studied the father.

Harcourt told the father the fort was rolled up tomorrow. All of the regular enlisted had been reacquired, and most had shuffled off outside the gate and vanished into the world beyond. He himself and the last few clerks resolved to ride out with the morning with the last few wagons if any more had come. But Harcourt did not know.

Harcourt said that in times of war the walls and all the structure would be denied and burned, but the commander admitted this was not the same moment copied down through time and then admitted that he had doubts as to what the moment might be instead. Harcourt had not decided. He confessed to the father that he did not want to decide.

Most of the soldiers under his command had already gone on to new placement. They would be going west. A man who he knew and trusted had already arrived and written from his post back to Harcourt. This insider he trusted, Harcourt told the room this, the father.

Cheval and the old doctor Ellis sat against the rough wall and their smell was hot and dark. They had not reached for the bottle in some time for in fact Ellis had finished off the Frenchman's stock, and Cheval had watched without protest. Cheval was listening to the commander but more he was watching the father. Ellis having only to listen to the commander Harcourt as he spoke to the imprisoned father, his eyes had come slack off the floor and looked for some new sight. Cheval watched the father and watched where the father put his hands and how he shaped his face in listening to the commander's words. The old doctor Ellis rolled the bottle between his fingers on the floor and remembered that his wife had still not returned.

Harcourt had continued on and the father had not moved. For Harcourt this command, this movement, was explicit in its aim though there was nothing more attached, simply the command itself to station themselves along the westmost front of the nation. For Harcourt, he told the father, he did not know what arrival held. He had experience in the fur trade, he had experience governing the people, he had experience in

war though little. The western front called to him, but Harcourt felt strongly that some other reach was taking place, and this act, this grasp was why he spoke so freely.

Harcourt stood up over the table and gripped the furred shoulder tight, to where he could feel the bone resisting, and hung before the father's face like a thrust, dried, and waning lamp.

I know there is to be war again. I know there is to be new land brokered for. Look man! look south, for the Seminole people caged in a trap. I dream of them. I've written of the moment, to them, and none answer. What is passed on the lips say they will not fight again but I do doubt it. These moments, they are popping up. This terrible grief, it blooms and rattles across the night of this new country. And here it comes again, across my desk, written so neat the hand to make it I imagined translucent, veined in copper, the heart to drive them unearthly strong. The army is on the move, has been regenerated. I have read the letter though the document has veiled its own purpose, and I have only the dawn to decide for myself what I should do. For I have seen the letter; they wish to move all others from this garrison, all of the remaining men except for me!

If the news impressed upon the small crowd it did not find itself sharing, for the doctor Ellis and Cheval merely sat as they had. The father put his hands across the table and the chains linking them clacked and rang solid. Harcourt collapsed in his chair and from his old great coat glowered.

It is for this inspection of the act I am here, Harcourt said at last, and your acts coinciding.

Keep breathing he told the boy, keep breathing. Then he gave the boy up.

The father watched the tarnished eyes turn away, and he followed the mother though he felt only he knew the way.

Under the moon she held the boy who would not speak to her and the father spoke in the absence. They walked in this way and there were no animals to sound but his own voice and around them the trunks did flatten in the dim light and the landscape scrolled by them like a paper screen and the father did not wish for its end.

Why would he name the one that was to be sacrificed? the father asked, and he in his ache and climb down into the cold waters fell and rose and walked and fell again and caught his falling with a stiff arm and in this cycle did become some creature other than man and yet he crawled on. His question stretched from the beginning of the boy's birth and asked at last but still she did not speak, and for what. To put aside the most human sin as without label, to beget a new story from her vital colored tarnished eyes. She refused him. The brother had been born to die, to take the boy's place. Though the mother knew her children would have passed into new lives and new selves and the old just shells behind, this was closed to the man who loped behind her. The father sought refuge and she held already to the boy, the first born, not the father's but man too his only heir, first and only, and all possibility closed behind that entrance. The mother led the

miserable procession through the trees and her soft moccasins broke the plate ice layer of the snow into pieces.

When she stopped she set the boy in his furs into the ice and parted the rotted animal veil to reveal his cheek. The remnant family stood together at last by the shadow of some lowed bole. She gave the boy water and his lips took it, and then the father. Coats and rags and blankets covered her back and from this weave she threw more off. She told the father to strip and he did and his clothes fell into the snow and were gone. She gave him the belt with the knife. From his shirt the father cut a lash from the waist and took the belt and kept the weird weave lashed to his body by the thin leather and then tied the knife beneath to his inner leg. The father babbled and the mother listened to him talk of the grandfather and she picked up the boy into her hand, and he the father went into her footprints and they walked the moonlit branches across the ground.

The boy's angular head bobbed in the crook of her neck like a hatchet in the ray shafts and glowed red as an ember in the dark. And like a stone struck the father feared him.

The mother spoke to the boy and the father quitted his talk and listened to her. The father thought of him who he had put in the safe. Rolled his red name over his tongue like a river stone to stave off his drought. Beneath the father the legs went on bending and unbending. He remembered she had been between the two fire pits so they could spit ash on his child when he was born, a child of fire. What the old missionary priests would cry if they saw this baptism into devilry.

When the father eyed the ground again the pale white snow glistened unbroken and rolled before him solid into the distance and he feared again he had turned back to the hole. The cold wind set his face to all dry teeth and lip and agony.

Harcourt told the father maybe he would return south to the lower state and take the father with him, and here Harcourt recited some of the charges against him that would take, and Harcourt told the father the government and most likely all established companies would have their fill of him in their own time, and more trials would process. He had no wish to execute the man. When the father asked of the boy, the commander told him he would be passed onto any mother that might come forth to take him. Harcourt seemed to look about the room then for something he had lost and when his eye fell on Cheval he told the Frenchman yes, why did he not look in on the boy asleep in the other room. But Cheval did not move from the wall.

Harcourt continued speaking.

Harcourt told the father again that in the event the boy is not claimed as was right by god, the boy would come into repossession. Harcourt knew of this way, for his daughter took care of a similar child, and taught the child and other children like her in the swept pews of a small chapel miles distant from this cold place on bare afternoons, and he confessed that likely the boy would be directed under her guidance, for he knew not what else to do that sat right with him.

That is the best I can offer you, Harcourt said.

In return, I must inquire as fitting of my profession and current occupation. As I have mentioned I have heard of you. There has been an interest in you, and your business and your family. Though it seems these two are much the same to you, if what I have heard is the truth. Most recently, rumor of your passing had come to my ears. These people ferry word of you through the factory, they deposit more than peltry and jewelry. They put into my walls a telling. And in turn this old wood speaks to me.

Harcourt fingered the lining of his coat as if for him it held a great secret. The father shifted in his chair. And then he told the commander what he knew to be the truth: That they lived alone in the cold swamp of the interior propped by the native family he married into. He traded peltry with a chain of independents whom the companies hated and the government sought to scare away for the future of land deals with the steadier flowing pioneer family and to steal even the trade of fur itself to support the new eager trapper in the hopes of enlistment. The father knew the trade was all stopped up, his inventories had gone bad. He hunched that the army was desperate to swell again against its new native terror, and said Harcourt himself had all but confirmed. These things the father knew. He told the commander the house lay abandoned in the interior, lay destroyed. By whom, by what? but the father would only say that a hole had opened up beneath the house and could explain no more, no matter Harcourt's prying. He told Harcourt there was no money, to put it to rest. He told Harcourt the native had gone west and north and south only in death, and Harcourt puzzled at this. The interior lay bare, the father said. He told Harcourt it all dried up. The father blamed Jackson and Cheval spit

upon the ground and Harcourt studied the Frenchman while the father continued. He admitted to Harcourt his influence was fragile and gained terrible reach and yet even he could not get it back now. And how were you to hold it? Harcourt inquired, but the father went on, and Harcourt stopped him again, his hand raised to stop the speaking.

How were you to get hold of this interior?

The father told Harcourt he had better governed the dark landscape outside the window. He told Harcourt he needed the doctor for the boy. But why, by whom? but the father would not answer him.

And Harcourt, having turned from Cheval who shied from his gaze, fingered the lining of his coat as if for him it held a great secret. The men in the room had felt the cabin grow close, grow tight and small, and yet it was Harcourt only who felt he had comfortably drawn the string, as he sat he contemplated at how to speak his heart. And who was this man, but an old veteran himself to the soldiers who lingered in the fort now, the old sergeants and captains all gone away, sent away fled away, resettled west. Other than the old doctor, Harcourt sat alone in age under this night. See him: The inheritor of a dead and disgraced general, nothing more himself than a lost aid-de-camp whose age holds him aloft. At night he ascends the gates perch and looks down into the forests. He oversees the pilfering of the woods. They do not want a military man. He is their pretense. His cot is neat, it is well made, it is dressed in crimson wool, he sees the edge of the bedclothes by where he peers beneath the solid walls of his desk and the color maps his dreams. He writes and inquires out of the darkness of his post. He seeks some sign from the world, gathers the stitches of letters and scraps, and what he has put together

speaks to him of a great conspiracy without conspirators. Beneath the desk before sleep he tries not to hear the night sounds of the fort and beyond. At night he ascends the gates perch and looks through the laden boughs. They are heavy with fruit though this cannot be. What does the old frontiersman see? During the day he writes to his daughter. He cannot bare to speak to anyone for long. He laughs with a made face and so do the rest of the solders under his command. He urges his bastard daughter to write quickly, he must know. Her mother is always lost to his memory, her tawny face is gone to him, she is disappeared. What does the old pretend veteran see? He sits between the edges of the world and knows there is no place hollow. At night he ascends the gates perch and looks down into the ramshackle and thin hovels of the native come to sell their world to him. He sees the slow procession of turmoil. The commander tries to tell them his story, his collections of letters, he tries to warn them. The original people tell him they already know and ask for how much will you give me? For this pelt? For this, for this? They march through the factory, beads for stitching, blankets for black powder. The soldiers sell bottles until they cannot and then gift them. The commander takes into his room the doll of a small child and caresses the traveled husk dress. At night the candle flickers wildly to frame him always waiting at his desk, waiting for new information. Before him are the letters, to his daughter, to his superior, to the companies which bribe him for the next load of bales. He sends his daughter money, he knows she will use it to establish a refuge for the world's orphans and tender aged, though she never writes back. The man forgets a human touch. In his mind he explores the craggy walls of his heart which are a desperate ruin. At night he roams outside the camp walls and walks amidst the warmth of the mob and their rotted fires and looks through the smoke to see which eyes will meet

his there. There is no moment in his lifetime in the perch where the motions of his world stop, there is no moment he sees its blood and life thinning. And yet he doubts. On a walk he imagines in the darkness the shape of his wife and too the face and hands of the man who has separated him from the love of his daughter, though she contains none of his features. He bumps into one of the night watch and reels. Every night ends the same for the old pretender. Every night he waits in the chair for someone to come out of the edge of the world to tell him what is happening in this new America. Below his desk he begs for new creation. The commander in the perch moves wetly inside his own flesh, searching for out, and perhaps over the walls it exists though he will never take the step. So he walks the camp and under the desk their skin maps his dreams, and when he watches they process out only for him and he watches by the fire of the candle.

The father watched Harcourt play with his coat. Along the wall the father's own shadow danced by the fire. On the window the snow had fallen and it swept and dusted across the broad white plain where now the torches of the soldiers grew dim. Yet the father longer looked, for his eye was caught. The snow blew and rattled the window and threw up a great fog so that even the men pressed against the gate shielded themselves and huddled. But the father could not make it out fully. Beyond the small hot cabin where Harcourt had yet to tell them of his conspiracy and the grave discovery within the walls of his own garrison, the cold did seize the territory and squeezed its hard stall. And under the winds, across the fresh blown powder, winding out into the darkness and the slope of wheel-laden ruts, went a fresh track dissolving, away from the cabin, away toward the barracks through the snow where the stable attached.

For the boy the cold came slowly. The window of the small cabin room spun out no light but in the dark the boy had spread his hand upon it. And in the room in the moments before the boy would escape it he crouched barefoot by the bed and went under it like a spider. He pushed out an old flat crate and dug through the naked debris under the mattress and around the bed a nest of straw and feather lay strewn and still the boy had found nothing. The room held little else. A chair by the window for reading and a heavy chest of drawers. There were dresses that had not been touched and folded away, an unworn pair of shoes, a box of silverware. The boy passed over them and left the box open to the collection of aged spoons.

A crude sling wrapped his arm. He returned to what was on the floor, the remnants of a life and parts of another. Outside he did not hear his father talking though he hung at the door. There was only the crackle of the fire from the hearth, and the boy put his hand along the wall to feel its heat spot. He continued looking. The boy wished for a knife or something rude and sharp, some old tool buried away from time for tonight's new purpose, but there was none. On the floor lay an overturned frame, and in it an ashy sketch of a woman whose nose too large and forehead an antediluvian shape. Her charcoal hair was wreathed in fingerprints over and beneath the glass. The boy's face doubled in the glass and he held the frame so that the woman's might overlap his and he studied the image and returned the frame to the pile. Beneath the door the glow of the hearth promised warmth and fire and the boy left out the window.

He was in another land.

The father was a shadow on the bole, and ahead of him the figure in the deepest black bounded from the trees, and the father chased after through the snow. The figure had kept track of him, had followed from the hole and house in the cold without complaint, but this had not swayed the father. The father ran, his breathing raked the air. And what pulled him was the thought, the notion that the figure had done all this while ahead of him, had followed the father without even a trail to follow. The father needed to know, he needed to know who was his enemy.

But each time the shape eluded him, its end did not come. Between breaths the father watched, between the bobbing of his head the father saw the figure moved with some familiarity. The father followed and no thoughts arose of the mother or the boy or where they had gone in the endless track of the moon.

The father looked for some sign to steer him but he saw none. He came upon the exposed muddy bank sloped beneath the roots of an old oak crested in snow. The hoops of viny life curled into the earth and in their cups melted snow glimmered. Atop the hill of snow a man looked down onto him. The father put his foot to rut out a hold for himself. He held to the trunk, but once his arm wrapped around he knew he could not leave. He stood shivering, his face pressed against the bark, the slivers of ice stung into

his cheek. When he looked up again he imagined that what he saw was his own father, the boy's grandfather above him on the small hill.

The grandfather looked to be a cold watcher of the world then, and he stood on the hard ice mound. He wore a redcoat, though he had only been a guide to that empire. He had left the father for the northern trail and trade and had never returned, and the father did not know why or where he had gone. The boy had asked him before, had asked the father to tell him this myth of his progenitor as plainly as the grandfather stood now. The father felt his temple freezing to the tree but he looked on. The grandfather had not moved, had not shifted his stance, and beneath the coat the father could not find a sign that his chest did rise. Down the aquiline nose the grandfather looked and his eyes shined to a mirrored edge, finished to reflect the father where he clung to the bole and behind the father's shivering form where the woods passed on into darkness.

The father looked away. When he rose his head the grandfather had not left but stood as before. The father searched for some words to say. He saw in the prism of the body beneath the old red coat shapes of things he could not describe, a spectral design laid out by some strange hand of fate, a completion of what the grandfather had left for him and yet only the beginning of its understanding. Here was the old French guide cowed to British masters and sent into the north of the continent for trade. Here was the old French guide father to a child who would not know his mother. Here was the old French guide who left his child in the woods. Here was the old French guide who educated the father amidst the strange bands of men and women traveled in the weird trade of flesh. And standing before the father was the grandfather who had put treasures

into the forest, had put coin into tree stumps, had placed a bag of nails and his vision for the interior in the selfsame swamp and left it all for the father to do with as he pleased. The grandfather had left, but he put for the father the seeds to stay and claim coldly a land that had refuted other masters. And the father had done so.

Why did you leave me? the father asked.

But it was not finished. The father stood alone in the bitter cold to see more, and as he shivered against the bole and dug his foot into its roots to better hold, the woods seemed to bend over him. The air was still and there was no other animal sound but his. The father raised his head and by the shafts of the cut moon through the branches the father's face glowed whitely, and the ice hidden in the lines of his face seemed to hold him all together.

A golden woman crumbled into ash and disappeared behind the trees. The figure black danced upon an ageless iron floor. When he raised his narrow face a third time to the hill of ice the house sat haunting him. In the lone front window a candle flame did pass. The house looked narrow and thin and its face held the lower door and the lone window and higher its walls were bare and solid facing him. The wind picked up and the tree the father clung to trembled but he paid no attention to it for the front door of the house started to sound. From inside the house the lock of the door rammed into place. It struck again and again. Where he huddled the father could feel the thrum of the lock sound beneath the bark of the tree, and beneath the snow dampened night air that felt drawn in and close to the head, the father could hear distantly the beat beneath the boles, the pine in the darkness ticking away. And by what power the old grandfather had sowed

in his own medicine bag through the nails and the hollowed stump the father realized, the door to the house on the glazed hill stood open.

All sound swung away, and the father felt the cold glass him and he found he could not look from the house though he knew it could not exist there. And yet it stood shifting with the pine. From the liminal space of the darkneses the doorway held, of which the house surely contained them all, the pieces of a pale figure constituted itself. A hand arm and nose. Bare dimpled chest and foot. The features of a boy, a male child. The child held a bare candle in the saucer of a broken cup. The child looked out from the darkness for just a moment, where the moon fell clear over him and the floor behind, and through the image of the house and the features of the child the father could not raise the name. He gazed steadily through the moment and at last the door was shut and the house appeared no more, had shrunk, and withdrawn into the faded blacks of the snow covered woods until its candle glow snuffed out into the twinkle of the moon, and the father did not know which of his children it had shown him again.

The father curled around the foot of the tree and slid partially from the slope of the roots where he lay in the snow. Lightly snow began to fall again and the trees did not move. Above him the figure black walked away, over the hill of ice and disappeared, but the father curled from himself and no longer the figure, for he knew who the figure was and who it could be.

Out of the colorless and muted damp air, the rank smell of the pit rose again to his nose. How far had it come creeping, he thought, he imagined then the ground unraveling beneath him. How far had the sinkhole followed him, he thought. How long had it been

since his bare foot hit the water? The father thought perhaps he was simply walking on the other side of the pool's trembling surface. Was this part of the magic, the father thought. Was the house only built for its own destruction? As if to test the thought he brushed at the snow on the ground but there was only earth. In the cold the father thought of the fires that circled his and his wife's union. She had chosen him, he remembered, she had chosen him, but now he could not be sure.

When he awoke the leather carapace around him creaked as he threw it off. Steam poured from his head and he squinted in the sunlight. Direct ahead of him the boy gazed out of a woolen bundle. The father reached out and touched him through the layers. His skin was warm and hot.

The father realized she was speaking to him, and he stood up over the crouching boy. The mother sat in the snow and from the blanket thrown over her shoulder were the oversized moccasins and their intricacies. The father rose in full as she waited for him and before he could ask where they had gone or how, she stood easily and scooped the boy from the snow and waited again for the father to move.

Harcourt woke from a dream.

The small room which was his office and where he slept held a bare few things that marked it as his own. The bed lay neatly made and empty, and he had not found refuge here. There was the solid and immovable desk, across which a number of letters

and old string ties and ink stains sat and pooled. Beneath the desk lay the commander Harcourt. The three walls and the give of the old floor gave way in Harcourt's mind to the forest lean-to shelter and the firmness of the immortal earth. If he left his mind long enough in the memory, he swore he could feel the heat coming up from the dirt. Beneath the desk Harcourt smelled himself. In the room there was the bed and the desk and an iron lockbox where the written history of the garrison lay inked and numbered. The knock on the office door came again.

By the time he had traveled down the stairs and had been lead into the storehouse which sat on the cold grounds between the stable and the factory, Harcourt had already heard it twice.

Tell me how you found it again, Harcourt said. He and the clerk stood before the yawning room stacked in materials.

The clerk whose nightshirt was stained in sweat since one of the ragged soldiers had shook him where he slept him clutched the greasy lantern. The clerk nodded but held the lantern out before him.

Would you take this sir, the clerk asked, and the commander assented. When the lantern had passed from his hand and the light grew dim on his face the clerk seemed relieved. Then Harcourt walked the clerk into the room.

The garrison had not been built to hold back time. Harcourt knew this. The fort walls were erected to protect the interests of Fort Saginaw. But even as the walls were raised and the supply of peltry trickled in, the soldiers continued to accrue. More men

than there were shifts. And many made their own dealings beyond the walls and this breakage the commander tolerated, though even then he questioned the growing numbers. But men arrived while the peltry markets had all gone to states of rot. Bales of winter beaver were expedited from the inventory as fast as they could be tied, men would nick and cut themselves to ensure its speed. Perhaps muskrat made its way into the bales. Harcourt did not check these things himself. He was paid all the same. But the flesh persisted. Piles of animal arrived, were waited, were sent out when demand met them, were sent out when price per bale was slashed, cleaned out when the old stores rotted in the room even as new peltry arrived to replace it. The animal did move, from the wood to the bale, animate once again. The American put a map over the land and changed it. The American put the land in their own boxes, and sifted through grid by grid until it had run up to its borders and slavered at the boundaries it had yet to caress. Harcourt knew this. Flesh was flesh, the American said to Harcourt as he read the letters across his desk, which asked for more.

Harcourt allowed the clerk to go beside him into the next chamber of the storage rooms which in the uncertainty of the darkness seemed to stretch onward but the clerk would not. The clerk waved a bare arm, no his gesture said. When Harcourt raised the lantern to see ahead the thick hair on the arms of the clerk were lifted.

Harcourt looked into the past again. Saginaw fell into ruin, and Harcourt's position in the wild grew a miles from civilization. The garrison rested beyond the boundary of the Treaty of Saginaw. The Ojibwe had been cultivated around the fort or moved farther beyond its reach, to where Harcourt's garrison rested near the center of the

region of that lower peninsula. When Harcourt first read of Saginaw's impending collapse, he wrote to the territorial governor whose name was Lewis Crass. Governor Crass responded, and told Harcourt that the United States military were much compressed by the heat of the swamp and the penetrative tendencies of the mosquito. When Harcourt returned a letter to the governor he asked only how small the men of Fort Saginaw had become and at what rate their shrinkage and if he should fear its spread. He heard no answer. And so his own governance over the trade had elongated in a single night. And though some years ago, amidst the processions of the poor and the maimed which limped along the barest of roadways in through the gate, Harcourt had asked himself how long it could go on.

Harcourt and the clerk pushed aside the trap lid where beneath the factory storage a deeper cavern had been built to hold the excess. The clerk watched above with the lantern and Harcourt climbed down out of view.

When the both of them stood in the warm dry air of the earthen hold and listened as the timber holding the dirt at bay groaned and swayed in the dim light the clerk began again. As the clerk spoke Harcourt's oil lantern swayed over the boards and bounced off the dry dead walls and he walked hunched though there was no need for it. Harcourt thought over who it might have been.

The clerk had overseen the inventory and done the counting for the factory where American goods were sold. All others to do the work had gone or slept. There was something to the stillness of the task, the sound to fall off after the rummaging which the clerk enjoyed. The garrison was to be closed up and the left over accounted for and the

supplies metered out to the remaining men and secretly the last few native peoples who walked from the woods, though no places or houses stood outside the walls now save for the twinkle of a caravan distant down the road which sold whiskey to the leaving men. The clerk had sat asleep behind the screened table of the factory store and across the rough counter he had placed the markings and a sketch from his charcoal pen and behind him the shelves were empty and smelled of sulphur. When the clerk awoke it was not to the sounds of the men moving the crates and barrels from the room but their absence. The clerk told Harcourt that here the hairs on his arm had first raised, but Harcourt doubted this stretching. There was only silence in the factory, and the men had gone to sleep. The clerk rubbed at his eyes and when he felt what he had put on his face he pulled his hands away. They were covered in the ashy film of the pen. He looked to the charcoal stick on the counter and swept it away where it rattled beyond where he could see it.

The clerk alone in the night had only to wait for the next few men to arrive and finish the work of sorting and then he could be done. The clerk wiped his hands on his pants. His stomach gurgled and in the hollow he pictured softened corn and meat and roux from the pig fat, and thought of going to find a meal now that rations could disappear without concern. Instead, the clerk rose and walked behind the shelf through the narrow smoky hall where, by his telling, the oil lantern still wisped. The clerk had thought this odd. Here again he told Harcourt of his future dread, and Harcourt merely watched him with his soft eyes. He chose to follow the flicker down the hall despite the sign, the clerk said aloud, and despite knowing the men assigned to him had left the task and walked alone to their beds without light. Who were these men, Harcourt asked him, but the clerk could not say more than their rough description: wide, dirty, ragged, crude.

In the tunnel of the hallway years of grease and wearing had softened the walls and as the clerk had alone approached in the dusk of the lantern the rough folds of the wall seemed to layer and accumulate around him.

Tell me exactly how you found it, Harcourt said, holding the lantern to the clerk's face.

When the clerk had entered the back he picked up the waiting lantern to better continue. The clerk stood in the upper room. Here were the clothing, salted meats and other eatings, a few worthless traps sold to soldiers or the curious native, gaudy trinkets and carvings and things of pernicious value that lay in piles. Uncollected letters and writing sat and tied along the wall. Among these the clerk knew were the notes of the deceased without their own home to return to and the last soft cries of the dead beneath folded parchment. Here in the selling place they lay for there was no other place for them; no one would hold onto the notices of the estranged dead. When death befell the pioneer who else would answer the knocking? Perhaps the cold body would be slid from the horse or wagon, buried, dependent upon the company kept. A letter was written. It was carried in a breast pocket stained with sweat. The clerk had known a man to die in his own company on the way north, and the clerk had watched as the body discarded easily and the letter only carried so far and at last at next break folded up and thrown among the mossy stones. And here some others lay, in the garrison, collected as easily and without remark as the men who carried them. The clerk knew looking at the bags these would never leave along their intentions. The letters had no more place in the world. The clerk would burn them in the morning, no one would carry them out. But here

the clerk paused. He opened one of the bags by the knot. The form of the clerk etched itself on the ageless wall in the low light for a time as he crouched by the lost letters and sifted through them, as if to find familiar a name or a known seal. His face was drawn as if he exerted to pull from the future his own. He admitted to the commander he did not know how long he was at the bags, with the trapdoor open behind him. Harcourt asked him if it was over or under the hour and the clerk did not know.

Could anyone have gotten by you? Harcourt asked him, but the clerk only shook his head.

When the clerk at last lowered the lantern over the open blackness of the space below him, he knew by the smell there were the old things recently disturbed. The rooms of the inventories were a division itself in time. Around the clerk the walls melted blackly. Below were the gun and peltry, powder and metal kept cool and dry. The clerk climbed down then, as he described it. When he first stepped off the thin ladder and the light bobbed and dipped before his eyes he looked at the scattered rooms which connected by bare timber braces that held the earthen roof at bay. When he reached the bottom he heard immediately after footsteps cross the rooms where he had just come through. He thought his relief had arrived. He called up to them. But when the clerk's voice and his complaints had faded, he realized the footsteps had been moving away.

The earthen room now was much the same as the clerk described it, and Harcourt held the lantern to look over what the clerk had woke him for. Harcourt drew the lapel of his coat across his nose but there was no smell save the smell of the dry earth.

Where did this come from, asked Harcourt. From which box?

Not certain, the clerk said.

It was about the floor then?

I believe so.

Was it visible when you first stood here, by the ladder?

No.

Are you to mace me of the truth? What is it man? Did you find this in storage or did you bring it out here and put it on the floor? Was it here or elsewhere?

Sir, it was both. I saw a bit here, and the clerk maneuvered his arm around the tight wooden shaft where they stood.

But I also found more. I brought some out. More lay beyond, under the crevice over there.

The clerk pointed to where the shaft gave way into indeterminable material beyond the wall of light.

Harcourt raised the light and still it failed to deliver what the clerk had discerned but Harcourt moved no closer. He turned and inspected the ladder and it was old and bowed. Harcourt climbed up the ladder a distance and from the ladder held the lantern out and twisted in his coat and gazed across the room again. Still the light fell short, and his

arm fell back to his side. He climbed down and went delicately around the contents on the floor beside the clerk.

Where is there more, Harcourt asked, and the clerk pointed again and sweat coated his arm.

They stood only a few steps from the ladder mounted into the earthen wall which started the inventory cellar and what Harcourt assumed had always been the lone small space where the garrison's memory had settled. The ceiling was low and heavily timbered. But behind the clerk and behind the few kegs and a few crates that lay strewn aside as if in haste and lay smashed as if searched there was a rock portal. It was low to the ground and the commander gave deference to his knee as he crouched to inspect it. The timber walls and brace did indeed give way to some rock and opened up, extended further beyond the old eyes of the commander could see and yet he caught the glimmer of iron bands of yet more barrels and more that he could not decipher. He examined how easily they may have been moved within. As Harcourt struggled to stand the clerk continued to search not the hole but the smashed inventory beneath the wood and straw which had lined the boxes and now covered the floor and what had been made of the furs and skins that had been brought out of them. There on the floor lay old muskrat and small vestiges of animal Harcourt could not discern for they had dried and shriveled, and shriveled there lay the longer hair of a human head. Harcourt held unsteadily to the lamp's handle and the hair lustered.

Harcourt put his hand on the back of the clerk's neck. He gave the clerk a shake. The clerk watched as the commander set the lantern down and began to remove his coat.

Listen, he said, and he gripped the collar and slapped the coat over his knee. On the barest ledge of the ladder Harcourt sat down and placed his back flat over the rungs stiffly and put his coat over his lap.

There are more, he asked and the clerk nodded.

Then I need you to go further in and pull them out.

From where he sat Harcourt could see more human hair and flesh beneath the straw. Dead flies lay under a fine dust.

The clerk waited but Harcourt said no more.

Won't you help me, the clerk asked, and Harcourt shook his head.

The clerk asked him why he wouldn't.

Because I cannot crawl under that shelf there, Harcourt said.

The clerk paused as if to say something in return, and then he crouched by the shelf of rock and put his hand on it to hold himself. To keep from ducking himself inside the clerk looked again at the commander.

Because I am afraid, Harcourt said.

The clerk studied the man who gazed patiently from the lower rungs of the ladder. The old man sat under the drape of his coat as if it were a tired blanket, and more his eyes went off into the darkness uselessly as if he waited in anticipation for a story that would never come. Around the old man's eyes was sweat and creases of old earth that had sat on

the top of the ladder steps for as long as the steps had existed. His blue stone eyes studied the clerk patiently. The clerk crawled on his hands under the slip of rock until the white of his neck was gone.

There is a myth of a people from whence lowered. Bone and flesh and breath put into the curl of a shell and into the earth and out stooped a man of many. Though he is born in a real place and his eyes carry the fire of his heart, elsewhere is cast the shadow of his world and this is where his people live below and between these two points is the story.

In this place of shadow there is a watered valley where an original people roam. These people are a people of fire too. They whisper history into the trees and words are made on the inner bark. They trade rock and stone and boiling sugar. They are an original people and strong and large, and yet they carry superstition that pulls against the story in their hearts. For this in the valley the bands know to walk as quiet as the mists move and strain their wide white eyes for shadow. There has been a great death in the valley before them, they have caused it, this is their worry. One day the bands go hunting, there is a need crying up from the people. But when the hunters and warriors return there is no success, their hands are empty. And when they return they do so in haste and gather what little they can carry without stopping and the bands move elsewhere in that haunted hunting ground. When the warriors are asked why they have left, why they have gathered

the others and fled, who is the villain behind them in those shadowed forest gullies, the warriors say *an-do-gwane*. The warriors shake their heads. And they go.

When an unoriginal people tells you that history is laid and set and cannot move, you say this is false.

When the clerk rolled another lidless powder keg out from beneath the rock shelf Harcourt told him to crawl out from the wall. From where he sat on the ladder Harcourt could see the whites of the clerk's eyes appear and disappear as the man pushed aside the straw and hair and remnants of more than a dozen packages and bales and boxes and remnants of the death they had contained. The small room was crowded with contents of the inventory that had been within the expectations of the garrison, crowded with the stink of dust, sweet and sour. And scattered within the bundles of the inventories there was the flesh of men and women.

When the clerk stood Harcourt asked him how many more could he pull from the wall and the clerk said he did not know. When Harcourt asked him what he might mean the clerk told him he could not give a clear count, but that as he felt through the darkness there were more things that resided there and more the rock tunnel seemed to go on.

Someone dug it out, the clerk said.

It's solid rock man.

I think it must lead to the surface.

Harcourt was thinking.

Find two men that you trust and tell them to meet me in my room, Harcourt said.

It must lead someplace.

Did you hear me?

What am I expected to do, the clerk asked. Who can be trusted now?

You must try.

How could you not know, the clerk asked.

I didn't.

How?

I didn't know.

On the floor the lid of the crates lay askew and the commander lifted the lantern to better see under them. He might have been inspecting bone, for all his good. He did not know what to do. He had not seen this before. On the floor were thirty or more men and women, pieces of them. Harcourt had never been under the garrison within the walls of this room. He had not known of the passage, or where it lead or might. Harcourt thought of the men who had served him and gone and thought of those that still remained tonight and most newer to him. Harcourt looked at the young face of the clerk and its image papered in darkness along the white pine wall. The clerk's hair was white with dust and

his eyes rimmed red and the commander closed his eyes. The boxes and the crates of the old inventories were tall in the room and deeper there were dust laden crates which had yet to see light and Harcourt did not know for how long they waited there. He did not know for sure what lay within.

These have been going out of here, he said to the clerk.

What?

We've just been passing them along.

We should bury the door closed. Burn them.

Where have they been going?

Then Harcourt said as the clerk sat down in the space he had cleared with his foot:

Find the two men you trust most of all here and walk them to my room and cover this back up until you return. Lock the doors when you go out, even the hatch.

And what then?

Harcourt handed the lantern to the clerk and the clerk's pale odd hands struggled to grasp it.

I want you to bring them back down here. Wait at the door, said Harcourt, pointing at the ceiling.

Wait and keep it closed. Then bring them down and pull the rest out and count them, he said.

The sounds of Harcourt climbing the ladder. The clerk watched him go and dust from the steps and the bottoms of his boots fell down and sounded and after the commander had left the store the sounds fell away again and the clerk waited. From the cave of the storage room no cold came at all and the clerk shivered.

The boy lay in the snow and waited for the footsteps to go by him. He saw black leather boots and the tails of coats sweep the high snow. They carried no torch. When the boy could not hear them he waited only a moment more for the cold had settled in him at last and he wished again to be rid of it. His head poked from beneath the overturned raft. With his one hand he pushed the snow out and pulled his wrapped arm delicately through and then the rest of him.

When he reached the stable doors they were ajar. He touched them and they made no sound. With his free hand he pulled and in the moonlight saw before it could happen the doors were tied with some old rags from the inside. When he saw this he let them go. Snow was falling and it whipped his back, and like some ancient crack the doors quivered and the snow pulled into the doors and glittered and vanished. The boy measured the gap where the rags were tied. Across the yard men were gathered at the gate where high wagon sat, and up its slope three men pushed at the coal-black canon in vain. Before the crack of the stable door fresher prints lay in the snow. Between the gusts of wind the smell emitted from the doors was dark and comforting. The boy ducked his sling and slid himself through.

The commander asked the father where the boy's mother was. The father pointed near the window behind Harcourt. When he turned to see there was no one but the cold wind and a flurry of snow.

I did not want her to come in here, the father said.

Why not? Harcourt asked but the father did not answer.

Cheval paced by the window and his walking disrupted the moonlight coming through it and the shadows passed like the low arm of a clock swinging to blot out the commander oblivious to its motions and unaffected by the changing of his own shadow. Before Harcourt was a plate of meat and warmth sprung from the tin disk and parted across his lowered face. Harcourt looked into the soupy blood where his ruddy reflection surely hovered. The hot from the plate rose and parted like cold water around a rock, and Harcourt looked up from the steam and asked if the father was hungry. The doctor sat on the floor against the door to his bedroom by the fire. On the floor the doctor tilted his gaze from the empty bottle to the swaddle of blankets and furs which cloaked the father.

The candle by the window had been snuffed and the camp quieted again, and the commander in his black coat sat across the father, and framed by the window the commander cast his pale moon-drawn reflection over the room.

Listen, Harcourt urged.

I need to understand what has been happening here. I need to understand your arrival and what has been going on beyond the walls. There are places I fear to go, I have not all the pieces.

Read your letters, the father said.

So you know me? Harcourt asked.

The room was silent.

How do you know me, Harcourt said. Have you been speaking to someone? How do you know me?

The father was silent.

Harcourt unrolled a sheaf of paper from within his coat.

Where is my wife, said the doctor from the floor.

You've sat yourself along the old routes, I know that, Harcourt said. The old native trail out of Mackinac. This is how you steal your living, yes?

I am independent, the father said.

But you are not American, are you?

I am in the service, the father said.

No longer, Harcourt said. No longer.

You have abandoned your contract. Here, read it, listen. You were to winter with an Odawa band and head farther north. You were paid for the year on your return. You were sent out again and then some hospitality was extended to you, I think. You did not return.

I was in love, said the father.

à la façon du pays, good for the pocket, said Cheval.

You went into the trade for yourself. Two illegalities. Only an American can do this. Trade in these new states. You are French, Harcourt said.

I was born here.

Who was your mother? Where?

I do not know.

Harcourt paused to chew. Cheval's footsteps on the boards. Wet shearing of meat and gristle. The striking of the shadow across the room.

I have not seen your boy, Harcourt said finally, but I have heard he is a half-child of an Odawa woman, your wife?

Yes.

He is asleep in that room yonder? asked Harcourt. He pointed to where the doctor slumped. In the doctor's chest something rose and slowly fell. He snored.

He is under the doctor's care, the father said.

Then for the boy's relief, would you relent?

Harcourt sat stiff in the black coat. Tell me something, the lean of his face seemed to say. Tell me what I want to hear.

Outside the door to the medical cabin was muffled noise and the father looked to the window but he saw nothing but the snow. In the father's mind came the image of the fat Morris hobbling around the fort.

I know what you wish to know and know that you will not wish to know it, the father said. Stay here, stay here in the room. Like you always have.

Harcourt shook his head and sat back. He picked at the plate.

Mangeur de lard, said Cheval as he stood behind the commander and watched him eat and his eyes fell on the father as if waiting for some response, but there was none, the father did nothing but watch the window. The father sat as still as he had before and he did not move under Cheval's eye but sat laden with the blankets and the old terrible furs he himself had walked out from the hole with. The old rank smell had established in the room. The father watched Harcourt bite into the skin of something on his plate and beneath the table where the furs fell off his pale legs a thin leather strap tightened the pale flesh, and against his inner thigh was the sheath and the strange metal of his knife. The father did not reach to touch it, he knew it was there.

I want to know about Washington, Harcourt said, spitting a white globe of fat which stuck to the table.

Sure you do, the father said.

There is a young woman who sits in a long harsh dress and she presses her hand to the pine bench which no longer looks as fresh as it did when she watched it made. She steadies herself as the wheels of the great wagon find another mouth in the road. In the dark of the covered bench and the darker night sky eyes bob and twinkle on the seat opposite her and stare collecting the moment as she does. They are afraid. They know like she knows some arrangement has been made for their safe passage into this new world. The occupants of the wagon and the longer caravan of wagons have felt already its cold and its darkness though winter has not come. There is fear in the woman too.

In her small belongings which sit in the small of her back and ease the shake of the road are a few letters she has selected to carry with her. She knows her father will not recognize her without them.

There is a call and the steady groan of the wheels slows. The driver is speaking to someone. All the eyes sway to front where the tarp weaves and dents with the wind. There is not sound of another voice, and though the woman wonders if the man is simply speaking to his tired horses there is doubt. The woman in her life has come to know that uncertainty becomes its own answer. But she must know.

The eyes in the wagon shift to watch her pierce the thin fabric that has so often failed to shelter them from the misty rains that grow the territory an eternal green. She pulls apart and looks her eyes through.

There is a child and she looks down onto him. He is thin and such a pale gold she cannot tell if it is only a trick of the fire from the driver's globe lantern. She thinks he looks like part of the morning. The driver is talking to the child still and this is when the child slides the rifle off his back and leans against it as though it were another tree. The driver does not seem to mind. Her eyes do not leave the rifle until movement in the dark, and there, again. There are a people along the raised earth of the road. This is the arrangement her stomach says. She returns to watch the driver put his hand over his eyes, as if what he is seeing is too bright though before him there is only the deeper blacks beyond the road and the child who shoots him through the neck. She feels the wagon rock as if it has hit another rut in the earth though she knows it has not moved a moment further, there the horses dance in place. She knows it will move no farther. The boy is kneeling in the road. He is still bracing the rifle against the earth and his body. He is trying not to look at the driver whose hat sits next to him on the bench. The driver tries to pick it up but he cannot. His fingers grasp along the bench until they curl. His body against the tarp is a pressure she can feel but she does not move even as the tarp begins to wet and she thinks of those long rains. She feels his body shaking and the tarp shakes and she can hear the rain fall, and beyond in the trees outside the tenting wagon roof there is a great clatter and shudder as the woods begin to shake and it is only the rain she says to herself but the truth is elsewhere. Behind she feels a great emptiness in the bed of the

wagon. From the corner of her eye she sees they have left their possessions behind. They have left their possession behind but there is nothing to give her an advantage.

In the distance there is the boom and rattle of rifle fire and she thinks on how far these people of hers have gotten themselves. She shuffles away from where the driver has died. There are no eyes along the darkness of the benches and even this black has fully left the wagon. There is fire visible through the drooped slant of the tarpaulin, and through its screen outside there are crossing lights and the shadows that hold them. She hears the pioneer little. There is gunfire and running, huffing, and so often a cry that is cut short into mewling and into silence. The young woman tears open the bags and belongings. She shakes them out. She looks for something to save her but there is nothing and more she looks. The fires outside grow bright, and cast their own shadows through the thin sheet thrown over the wagon bed and the gunfire dies away. The woman does not hear this, she can only hear her own breathing, her hands on the canvas and leather. She will run soon. She is stuffing the letters one by one down her sleeve. At the end of the wagon there is a figure to watch her through the flap which sucks in and out, for the fire breathes. She hears nothing at all.

When the figure is done the rest of the caravan is already burning. Leaves of ash, tongues of fire. The trees along the road are beginning to catch, and the hollows between where the people return below cradle deepening heat. Where has the world gone, Cheval thinks to himself. He has in his hand some letters and he wipes them one by one on his pant leg and reads them curious. He recognizes a name, but when he tosses the last to the

ground he cannot think on why they were weighed as they had been. His eyes rest on the prone woman.

On Cheval's belt there are thin wires which hang and bounce lightly. His hand slides down the flexed metal until it finds the hook at the end. Around him there are fires and figures moving in the ruts along the road but he pays them no mind. Steam is hissing from the trees as water is squeezed from them. Cheval puts the woman's hair on his belt and the wire bends down to where the others hang. From his belt there hangs an assortment of flesh. Across the road and thrown in shadow and smoke emerge the figures from the woods again.

They are tall and silent and nearly naked. Their skin is the color of old fire. The forest behind them burns and they wait.

Cheval finds the others behind him. Path finders. Guides. Men of a squalid class. Trappers, the far displaced mountain man, the discharged soldier. Voyageurs running the river, *coureur de bois*. More loomed in the growing light. These are the strange men who have come to the edge of the world and enter into a new one. In the half-light their eyes glow like sons of wolves. They walk out of history and the woods they run, and here they have crawled. Their sleeves are rolled, cuffed. They shift silently. Wait. And there is the *hivernan*. The father has been watching Cheval at his work. The father leans against his gun and the dirt of the road gives beneath it.

Go on, the father says.

Two ragged trappers come collect the young woman. Hands take her delicately by the wrist, by the ankles. The men carry her as if they are spreading a tarp. Where they go they do not take her into the fire of the caravans, but off the road into darkness. A few others peel from the standing group and follow them and do not return.

Cheval watches across the road where one of the tribe stands level with him. The foreign man clasps his hands over his battered rifle and studies them. He speaks to himself. He looks to the trees and they are like a vision into another world of clean bright life.

He seems to know you, Cheval says to the father.

Is this the one you sold your boy to? he asks the father.

Give them to me, the father says.

Cheval's hands spread the letters out from where he has been keeping them tucked against his side.

There is nothing to them.

The father leans away from the gun. He crosses the road and the native man watches how he steps and Cheval is watching the floating end of the rifle. The father grips Cheval's hand and squeezes out the letters. When the father returns to the edge of the road he asks Cheval why he has taken the woman's hair. The father begins to read, one by one.

Cheval lifts the wire for the others without looking and beneath the red scalp is pale hair, shining like straw. He drops the wire.

Redskin is redskin, he says.

The father reads the second letter but before he does he eyes down the road where the boy has been. Cast from the trees light sweeps the dry road and the boy is not there.

The brothers will hang you if you give them a white woman's head. Worse if you try to get a dollar for it.

There is no difference for me, Cheval says. He begins to walk down the long line, beside the fires, scanning the ground where it still lingers hidden.

I have been making a dye, he says. And then the smoke overtakes him.

There is the father and the native and the road. There is the fire and the darkness and the woods. There are a real people and the pale-faced wretches. This is what the father sees. He throws all but one of the letters into the fire.

The native man is still waiting for the father to speak. The father does not know the man but by his looking he knows what this child of the forest is asking, but why.

What is left to take but the taking itself, the father says. He folds the letter into his belt.

There is always a trickster and he is one. Cheval hides from the fire between the cross sitting wagons. He faces away from the others, converses to another soldier. Despite the cold his companion wears no coat and only the uniform pants. When Cheval lifts his head in agreement at what the coatless fool is speaking his face is cast in a hideous light and even the fool stops to look. Cheval wears a uniform, he curls the collar up at the neck. Around him the men laugh. A soldier steps down the short drop from the closed back onto the wet ground and puts the brown bottle to his lips before he registers the cold. He smiles and Cheval watches him stumble off into the night back toward the garrison and is gone by the bend of the road.

Cheval sees the father first. He looks away and looks back, he does not recognize him. But there is the old hivernan himself, hunched over the road. He grows taller out of the dark by the moment. His gait is no one's but his own. From where Cheval sits the father leans in and out of the low hanging branches and looks as though he might eat them if he could. Cheval recalls the trapper who ate his leather breeches when he sees the father is not wearing boots. Cheval watches the father stumble, sway, weave, but always towards where Cheval is sitting at the edge of the camp. Behind the father there is a smaller form walking a straight path.

A woman laughs and Cheval looks for her among the whiskey laden pioneers. All across the territory an American people are roving in. In the dim light their sharp faces dip and slant. They are eager to spike their heads into the ground. Cheval knows the father has already put his hand into this, he thinks the hivernan would put grids in the earth himself if it was not already drawing up far from here. He pities the wild beast, the

wood, and rock. The father is about to stumble out of the darkness and collapse before him. Cheval thinks what will happen to these new people as they continue on the road. The father puts a curled hand on Cheval's boot as he kneels in the snow. There is a little dry blood around his mouth and the hand that touches Cheval is raw and cracking. The woman appears fine. Cheval looks further down the road and into darkness and only then notices she carries the boy. The talk stops behind him and he knows they have drawn a crowd.

The hivernan's wife eats something in one of the gutted lean-tos setup for native consumption and this is when he asks the question. The good bearing wagons are placed in something of a defensive posture and the father is already at work to unravel them, Cheval thinks. The father sits with his back against a wheel. The wheel itself is sinking into the mud and while the curious travelers flutter around him the father again sits himself as far from the muck as he can without leaving the support. He seems mostly naked though it is hard to tell, for some weird weave of animal drapes over his body and there is some blanket tied about his waist and his legs. His boots brim with mud. Cheval looks for the woman where the light falls nearly red on these warm survivors but it seems he knows she will not be found. There is no place for gentleness here now, that time has gone.

The fool is listening and Cheval knows watching the ebb of fire beat around the ridge of the soldier's eye and the vulnerable lines of his thin head that this will only go one way. Cheval waits before he agrees. One of the sellers offers the father a metal cup

and the father takes this with a smile and his yellow teeth beneath the unkempt mustache show genuinely and Cheval is not sure how this can be.

Another bottle I want, Cheval says to the man. When he is done the seller leaves without indication that Cheval was heard.

They had been there some time the father is told. He watches steadily from over the metal cup as though he were only a child as they speak to him of the garrison. They ask him how he has come to be this way, why he has crawled bloody from the woods with his wife and child. He tells them they will know in time. The father drinks.

Cheval speaks little, it is the fool who talks quickly. Before they move into a greater north the whiskey sellers want to offload their stock. The native know there is no selling to them and they know that the companies cannot hold liquor and are want to take it when discovered. There is confusion and the father asks if these are company men or independents and to this the fool says they are. The fool shines his long nails on his pant leg. By now the driver is long drunk, Cheval tells him, he saw him stumbling into some dance by the fire near an hour ago. They will not be driving the train out until morning. The father is still trying to entertain the glances of the old tired men haunting the fire but he has yet to stand from beneath his skin blankets. They look at him as if he is not white, them with their rags of beards and lye stained smiles. They have not yet seen the native, the words comes across the camp toward the three like a low wind. The driver is gazing unfocused in the direction of the lean-to. They wonder why no one has come out of the woods for their wares, there is disappointment, and the driver in song voice calls into the dark that he wishes to see America in its older glories. Cheval bends at the waist and

delicately takes the metal cup from the father and returns it after he has had a mouthful and the father moves little to stop it. Or could he even, Cheval thinks.

The father asks why the fort has yet to run them off. Haven't the men for it, the fool says. No replacements forthcoming. Known for months.

How? the father asks. Cheval is studying the hivernan's fingernails.

One of the clerks. Had his trunk stolen, right from the barracks. Word came a little later and surely one of the others had done it. Man wasn't much liked, the fool said. He scratched through his thin dirty beard. The fool begins to fidget. Cheval is watching him. The man is drunk, curious, but he says nothing..

Two men pass a bottle back and forth and the light seems to shift within the glass and Cheval looks for the seller but he has hidden himself away. The father asks about a doctor and the fool nods, and tells him as well there is a man right over that had only just been talking of needing to sew his animals before he could leave. He'd be glad to get one that doesn't kick, the fool says.

He says also there is a little woman who just happens to know the doctor. He says she hasn't been gone for more than a minute down the path, and Cheval can see the bob of some light off a ways. Married twenty-three years, the fool says. Doctor, the old man Ellis. He drinks. He says things.

True things? the father asks, but the fool can give no answer.

The father stands. By Cheval's estimation he is to go after the light and not stop at it, and the father is watching down the road right through the Frenchman.

The mother makes herself visible for the first time. Cheval is the first to catch side of her waxing face, and it is clear and strong and a color of yearning. Their eyes meet and Cheval is ashamed. Cheval believes the father when he says he is in love and this is why. Cheval straightens from the wagon he has leaned against and the wood groans and he is off to find more to drink.

When he returns it is clear the father and the fool have made some pact. As Cheval slips a bottle into his other deep pocket they face him. The father walks to the fires. He unties the blanket and crouches down to cave in the heat of the flames.

From within his cloak he produces the remainder of his clothing and lays them before the fire. When they are dry he goes through his clothes and takes what he wants from them like a giant cruel bird snipping at prey, or farther some grey and long lost thing reawakened into the world of man, scraping through the remains of what he might become. There are three men by the fire and another leaning from the mouth of the wagon bed and they watch him work. The father takes up the thin leather lash he had used as a belt and takes the knife out of it. The handle is splintered. The father breaks it away on the flat of the stool beside him and the men watching look at the stool as though it were broken too. But the father is holding the knife to the light and sees something they cannot. The full tang is bent slightly but the bond of the metals looks wickeder as the light licks it. A few men walk nearer to Cheval and the fool to lean around the wagon and stare into the lean-to.

Stay away, the father warns.

He takes the belt between forefinger and thumb and puts the knife in front of the loop and cuts away the end and measured it and cut away a little more. Then he puts the knife flat to his groin and ties it with what is left of the leather until Cheval can see the metal indent the pale flesh. The father stands.

The fool is partway through the plan to bring the father inside under their custody as the father has described, and then the fool says, What harm is in it? It is for the boy. The fool looks back to the lean-to.

What has he promised you, Cheval asks, but the fool does not answer.

But the father is already moving. He returns to the little shelter between the wagons and before he can pass to the slant sparse wall where the mother sits Cheval takes his arm. Cheval hears distinctly a woman laughing and he must ask, he must know.

What has happened?

The father says only that there is something in the safe that he needs. At this moment the light from the road rounds the bend toward the garrison and winks out.

Cheval is trying to keep up.

The father is walking the road. Cheval holds the lantern high and the father just escapes it. It is the father and Cheval and the woman and the boy and the fool. Occasionally the fool passes Cheval to see on the hibernian as if he might get away, as if he is a wounded animal and the fool is measuring on how and where he might collapse. But the fool also glances at the woman on his way back and Cheval feels his attentions shift. Cheval stumbles in a rut and steadies himself. He pulls the brown bottle from his wool coat and drinks before pressing it tightly to his body again. He is warmed.

Amidst the snow drifts in the melting forest the father sways. He appears like the harbinger of some great doom, and Cheval feels the truth of this watching only his back and only where the father has already passed. Ahead the cloak of furs dips on and out of sight.

From a great distance and with his shape muted by the harsh glow of the lantern Cheval appears as though he walks his own shadow by a chain, and chained to more behind. The father is wheezing on.

When they stop the mother's eyes are only the only points of light reflecting back and the moon has gone away. Cheval holds the lantern higher and not even the woods cast light back to him. The snow is mute and dark with mud. Cheval coughs and begins to shake.

The fool sets the boy down and notes not the darkness but only directs his gaze to where the father rummages through the blanket bundle he has carried. The boy stands. Cheval has seen little of the child and knows littler. When his eye falls on the thin soiled clothing and the rotted furs which make not a cloak or blanket but hardly a wrap which

the boy needs to hold to his body by the one arm he favors, Cheval remembers him. But it is not the state of the boy but his bearing. His legs are bent and he stands as if he is always on the verge of reaching the ground. Cheval has not thought about the night itself, its images obscure to him, but now he hears a woman laugh. He looks to the mother and she is only eyes. The lantern hangs down by his knees, his fingers slack.

It better be you then, the father says, his hands within the bundle. The fool looks to Cheval but the Frenchman is shaking and has cast his face downward.

What do you have on you, the father says without reply.

The fool stands in a stupor. He pulls aside the shawl over his curling wool coat and there is the hilt of a long knife at his waist.

The Frenchman in the dark by the movement of the rifle slung over his back is still trembling. The father looks back to the fool and tells him he will be the one to wait outside, to wait with her.

Down the road is the bob of the lantern, the one they have followed. If it is to be believed the lantern holds the doctor's wife. The fool and the father have agreed to take her. Cheval has not spoken on it at all. The fool's eye wanders from the light on the road's horizon to the eyes of the mother.

Cheval puts his hand beneath his coat and pulls his fingers away wet with cold. His coat feels suddenly soaked. There is a smell and he cannot place it.

Come to me, the father says. He stands straight and stands just out of the light which wobbles with Cheval's hand. The fool cannot make out his face and in the voice there is something he does not like but he goes on despite it.

Those people, Cheval says.

The boy's face looks just as before, just as it had when he watched Cheval scalp Harcourt's daughter. Cheval sees the boy's limp arm is slung under his fur wrap, into his pants pocket. The boy is clutching at something hidden there. Cheval resist the urge to pull his feet from the light snow over the road.

The father is leaning over the fool despite his own height. The void of the furs carries the fathers voice to him and him alone. In the cup of the fool's glossy eyes there twinkles and curls a glittering and behind the fool's eyes where he cannot see there is an iron door swinging open.

Cheval in his mind follows off the road where the young woman he has scalped is carried. He looks beyond where the mother's eyes float in the darkness and he feels that she already knows what he has seen there. There on the floor of the forest amidst the leaves and a grass of overlapped pine needles are shoes and pants and discarded items. It is hard to see. Cheval wipes sweat from his eyes. He hardly feels the wind. The breath shakes out of him. There is a shirt, a belt, more shoes. There are hands. The pale forms of hands and feet. They stick out from the pile.

As Cheval approaches down the path they have made, the few others turn from their work. He does not know these men. They work away in the dark, limbs in motion.

By looking at them he does not know them, and it is only in the motions of the labor they perform that some sense of who they are returns to Cheval's dim mind. Cheval wishes to speak to them but he cannot and he and the mother and trappers and guides wait for Cheval to unshackle the worn slip of his knife's edge and they all turn away.

You've skinned them, Cheval says but he has already known this. When he raises his face from the road Cheval sees the boy watching something near and above him. Cheval follows the boy's gaze and looks and turns but there is nothing behind him. The boy sits in the road and watches him. The Frenchman shakes his blurring hand across where the boy watches and starts to climb the air until he feels the end of his rifle barrel. Cheval drops the lantern in the mud.

When the fool returns he places his hand over the cold iron loop and raises the light. The mother and the boy watch him and he ignores their gaze. He puts his arm which is cloaked in the stiff folds of the uniform across Cheval's shoulders.

Let's move from here, Cheval says.

He see's from under the fool's arm that the father is looking through papers, letters, by the half-light that has been dug out of the darkness.

They walk, the two together in the front and the other pair following behind. The boy is carried. They walk into the little ruts and hills and grooves of the earth, into the pooling water and the inky flake of leaves, and they together feel the distant rumble of some great wheels departing from the camp and make its way to them. The light has taken shape ahead of them and so has a body been born out of that shape, the long

silhouette of a cloak and the color of moth and broad shoulders and a long rifle and some hesitation coming into the step.

The fool raises his lantern when the woman does the same. They are still far from the fort it seems, though they are only another clearing away. The father lopes into the fool and the fool pushes him to the ground. The father catches onto nothing, his hands are chained. He falls. The hivernan waits on the ground. Cheval knows he is hiding his face. The woman calls to the fool and the fool shows his teeth.

Cheval was gone. He had left the room and not returned. In this space of silence the father had already given Harcourt the contents of his own letter, and how he came by them.

And before this even, the father had told Harcourt about the other letters he had obtained, and how he had obtained them, and who had helped. For these were the things Harcourt thought he had wanted to know, but this was not the truth.

Harcourt's face loomed over the candle and the cold plate of solid fats.

If what you say is true, I'll hang you in the cold yard before the night is over.

The doctor slept against the door. He slept soundly, nevermind the calamity of the commander's voice or the comings and goings or the cold coming through the door. He slept, and had no thoughts on what had occurred. The father sat as he had before and the

furs were still about him despite the heat of the room. The window rattled in the thin frame and the doctor Ellis gurgled dreams that were beyond reach.

The father stood sharply. He put his foot on the chair and pulled the knife out slowly so that the commander could see him do it. He held it between finger and fore thumb. Then he set it on the table. After a moment, and before the father could sit down again, the commander took it into his lap.

I have come to tell you the truth, and that only, the father said.

It is, is it?

Yes.

You've drug your child out from your home away in the woods to speak to me? Harcourt scoffed. The mother of your child? Where is she at? You have failed to produce her. You avoid the mention of her.

No one will have her, the father said.

A bottle remained on the table. Harcourt lifted its contents to the light and shook it. He went to where the doctor's glass had rolled from his hand and blew it out. When he sat again he took a sip of the golden layer he had scraped from the bottom.

If you do not speak honestly here, I will send your boy into the night.

Yes, the father said.

Harcourt's eyes rolled over the form of the sleeping doctor.

You know about what I have found in the storeroom.

I do.

Have you had a hand in this?

No.

You have admitted to scalping man. And worse.

Yes.

You've sold those scalps?

Not I.

Cheval?

Many others.

But my men?

Yes.

And you aided them?

Yes.

Put before me a man to confirm this then. Name him.

Harcourt put the empty glass down. The knife lay balanced in his lap and he accommodated its presence stiffly and he returned the gun to his hands. The gun crossed his chest as though it chilled him.

Was stealing peltry not enough?

It never was in my time, the father said.

Your time?

Yes.

In the morning of a distant spring the safe appears. The father is locking the room of the house where the peltry rot and where he cannot hear the soft and hungry noises of his children, the noise their stomachs make. As the father turns the lock into the key and the tumblers fall there suddenly is a great resistance to the turning and then it is over and locks. The father hefts the key in his palm, watches it rise and fall. He feels he is being watched, and behind him is the child.

The child's face is eclipsed by the turn of the hallway. The father mistakes him for the boy until he emerges from the wooden wall and sees how the long black hair falls straight to his shoulders. His skin is a russet and is more striking now, it seems. His eyes have always been his mothers, and as they watch him he feels compelled to open the door again, to reassure the child of something that he cannot place. Neither speak. The father returns the key to the door, and the door swings open. The must and spice of the room pours over him, and there are the worn items of his trade and the wares collected and a table for cleaning small game, and a shape.

The father pushes the worn door further inward. The child hovers at his waist. The father's hand falls onto the child's shoulder and he waits for the child to speak the watery tongue in surprise or confusion or protest, but he does not. The father feels at his heart through the white shirt.

To his eye from the corner emerges the dimpled outline of an iron box. It is a strange contraption. The father enters the room.

By the time he has run his hands over the surface which move his fingers over the divots as if he were a part of a gearwork he realizes that the child has crept away. The safe is cool to the touch. Though the father has never seen the safe before nor knows how it has arrived, the safe sits in the corner of the room as though it had always been there and more, the father finds that it has no dial nor knob in the smooth face of its door. It has only the indentation for a key. From the father's pant pocket he feels a weight accruing.

When the door to the safe opens it is of its own force and speed. The father avoids touching the iron slab. The interior is bare, grey, dulled and deep. It holds only a fold of paper. When the father opens it he recognizes the letters and margins of a ledger page, much like his own. Sent out and paid for, the list of trade goods and furs and the like. On the yellowed page there is a list for war. A list for guides, traders, trappers. A list for general consumption. Corn, flour, grease. Meat. And it is here the father pauses. It is here his eyes stop roving. And here at the bottom of the list are blanks to fill and unfulfilled.

The boy remembered before he entered the stable the grandfather was not a guide to seek peltry but a guide for the pale men to seek the old people, the native. There was value in the people. And then the boy slipped his sling and hung his broken arm by his side and stepped through the portal between the shuttering rag-tied doors.

The cold and darkness lingered at the edges of the boy's sensations for inside the stable where the boy hoped to find a horse or some escape there was a burgeoning warmth and life. The boy put his arm into the sling again as he avoided the straw and grass littering the hard-packed clay of the floor.

The boy felt the key hit against his leg within the pocket. The boy stopped amidst the darkness where his eyes have yet to adjust. He heard only the clattering of the doors behind him and the soft groan of the rag that held the door. Animal life in the stable breathed, snuffs and coughs. The boy closed and opened his eyes.

That black warmth like dreamless sleep pulls wider and opening to the pin-pricks of cold at finger-tips and knees and the small of the boy's back.

Did you see? Where? Where boy?

He is rolled over and feels water pour out of his stomach. All is black and blurred. The few sprigs of grass tickle his nose and stick to his lips. Blind he pulls at them. His fingers are too numb.

Look at me, the boy hears from the darkness.

When he opens his eyes he sees the flat rock before the door. The stone left to sink unevenly into the mud and serve as a step into the rest of the home. He sees the house again. It sits some yards away. The boy rolls back onto the snow and grass and mud, rolling like an infant to see the home in half and still falling, Pa wet and pale shaking him, shaking and shouting into him as the rest of the parlor slides away beneath the grass and snow, his mother pulling at his feet and crying in words he does not understand, she not looking at him the boy but behind him. And he sees through into the skeleton of the room, the rafters like naked, splintered masts still sinking and holding upright nothing else, no rooms or doors to look over, no tethered rooms, mirrored rooms, no rooms of fur, no black box. In the boys heart blooms terror and relief.

His mother is still pulling at his feet. She is wrapped in the grays of the blanket and clean fur.

The ground shakes again. The boy sees the earth before him sliding away. The hole widens and there is a rumble and the distant sound of striking metal.

Look then, Pa says. And the mother lets go, she goes, she is gone and the boy has only slowly blinked.

At last he looks and hears him fully. Pa, his father, the old hibernan though he is still young, to the boy. Pa shakes him now. With his attention he hits the boy with nothing but the flat dark eyes which ask their question, too. They are alone now. He asks the boy and the boy has no answer for it.

Where, boy, where? Where is it? Where is it?

The boy feels something catching in his pocket but he has no reply. Beyond the tree line in the cold the old wood groans, and in the shapes of the wood and between were the figures spinning out in the frozen darkness. He thinks he sees his brother. The steady ticking of the wood seems to slow and closer still the layered rings of the trees bite and lock into place, the pattern of the bark sways and draws together. The boy's head feels heavy like the box. In him comes the fear that might sight heavy forever in him.

A noise came from the darkness of the stable unlike the others. The eyes of the boy make out the structure of the walls and gates and silvered ceiling, and the boy blinked. He walked ahead and away from the memory.

The boy felt his way along the low slat wall and as he passed he felt the breath of the horses come out to see his intrusion. Their eyes hung large and globular and the boy moved away where they could not see.

Before long he had found the back wall and was pressed into it. The night and passing days came into his bones sudden like the crash of the house and his knee gave way slightly. He braced against the pine boards. The noises had gone, faded, vanished. His fingers scrawled the surface of the wall toward where he saw an open stall gate. He struggled to them. A horse paced within. When the boy reached out and touched the animal he uttered a low whimper. The horse drew back, and then neared again. The mane thick and coarse and full of grime and life. The boy breathed. The horse drew its head down to him. He breathed in the horse's warm breath.

When he had steadied his heart the boy began to look for something to throw over the nameless colt and as he tossed a small musty blanket sat alone and with no yearling

stolen from the boy caught his hand on something in the air. He pulled again hard against it. The blanket fell short over the ground. The boy felt himself spun around.

Onto his arm was a black hand and a blacker figure, whose shoulder grew a twinned head until the boy saw the other man stand up taller over them both. The shape holding him breathed foully.

You are his child, the man whose name was Morris said. The other shade swung mutely across to where the horse and the blanket curled away.

This is what the boy has gotten wrong, the lie he tells himself into truth.

And far away the boy's heart carries him, he closes his eyes and his heart carries him closer to the father. Far away his heart slows and he sees too the haphazard circle in the beaten ground, the color of the clearing mute and dull and possessed wholly by the fire of torches hungry for the branch beneath the wrapping, the men holding them no more recognizable by their faces than the block fists raised solitary and holding that fire their only light. Lidless eyes of shadow and mouths agape in hollow darknesses. Monolithic brows and cavernous cheekbones, a nose that has lost its end like so many others in the clearing, a cloven ear cast upon the ground. Exteriors of gnawed fur, exteriors made fleshless. A detachment that whispers hunger. This is what Morris expects to see, what the boy will not accept. Fat Morris and his brother the mute shift on their horses in the darkness. They watch over the process. The father is speaking in the

clearing where the old trappers scrape and scrape the flesh. The brothers know the native prepares the fur and the peltry, but the boy does not know this, and yet here are the trappers cleaning skin and the boy cannot accept it, his sight fails him. The Morris brothers kick their horses on.

Altogether in the smoke they crowd the end of the footpath, whose own ends sit innumerable, split and full and wide back over the mossy smoke touched grounds to where the old fortress glory now a dead shell has once stood, Michilimackinac by the shore, the end of the long wild to the north. It's serpentine woodwork keeps out the masses, holds back the tides, subdues the real people. It is a vanished garrison where behind men, women, and animal cry outside the walls, hear through the woodwork the songs squeezed from a clumsy fiddler's cold hands to the tune of laughter and a great feasting and teeth. The first people fear to enter it.

Fat Morris sees the father walk from the half of the trees which vanish and appear again the next moment as the fire grows tall and weak and throws its light. The air is sour. The wind and stale smell of grief settles under the branches, and Morris waves the night heat away. The mute watches the men work. the mute sits idly beneath a skin poncho. The father speaks to Cheval and they agree and part. The human crowd gathers around the dull fires kept close together, and from the fire like a child's paper toy the shadows of the gathered dance and the layers of the scene all repeat; the black the fire the rise of pine the half face of a man the jaw of a another the missing native the real people under the night.

There too is the face of the father. It shifts and shapes to the fire, it is his outline and form, and as Morris watches he is unsure of what the man might do when he breaks his horse through to them. Morris does not know the man's name. Morris knows only what the letter he has received described, and only that he has followed his heart alongside it. The letters arrive, they are sealed, robed in the authority of a country Morris feels he is only just discovering. He trusts in them. Morris watches the father speak up into the sky like a madman. His face is pale and sheathed in sweat. Morris and the mute ride around and circle the little clearing. They see the work but not what the men are working at, the brothers see the motions. They cannot see the fathers eyes. His head is downcast. A man eats something from a bone and the some of the others share in it. The light in thick glassed liquor bottles glares first and then on the men holding them second.

Beneath the woolen and leafy cloak of the darkness the men unload their peltry. The men carry them between one another, two men each. Morris watches. The men cut and bind and inspect. Hands hold the knife bend ties over its edge and pull, clip the musky thread already deteriorating against the matted hair and flesh and release them springing into the night. The stacks of flesh are soft and expand. There is a burn pile, Morris sees. The rotted pile smokes thickly in the dirt.

The skin is cast aside. It is not what they are after. It is what is below. This is as Morris has read it, this is as he follows. This is the nameless need he has filled. Each man carries weight strapped about him across shoulders, back, chin, and brow, no longer men but in the routine and motions there the pack animals they replaced, their faces slack and minds put to the work of the flesh. The piles grow. It is a grotesque dance between

unfortunate men and men alone. In the night the parts move as if of their own accord and the men holding them obscured, string sinews pull the flesh draped like ghosts in the empty night. These were people. There they lay in the open dark conjoined and wordless. This is what the boy will not see. The boy has moved beyond it, he has tried. Pieces of men thigh wrist hand calf stomach buttocks a grotesque all thing comes into being and stitches whole and passes apart in the same motion. The select are piled before the tramp and the rover, counted and valued beneath crouched forms and dirty feet, and the native more than conquest memories in their new bundles, Morris thinks. He has only answered the letters in his calm hate, and he knows not where they come from. The bales are gathered and taken away strapped to beasts in obscenity and wait outside the lighted ring. The father gathers the native and beast and men here and binds them together, Morris thinks. It is he who has done this, not I. The father deals in flesh and blood and greed. He burns what he can not use, what he has stolen for the ink stained tongues which tattoo the flesh which will be theirs. This is as Morris sees it.

Morris rides forward and his brother follows. They ride silently, by the fire, by the pile discarded. It is only an accident, only a coincidence. The fat Morris looks down through the firelight at the leftovers and the fire shines white. White on the skin. White on the flesh. The fire crackles hungrily. The mute already sees, he is climbing down. He stokes the fire with the end of his rifle, with the bayonet. He does it as though it were a poker. Pale skin burns. The mute does not wait to mount.

The riders move into the center of the ring. The rest the boy has seen, the low point in the woods where everything comes together and flattens out. The boy fears the safe at its center.

The boy looked up with into the heavens and there were no stars to see and only the dark timber supports of the stable roof. The brothers Morris stood only a little straighter and the mute followed the boy's gaze, though there were no brands or signs with which to make meaning.

Morris saw the boy and he shared interests beyond what circumstance could put together.

As boys the Morris brothers wander the bareness of that country and join at the Northwest Army under Winchester and see the terrible defeat of Frenchtown and the trail of Kentuckian dead that mark the roadway to their imprisonment at Malden. They wait in chains in a small room with hardly little light and the other enlisted wretches whose faces become nameless with the close of the door. The bodies in the room and its darkness seem to grow, there is no space. The brothers stay low, stay to the wall. They are shoulder to shoulder. When they are pushed apart in the darkness they interlock hands. Time ceases beyond their feeding, beyond the sliver of light which flashes through the open aired hole too narrow to fit an arm that serves as window. Time ceases beyond the momentary strain of holding to one another. Feeling about the dark floor Morris finds the uniform and underclothing of the first man crumpled upon the ground. Morris pulls his brother into the corner and puts his arms around him. They wake in the smell of urine. The stench of human disintegration. When the door swings open in full the light is

blinding, and Morris feels his sight has altered. The day they are released by their captors the fort is burned to the ground behind them and the war is over. They watch the red backs walk into the distance until hill and tree cover them up again, as if they had never existed at all. When Morris emerges he screams into the pale dust of the road. His brother no longer speaks and Morris does not try him. As they shuffle back along the road with the other thin ragged shapes of men into where they hope will be some salvation and some reprieve, the two walk as though still chained. The other men begin to call the brother the mute. It is years. They return to the territory and aid the bid to penetrate the interior, reappear in 1819 when Saginaw is claimed and in '22 when the fort is erected and escort its hivernan north to stay with the native but return south thereafter for the mute feared scalping. One day Morris receives a letter. It sits upon his bunk, upon his pillow. No one has seen a thing they say. The barracks look at Morris now broader and fear him but still cannot help the looking, for they feel he has been chosen before Morris knows it. The letter is just a pale shape, a yellowed paper. It sits as though it has always sat neatly denting the rough and dyed bed covers. But it holds his rank and name. It is sealed and stamped. There is the possibility of a trail. Morris opens it. He reads and reads. He shows the mute. It is then that the flow of native begins to dry. Soldiers grow bored and shout from the walls in jest. There is no purpose in the walls if there is nothing beyond them. Mosquitos lazily come to bed in the barracks.

They hope for the winterer but he does not return, the father is occupied in convincing the native to give him his own child, for they too want the protection of flesh.

The Morris brothers mind not. The brothers stay on in '23 when Saginaw is abandoned by the government. They linger in the ruin. The brothers cling frozen and starved to the river system. They wait. Before the dawn is to break a messenger blows from between the trees as though he were a passing part of them. The man cannot be seen for naturally he is a figure of darkness.

The brothers watch from the walls, their hands between the chewed and pulpy forks of the battlements. There is some glimmer to the figure, some metal, some buttons perhaps, a belt buckle of uniform. The figure withdraws from its shape the yellow paper. The letter captures the moonlight like milk. The words the brothers imagine are sustenance. The figure glistens. And then it retreats. Morris stuck to the shaved points of the pine wall imagines how it might ford the green winter river. They linger in the fort longer until a wandering band of metis chase them out. In a distant hot little room where the commander Harcourt has been writing a letter to his daughter they reenlist. They linger. In the night Morris awakes to find a letter beneath his pillow. In the darkness yet a few eyes shine on him as he reads.

The mute tied the boys hands together. The boy watched the fat Morris slink into the corners of the stable stalls in turn.

Sit down, the doctor said. The father stood by the cabin window. Through it and the snow that blew in crystalline waves through the moonlight he could see the gate guard was watching him. The father snuffed the candle on the sill.

He sat at the table in the space Harcourt had left. The father suspected he had gone to find Cheval. In his absence and while the doctor slept the father had twisted the knob and gently let the doctor lay back against the opened door as he inspected the room where the boy had been. When he pulled his eye from the crack he righted the doctor and let go of the knob and it clicked into place.

The doctor feebly pushed at the floor and watched his hand slip. He said quickly,

Has my wife returned?

And the father said that she had. The doctor relaxed.

Speak to me, the doctor Ellis said.

On the chair in front of him was his own greyed coat and behind this pieces of the father wavered at the edges of Ellis' vision. With his foot he pushed the chair to the side.

Your captor does not interest you? the Ellis asked.

The father said nothing. He waited at the table for Cheval or Harcourt to return. Whichever first. The doctor stumbled to his feet.

The doctor took the blankets off the father as he sat in the chair naked and the doctor looked him over as if he were to price him. His body was gaunt and the hard little muscles packed into a few areas and the rest gone. At the cold a tremble ran through him.

Ellis asked him to move his hand and the father brought his arm up and tried and the chains at his wrist clacked.

They said you walked for days.

Ellis tried to fit his head under the table without falling back. The father's feet were blistered but whole.

I thought I would need to take that, the doctor said.

The father was silent.

The doctor yawned and straightened back to height.

The cabin was not much to look at from the inside and perhaps even better from outside. The doctor's wife had prescribed special shutters carved for each of the windows, but it was ordered. Signs of the doctor's things were still about and he had a few small amenities such as an upholstered chair and a chest of drawers and a solid looking locked box. There were a few animal pelts tacked to the wall near enough to the father and he shied from looking at them.

There was something wolfish in the slant of the doctor's face so that he appeared to scrutinize every detail of the father as he stretched himself by walking the room.

The doctor asked the father if the commander was going to see to him being hanged or if he was wanting to get some men together.

Yes, the father said.

To what?

Both perhaps.

So you're looking to go more north?

Yes.

And you'll take him there?

That is where he is wanted.

By whom? He is from the north?

He is interested in the north. There is a treaty that has been written of. The treaty to open the rest of the territory. News of it sits in my safe.

Ahmm. The doctor twisted at the hair by his ears.

And the boy and the woman?

Take them too.

They will be safe here.

They will want to be talked to. Questioned.

Alright, said the doctor. The doctor shook his head and twisted the sleeves of his night shirt and sat back in his chair and thought about it.

Then the doctor Ellis said the father's story reminded him of another, of an old dream he had had.

This was when I first had settled here, he said.

I missed my bed, Ellis said. Or I didn't like this one.

The doctor settled into the back of the chair and his own coat fell over his shoulders and the doctor pulled the sleeves nearer his sides..

I have terrible dreams, Ellis said. I suppose they could be nightmares but to me they are not, are no longer, for I have seen them often. They occur and again. I am so familiar with them that the terror has changed, and though they are awful to me and any righted mind still, I cannot prevent feeling that they have changed. Their picture is thickened. Weedy with time.

And here is the dream. I wasn't a doctor but still just an old soldier, and I was going along the Missouri river though it wasn't. The Missouri, that is. It was instead here somewhere and I could feel it as I rode that I was on different ground, familiar ground. You understand? That it was known to me somehow. Well I rode and as I did I could hear the water of the river, that's how I knew it was the Missouri from the sound and the expanse of it though I didn't see more than a glimmer of it at a time in the dark. My father used to run a little boat on the Missouri and that's how I know it, I was there just that one time in my life.

And in the dream. And as I rode I passed men and all the men had torches, upright and made of old chair legs and one of long stripped bark and one man I remember had an old haunch, grizzled and flapping, though I did not know how it still burned. They went by me. I felt they all carried the torches so that I could see them. They already knew

where they were going. I think now they were walking out there for me to see them, too. But of course, it was my dream.

And I passed them and the first I passed was withered up and brittle and his skin was like old rotted tarpaulin, and though he carried the torch he had his arms crossed like he was too cold there, with the torch in the crook of his arm there. Like that. He was dirty and his feet clinked when he walked though I saw no chains and when I passed close I leaned out of my saddle to see him better and I saw he was covered in pests and blood drinking things. I nearly fell into him. His look frightened me. He looked frightened of me. But he kept going by. The second I hardly saw. And had he not carried the light he would have passed by me, for his skin was black as ash and gleamed like silver. When he passed I saw that his eyes were closed and that he walked blind. When I turned in the saddle to see more of him he was already gone, torch and all. I think I could still see the torch of the first distantly.

I started to hurry to where I was going along the river. It was then that I knew I had to race it to where it was going somehow, that I had to move fast or I would not make it across. I could hear and not see the water in the distant darkness humming. I had to beat the rise. I was to deliver a letter to the next station. I could feel the paper in my hand but I did not look down for it.

I came a long way and had yet to cross. I felt like I was still waiting for something to happen before I did. When the third man passed I knew it had been for him. I fortified my linings when the first faint torch did pop over the dark horizon. Then I saw the torch in full and the leg which held the fire. But here it was stranger, and if I had not had it in a

dream I might discount either side of the experience. For in the distance I saw an unrecognizable savage, a man of the forest you might say. And as he got closer I saw his face change. This was the effect of the dream I imagine, but he changed. He became the likeness of a man though I did not know what had changed exactly between seeings. I remember I did not recognize him on either side. But he wore stranger clothes than I and had a strange face and that face resisted me. He spoke to me and I could not return his call. I realized there was something in the other men familiar to me then but nothing about this man and I remember nothing other than his clothes. I cannot describe him. None of the men looked very old or very young and here was no different.

He was so quiet when he spoke to me I thought he talked like water, and that's truly how I know I was here and not on the Missouri, for all the men here talk like water. When he spoke I tried to listen for the details in his voice. But I could just hear the river going in its stead. It drowned him out. I watched his mouth make the words but he did not face me, he spoke as he passed me and still speaking, before I could measure any of it. And then he was gone. I tried to turn in the saddle but could not. Like the moment had frozen over. Maybe I just didn't want to.

My horse went on for a little while in the dark after. We went on until it got so dark I couldn't even see my horse, just feel him beneath me, feel his muscle churning. That's how I knew I was still riding. Then the darkness went on and I couldn't even feel that.

By the time I realized we had stopped he bucked me. I remember in the dream I was surprised. That my own warhorse had bucked me. When he dropped me we were in

the water, and I hadn't been able to tell when we had crossed into it but we had. And when I felt the cold seep across my back I woke up.

The doctor scratched his nose. The father listened as though he heard the tale before and listened for some new facet that had emerged. He continued.

I remember when I woke I woke my wife up but that's all I recalled. What I do not have memory of was after, though in the morning when I awoke again she told me it in full. I had been putting on my boots in bed in the night and I did it angry. I had grabbed hold of the candle by the bedside, as if to make my way. She told me she asked me where I intended to go. Why I had all that anger wrapped so tight around me in the middle of the cold night. I told her I was going to the stables. I went to the door over there. She asked me why I was going to the stables at this hour and at this cold. I told her then that my horse had betrayed me, had drowned my nice coat. I was meaning to right him.

I hope you will recall that I do not own any such coat as that as I am not a messenger of the military. You might recall I do not even own a horse. My wife told me in the morning perhaps I just went off and found one. I do not know that either.

The boy was to light a fire in the barn. The gateman who his father had paid or promised payment would ensure its open. The boy would ride out with the horses or

mules or what he could lash together. At least two, the father thought. This would not happen now. A thin plan under thinner wrapping.

The father was standing on the wall with his arms crossed under his blankets. About the room was a wreckage except for the little table and the chairs though they lay turned. The father's breath was great in the cold coming in through the window. The father closed it. He sat down.

The door to the boy's room was shut and the Frenchman was pacing in front of it over the broken globe where inside the candle used to sit and he walked over the pelts that had lined the wall. The Frenchman did not try to avoid any of it. He seemed to take some small pleasure from stepping into the soft glass.

The Frenchman picked up the one chair that still had all of its legs and the father was watching him as he tested it. He sat and told the father to show him his chains.

The windows were intact and the candle itself still went on, stuck to a little chest of drawers with its own cooled wax and a little of the wax dripped around in a half-circle as if it had rolled around a little even before that.

The lay on the floor and his face obscured.

Keep him stayed, Cheval said to the father.

The father said nothing.

The Frenchman went over and pat Ellis hard on the back and the doctor said nothing only shuddered on the floor. Cheval pat him again.

Are they still outside? The father asked.

Let me think, Cheval said.

The candle light bruised them in darkness.

The Frenchman worked the old sturdy pipe between his jaws.

Are we to wait all night?

Let me think.

He is not coming back.

What?

My son.

What?

The father shook his chains and watched as the Frenchman perched himself on one of the low windowsills over them like a hoary bird.

You should let me out. I'll help you.

The doctor stirred.

The doctor pushed himself from the floor slowly as if he might only have gotten up from his bed. When he turned over to look at the room his eyes sat immobile as flat river rock.

Cheval went and pushed the doctor up. He righted the only chair that remained unbroken and put the doctor into it.

They waited. Not speaking in the cold wreckage of the room and not moving from where they had chosen to set themselves and occasionally a creak or groan or the gurgle of a belly would come between them. After awhile while the doctor was looking at the Frenchman he said the father should take his boy and go, he and Cheval and the boy.

I've been told, the doctor said, I have heard there is a passage. Beneath the ground. Beneath the storeroom.

The doctor moved his bright stone eyes over the ground as if he could trace the passage he spoke of. Then he spoke no more.

We will wait, the Frenchman said.

The father gave no indication he had heard the doctor speak. He was looking out the window in the direction of the gate. Outside a collection of torches had gathered there. The father could not see beyond the snow and the light. There was shouting.

Listen, the doctor said. Listen. For how long are we to keep going like this?

The light of the candle guttered low in the wax bowl, the fresh wax twisting the flame into ember. The father slid down the wall to sit below the window frame. He

rubbed his ankles. The Frenchman nervously watched the front door as if it might thunder in on him. Though the cold had come in often now the room smelled sour and close. The light which extended into the room twisted like the mouth of a wolf white and gnarled.

In the cabin space one could hear the shush of powder hit the walls and the ice crystals dimpled the glass in the treading wind. Then Ellis said,

Our wives are out there, are they not?

The father did not answer. He no longer had the knife. He could feel his blood beat against the pulp of the boards.

The doctor had on little glasses and squat impish in the uneven chair. The ember of the fire was caught in the rims. He poured out the hollow of the candle so the flame would come back some and he did this carefully. The wax fell to the floor.

Cheval was watching for the stables but no fire came.

The father was looking away into the fire. His face had collected a pale sweat.

The doctor sat back. He seemed to be lost to another time, and now that his work was over. He seemed by the movement of his eye to have been pulled quickly and unsteadily through his life's many ruts and distances and the pale ember of the flame visible in his eyeglasses not the flame itself growing dimmer until it smoked and rose and the doctor's vision widening even as it lost distance and depth to find his fleshed body again. He sat still. The father saw the candle flame in the wavering edge of his thick

spectacles. He did not ask the doctor where he had gone for he had no wish to know the depths of him.

I'm going to tell you something now, Ellis said as he greased the rim of his spectacles with his thumb and forefinger, and because I feel compelled to speak to it. Maybe for his sake, and with this the doctor gestured his glasses toward the room where the boy no longer was.

Maybe for yours.

There was a place I visited as a child. A little sump buried in the Saginaw valley. My father was a doctor too. Taught me what there was. When he died it was a faulty hammer and the removal of the ball went alright but his heart just wasn't in it. I sewed him up real nice though. Anyways before he died he would go past these sticks in the mud where men sold their fire water. Just haunts, just that, sticks and mud. No one could live there long, even with the trade. This was before it was the state of course. Not reliable.

A moth flew by the doctor and he flared his nostrils and blew it away with the air he whistled out. When it flew away he looked somehow mad at the outcome.

Before he died he needed my hands for something I can't remember what, he said, and he straightened out his back. These young hands of mine. So we set out together on the road, or what had begun of one.

The dark leaned over the doctor. The father looked at the doctor's hands and the doctor held them out as if to look at them together. The father looked at the doctor's

hands and he thought he saw a tremor though it could have been the light though he felt even the doctor had seen it. For all the doctor's preening then the candle went out. Aside from the fireplace which cast light on half the room.

Cheval was watching through the window and when the candle went out he hurried to light it. The father looked into the shadow to find the doctor but saw the skin of the man like a monolith, his half facing the father black and licked by flame, the doctor's motions seeming to slow and confused in the uncertain glow, a husk shelled by greater forces slowly over time and scraped thin and weak but still sustaining some of that initial motion that put it into being. Black-sided contingency. He saw in the doctor a raw deal in the making his whole life. When their eyes met the doctor's ashen lids sat specked with the glassy embers of the candle flame.

There is always an old man, in these things, the doctor said. This is the same story. The story of an old man. As we rode and as I sat my horse my father turned to me. Not because he had much to say to me, he never spoke often. He turned because he had the same expectation. That there be an old man. When we rounded the turn there was a small bunch of hovels to move on by. Just strange shacks. Between a lean-to and a proper cabin. Skeletal. And by them he didn't see any old man. But he expected to. This was known. That an old man lived there by the grace of the native. And when I got around the turn in the muddy rut of the road I saw a boy standing there instead. In the doorway. A young king before the rude forts. If it weren't for my father knowing what he did I wouldn't have thought anything of the boy as he was standing with such assurance I would have passed on thinking it was his doorway. It appeared to be. But we stopped. He

pulled short. With us was the relative of the man we were seeking, a travel companion. He not wanting to be stalled up because of a dirty lonesome child by the side of a marsh. Of course I climbed down as well.

While he waited we walked up the grass to the doorway and there's this boy, hasn't said a word, just sit there watching us bicker. When my father walked up to him the boy said first that he had nothing for us. No whiskey, he said. My father asked him how he knows what we wanted. I noticed that boy had the cleanest feet I had ever seen. And I thought this odd, a boy in a marsh. To this day I've seen none cleaner. The boy said we all want the same thing eventually.

But my father paid little mind to this. He wanted to know about the old man. My father asked him where the old man had gone.

The boy had no answer. And so my father thought about it and when the boy told him he didn't know what he was talking about my father had another thing ready for him. He must have seen same as I that the boy had a feral look about him, nevermind those clean feet. Something in the line of him the way he stood there, and I saw it scratching in the golden color of the boy's eye when my father asked if he could have something to drink. My father put a big coin in the boy's hand. I remember that clearly. Near as big as his palm. I knew when he tightened his fingers around it my father had him.

I stood in the doorway and it had begun to mist. I watched my father drink from the dark jug. Something ran from his lips. I wanted to see inside the place and I felt it had more to say but the boy was suspicious of me and wary. I did not want to spoil whatever my father had in his mind to do. I waited for him to finish drinking.

My father put the jug down on the mud-soaked and blackened table and walked the empty room and saw that the boy was watching him. My father walked out the back through the door-less frame.

I told you already, that there would be an old man, all this time. My father had not been wrong. Behind the small stick house was a well though it had filled with mud like the rest of the place. Silt leaked through the walls. Clay over the stones and slung at the houses. The water had gone. You would have a better time drinking the puddles that speckled the ground. My father told me to get my horse.

When I returned he had the boy talking and out of something between amusement and disbelief, he told the boy to walk over it again. For sure enough the old man was in the well.

He asked the boy to explain why he thought it was a good idea to put an old man down a well.

The boy outlined some argument he had had with him that I hardly remember. Something about nothing. But by the boy's accounting, temporarily, the old man would not mind the well so much as he was accustomed to the dark because he was going blind.

My father hit the boy for what I expected was not the first time since I had left and the boy took it, and bowed and righted. I looked into the well. The black curve of its mouth low, far too low to the ground. Anyone may have fallen in. The old man could have fallen in, being blind or near-so. The boy may have waited for it to happen, while he lay curled up beneath the black table. I had seen no beds.

The brown stone of the well wall was stripped away. It was a foul pit. I no longer wanted to be in that place. When the old man raised his white face to me from the darkness I half hoped my father would push the boy in with him and be done with it.

The old man in the well must have known we were there and yet there wasn't a whisper out of him. He just watched us. But of course not, he was blind. There was not even the sound of water.

My father took the rope from me and looked down the well. As we lowered the loop of the rope down the boy told me that darkness was just another space. I had to extend the bit of rope with my shirt and try again.

My father had not finished with the boy.

Why did you lead him down there, he asked him. I held tight the pommel of the saddle around which the rope knot sat.

I was not surprised to hear the boy had been put down the well before. Quite a many. Nearly everyday. Had stopped because the old man hadn't the strength anymore to pull him out.

He said the old man would talk to him. He was fond of saying to the boy. Gain an inch lose a foot. Gain an inch lose a foot. Chanted it to him. Whispered it to him through the night. Lensed by the brown liquor glass, reeling and howling into the buried crates still above the depth of the boy.

I watched the rope kept pulling up against the flat stones, led my horse forward. The boy went on but I stopped listening.

When we got the old man out he didn't look surprised to see us. I think he had forgotten where he came from. What his flesh and blood would work to do. When we asked the boy he said the old man had been there for days. When we asked the old man what he had done to pass the time, why he had not tried to climb or convince the boy or speak at all, he simply said that he had. He had done something. He had been digging down, he said. By this time our companion urged us from the road and that was that. Why the boy or the old man wanted to stay in that place after I couldn't tell. We went on to where we were going and we didn't pass by there on our way back.

The doctor looked down into his fire hewn belly. He turned to the father.

Sometimes I wonder how far down he'd have gone if we hadn't got him out. Sometimes I think we had messed with something we shouldn't've. And more than that I think the old man must have been sore about it. With all his work gone to waste like that. Who am I to say.

It is the Morris brothers who arrived first. They knocked and entered without response. The Fat Morris moved into the room like the swivel of a top and it is the boy he urged forward with his hand. The mute swayed in the doorway and the snow hit hard

enough for him to raise an arm against it. When fat Morris saw Cheval and the state of the room he smiled.

Help me, the doctor said.

Morris closed the door. The boy stood in front of it as though he might barricade it and as though he might leave it all at once, until the snap of a rifle sounded outside between the curtain winds and the boy moved toward the wall in a crouch.

Cheval threw his rifle down onto the littered floor and made for the doctor's bedroom when the front door cracked open and bounced off the wall in return.

Two soldiers stepped in and leveled their barrels at some point equidistant and then Harcourt entered, doffing his hat.

Help me, the doctor wheezed.

Ellis was on his knees in the middle of the room where the table whose fragments it seemed had disappeared into darker recesses. The candle was gone and so with it the chest of drawers and by the moonlight and the dim hearth there was enough light to just see the sheen of things. The sweaty waxen faces of the men and greasy noses and the nose of the doorknob across the room to the bed door where the boy had slept were all alight. The Frenchman stood by the door and with his arms raised. He reached for the snuff in his pocket and Harcourt cocked the blunderbuss and at the sound the room settled into a quiet.

The earth had tempted to warm and pulled thickly by midday and before this the movement of the clouds had frozen and refrozen the surfaces and puddled divots stretching out of the mouth of the camp, and when the first horse broke the trail it pressed its first hoof through the frail glass and stepped away again at the sound. The party had left the cold camp at morning. The remainder of the garrison would ride out west across the following days and the garrison to close. The party set out ahead of the rest toward their conjoined intentions.

In the morning the commander Harcourt was the last outside and watched the horses and the men walk out before him into the rising world. He sat stiff as the wind came to his back. He breathed against the cold. The private standing by the open gate door strained against it, he would hold the door whatever length of time was required as they moved beyond it and his fingers whitened, the eyes bright and deep-set in his face and animal and expectant. The commander knew they had not rested well. For his part in it, the private at the gate had been fined. The man had not slept.

The commander watched the boy communicating with the father silently. Harcourt watched the private take it all in, even him, and the commander knew that he was trying to put it together how he would tell it later, probably to the homunculus-like man occupying the lower stacked bed who would soak up the whispers coming down to him and the stinging vapors of his breath like a warm meal. After the commander had gone, the remaining soldiers would sit idle in their half sleep as Harcourt often had, afloat in the dim gray stupor and laxities of his absence. They had days to travel, some new

front created without explanation. What had they left in their wake? Harcourt wished to know. He had only the pieces still, he felt. He had the boy and the father and a ghost's promise of a safe. But he would not retire in the west. He thought of his daughter.

Coffee the commander said aloud and the private holding the gate looked at the commander on his horse as if he stepped out of a dream.

The night had not passed well.

In the cell where the soldiers put the prisoners for judgment there high on the wall shone a window cut out of the dirt. If the boy and father stood foot to shoulder the boy could see onto the wooden ceiling of the small stable. The boy had not noticed the window before in the darkness. But now he could smell again the animal and hear the breathing, of which those in the prison ventured to join. But he could not pull himself through. When the boy returned to the ground he adjusted his sling and looked at where his father's hand had been.

When the commander had entered the room the boy thought he would shoot the Frenchman through the heart, and more, wished for it. But he uncocked the gun and the men had thrown Cheval out into the snow. Now the Frenchman sat in the warm clay basement speaking to himself and though of the same tongue as the father there was no understanding what the Frenchman said, and the boy moved away from him.

When the commander had entered the room they took the doctor elsewhere the father in the absence of all other men who might see a different story held out his hands, offering the chains. Harcourt had obliged his release. He had simply drawn the knife the

father had given him and removed the right hand with it. The iron loop fell to the floor and hung there. When the soldiers dragged him from the room the loop followed scratching into the earth.

The father beckoned to the boy but he would not come. In the earthen box the boy strayed away and folded over himself. Above them the old wooden floor of the barracks groaned. They had not seen where the Morris brothers had gone. The boy lay against the wall and slept below the window, and the key poked gleaming from his pocket.

The cave-like cellar was bare and warm and smelled of the stable . There was a little dirt stair up out of the hole and the window and nothing more. The father pressed against the door and the boy in and out of sleep watched Cheval carom around, looking for some other out. The father's stump from beneath the bandages bloomed. The voices of the soldiers came muffled through the earth and the boards like the victorious dead. The boy felt they spoke to him, he heard their worries and their laughter. Between the sound of boots and the floorboards the trickle of dark water sprinkled from above, and the boy watched the Frenchman occasionally drink from it.

The mother was gone. In the night the soldiers elicited the confession of the Frenchman in the snow of the barren camp and they returned to their thick wool coats and between sheets of ice listened to Cheval as he rolled his dark mouth on the cold packed ice. And when the private at the gate tossed his torch over the wall which was to be the signal of their success and the Frenchman walked out alone. The boy watched as he was walked to the prison as no fool companion of his came loping from the roots of the woods to greet him. There was no accomplice and no women. Harcourt went out,

impatient. He called out to whomever might answer. The two waited on the road like that, the Frenchman and he locked together in the cold and hollow dark as if aware of what had transpired and aware too of their place on the cusp of its discovery.

When they went to look for any sign of them the two followed where Cheval had seen his accomplice first run to. There they found his tracks neat in the snow. Harcourt began to walk around the spot. Amidst their circling they found a pair of boots sticking backwards out of the heavy snow.

The boy listened to the warped floorboards above. He imagined that he was merely on the other side of the floor. That his brother walked the night, roamed the pine boards of the house, and he the boy listened underneath. Trying for a glimpse of him. The father ceased his pressing at the door for some seam that would release him, and then the boy fell asleep again. The camp continued its clockwork haunting. The men who labored in the cold prepared to depart, those who slept suffered the sounds and shouts that entwined with the howling of the collected nameless dogs stopped from their roving to watch the men trudge across the snowy night plain of the camp. Cheval scraped mindlessly at the walls through the night unaware he would hang in the morning.

In the early hours the boy woke and saw his mother by the door but she was not there. The father spoke into the stairwell, beneath the door. The Frenchman licked his peeled lips and pointed, and the boy followed to where the fine earth shook down over them as the silent dance of the soldiers continued on without their bodies and on again came the old wood creaking until dawn, when at last light moved through the high dirt window through the opened and invisible stable door.

The soldiers came down the narrow shaft of the mud stairway and the father was first in front of them and he moved off the stairwell without a word and lay down again and watched them go by for he knew they had not come for him. When the boy last saw him the Frenchman had slept dirtied in the dark pool of water in the middle of the room but upon waking he was not there. The soldiers to the far wall where two feet poked from the earth. The Frenchman had only just begun to snore.

The earth pile the Frenchman had made touched up to their knees. The soldiers grabbed his ankles and Cheval did not move and he did not speak but slid out so easily they thought he had died. The dirt was in his hair and his eyes when he opened them and if he had had more time he may have dug his way into the stables or dug his way down deeper but he had only the mind to dig straight in to form a little hollow, and this was how they pulled him out and that was how they took him to hang. They processed out and left the door to the makeshift prison open and the father and the boy could hear men talking above but none came down for them. The father and the boy waited in the earth.

It was Harcourt who called down to them. When they emerged into the barracks the room above the prison was no more recognizable to them now as when they were led past it in the quiet night. The men in the room were eating and talking over the bench they used as a table. A few hunched over the glitter and clatter of objects thrown and retrieved, the shape and size and sound purposed only for them, bone and bead and smoothed glass gathered in their eyes. The men at the table glanced at them and continued on eating the meat as if the release was not of interest to them, for they had already had their celebrations. As the pair squinted through the smoke and scant light of

the fire in the room the boy noticed too the man who had taken his father's hand laying in his chair nearer them and it was he who watched them climb up in full. Harcourt had sat by the portal to the mud stair and keened himself to listen for the soft scratching under the floor through all the night. And the father knew that he had agreed.

And in the morning light Harcourt waited for them to ready in the cold before the gate. He told the men when and who to fetch and then ushered the prisoners out into the morning cold where they were stripped and redressed and now he sat his horse and warmed himself.

Harcourt had taken a mule and saddled the beast with their things, and he thought of his last meal. Its rough red taste. He imagined his daughter in a wooden room teaching the savage in the southern states and imagined the pattern of her dress and how this would shape the sounds of her words, how this would make the sound of her voice, and knew in trying to imagine it all that she was dead. He took out his watch and checked it and clasped it again. He had spoken to no one of this, or of his plans. The men moved eagerly to see him off. He watched for some sign from them.

Perhaps it would be the way one of them put a foot in the saddle or tied off a canvas bag or looked into a hoof. Harcourt watched. He looked for conflict. The wind swept through the trees and the snow which had returned to powder in the high air. The snow moved across them and fell like beads against the fort in unsteady gusts. He carried a cavalry pistol snaked from the corpse of the old dead general whom he served and he tightened it to him. The blunderbuss he had hidden beneath his long coat, and another rifle was slung across his horse's back. Harcourt thought if he studied the party for some

stray glancing vision of themselves he might prevent disaster, for surely it was he alone who would walk the father and the boy on. He watched. He felt that something might escape from the overlapped fissures which make a person, something he needed to see for the wary tremble of his heart but here he did not. The men worked as before. The father and the son were dressing. The soldier cramped in the perch above the gate stirred and the boy walked with great deliberation by the commander to the road wrapped in new clothing and a rough old blanket taken from the stable stalls and his arm in a fresh, loose sling. The color of the fabric popped into the daylight as he went by. The father waited before the factory where he had been given new footings and had yet to put them on. The boots had settled into the mud where he looked at them and he held to his missing hand.

Already the men who served in this ruin roused stronger, the sound of hot water from a bucket and shouts and sighs. Men overburdened with dull wood chests. One might wonder from which made the creaks and groans, overlaid by the run of dogs and hot breath. This place held no name nor would there be pronouncement. It was already gone. A man came down the water to collect what they had gotten and when he had gone, the rest would roll up and follow. The invisible and blind currents of supply ran south and only south and all else vestigial. The commander considered the premodern place from the distance of his horse, how they had come out of the woods to him, out of the swamps, from off the trails. He drank his coffee and called for another cup and had another brought to him and the tin was still warm in his hand when he had finished. His horse snorted and he went under rotted and filed spikes of the gate wall, lapped and winding and which appeared to him, as he passed under, an old serpent's flank. The camp in daylight was bare and terrible and the mud-covered walls of the old barracks looked half

sunk into the ground but for the black open doorway within which lay what but heat and stink. The commander knew it would not last long, the traveling opportunism, a carnival of hungers. He knew looking at the men that they too knew this and yet they remained for there was always more to come.

The father newly shoed was carried to his horse in chains. Harcourt glanced over him and his men lifted the hibernian to the horse and in the sunlight he looked like some mis-hewn artifact of worship. They chained him to it and shackled his feet together under its belly. The chains around his hands were tethered to an iron link. The soldiers pushed the animal it shifted in confusion. Harcourt watched the sad old horse clink toward the road where the boy waited.

The commander slung the remains of his cup into the snow. Before he could turn away from deep in the camp a shout came around until at last the shirtless crier who was the clerk and the only man with whom the commander had enjoyed a stray conversation with strode beneath the neck of his horse and took the reins.

Sir, he said.

As the clerk caught his breath he held out before him some bundle, which the commander presumed he needed to put his name to with some urgency to put the place to bed. As he took what the tired clerk offered, on the surface of the envelopes tied tightly and compressed beneath the twine was the name Harcourt. He felt the warmth of the candle flame in his small room. He opened and read the letter. And surely the handwriting was of his daughter.

Harcourt looked to the road where the father slumped in the back of the horse. Harcourt handed the bundle back to the clerk. He turned his horse to go.

The clerk still held the reins and would not let go.

Sir, the clerk said. He's lied to you. By what you've told me this is proof of it.

Harcourt and the clerk waited just before the gate and the walls so tall as to blot out the rest of world and the tops of the tallest trees. And outside it through the portal of the gate the world did curve and yawn. The father's horse had drifted to nuzzle at invisible green shoots down the side of the trail. The boy's dirty face returned his gaze and behind him the wide road narrowed into a distance point before it slipped behind the dazzle of overhung green fir. The boy waited without strain or impatience. Harcourt took the reins firmly from the clerk's hand.

Sir, he said.

See to the signatures yourself.

But sir, the clerk said. He put his wan arm out as if to hold back the giant of Harcourt's horse. The cellar. That cave. What should I do with what we have found. I have men still digging.

I mean to find out. I've made to return, Harcourt said and he gestured toward the mule. He urged the horse and the horse came up against the clerk's arm and stopped.

But what else can be done? Harcourt asked him. The clerk's arm fell away and Harcourt pushed forward.

Bury them away, if you can.

Then the commander turned his horse away as there was nothing more to say. When he passed the gate's shadow the soldiers behind and the private holding desperately the gate ceased their doing to watch them go. Those who had been witness to the cold and the spectacle through its night and into this morning watched as if the group were already alien to them and as the cold blew in they shut the large door across that vision to keep it out, the procession and shackles and the limp deformity of the hivernan jangling in the last.

They searched for the mother again. The commander desired it. He settled the boy on his horse and while the pair snorted the cold on the road the commander Harcourt took his horse and fanned out from the gate alongside them for a mile or more. The track had set into the ice glazed snow overnight. Harcourt followed the pair of footprints until it became one and he stopped. He could see from the cold hill the footprints soften, raise up, and lift as if whomever left them had simply risen into the trees. Some distant animal battered against the tree bark and the commander returned to the horses.

A day and a night passed and the season trembled with the burden of the cold wind and the heat from under the earth. Harcourt directed his horse. With his other hand he held the boy to the saddle in front of him. Behind was tethered the father and at last the mule. When they stopped the commander turned them from the road, and found a little gully that had but a few rags of snow. When he was released the father placed his hand on the ground and took a breath and watched the commander take the boy from the horse.

How far? the commander asked.

The father told him it would only be another day. A wind came and the trees all drew close and chattered and lay silent. The commander viewed as far as he could through them until his eyes came to a stop against the bark. In the setting sun the boles seemed to overlap and flatten out.

Sometimes I think this place is not real, Harcourt said.

It isn't, the father said. He sat down.

The commander lashed his horse to a branch that could not be got without sitting it and then climbed down again and removed the chains from the father's ankles.

Make us a fire, he said.

The flames rose faintly through the scabbed limbs laid crosswise and then rose higher into the ice hanging from the high limbed fir, and when the wind traveled it rattled fire through the night. They arranged themselves so. The father lay down on furs where the scant snow wall of the fire was low and glazed. He seemed to sleep and when he opened his eyes he merely moved them about the shield of the fire as though trapped therein. The commander was already sleeping and as he bowed his head his horse did the same, and the neck of the animal glistened in the scant light like some creature come down from the trees for him. The boy was set down in the old gully beside the commander and iron clasp bound him and Harcourt together. The father watched across the fire as the boy played with the key in his pocket. Around them all shimmered a deep blue dark. Between the boles a figure crept, and fanned out into two.

When the commander woke it was still dark. The boy's head rested against his black-coated belly. The commander put some hard sap in his mouth and his eyes strayed from where the father slept around the little fire where he saw nothing. The boy's skin reddened in the deep ember light and asleep the commander did not recognize the child, but saw him changed.

At the edges of the flamelight the Morris brothers flickered in and out of existence but for their eyes which roved slowly over the limp body of the camp.

The commander shook the boy awake though he had not yet seen anything to alarm him. When the boy's eyes opened the commander spoke.

What place have you in this boy? he asked, but the boy had no answer himself and instead listened to the crackling of the fire.

He asked me to bring you, Harcourt said. He pleaded for it. I could have left you with the doctor. With my clerk. Traveled you south of here, west of here, to our united coast. He told me you have a key but surely he could take it.

At the mention of the key the boy reached into his pocket and held it out before the fire. Its surface showed molten. The commander could not discern its material. The boy held it out for him to take.

Harcourt studied the boy but in the end he did not take it and the boy slowly wrapped the metal up again with his flesh.

And what is it to you? Harcourt asked. Is it as your father describes? The safe. The purpose. The things he has confessed to doing.

The boy closed his eyes.

The wind brought a layer of powder against the commander's neck and gave him a start. Harcourt brought his hand up to correct his black collar and brush the melting snow away. The mute leveled the long silvered barrel of the rifle from the cradle of his blind and fired.

The commander grunted and the boy shot up beside him, throwing the blanket from his shoulders as the old commander clutched at his neck. Before the boy there was the fire and the fire's igloo and the leaf strewn snow of the tree line above the gully and at last he made out the glint of the barrel snaking its way through the trees to adjust its shot before the father collapsed the snow onto the fire and his vision slipped away.

The boy could hear the commander's horse pulling against the reins and the branch. He crouched backwards until his heels began to dig into the steep side of the gully that met the road. The embers of the fire still squealed and hissed though there was no light. A branch snapped above across gap where he tried to see the one who had fired the gun. He did not hear his father. Then light flared for a moment, Harcourt's face and his short beard and drenched hair lit up and his expression surprise and confusion and pain. In the light the boy turned for the road and before it went out the boy saw his father already rummaging into the bowels of mule's saddlebag. Harcourt had fired his pistol shot. The boy had seen him bleeding from the neck. As the commander breathed heavily and rummaged his coat in the darkness the boy withdrew. He crawled one armed feeling

his way by the roots and fallen sticks and leaves and then colder the snow which leveled out and fell into deep powder and finally evened again into packed mud and harder clays.

On the road there was but a little bit of moonlight to see by and the boy's eyes still blinking were dazzled by the campfire. The mule's head raised over the embankment and dipped again but that was all. The boy waited to see who would come. He could still feel the cool silt of the road on his hand and he waited and the water on his hand pricked with ice. A boom and no flash, distant, down and over the gully. Another crack came, sharp and hot like thunder. Another and another. The boy peered from the bark of the thickest tree he could discern. When he heard nothing more he crept back out onto the flat of the road and began to look for the shape of the mule's head or anyone who might still live. Thirty paces from the boy a figure emerged onto the road from the deep snow embankment without struggle. The boy froze. He watched it sway but had yet to move toward him and the boy thought perhaps it had not seen him or had been blinded by some light or flash down in the gully as well. It stood on the road tall and wide and arms part and carried a rifle clutched in one hand. Beyond the embankment there was no sign of any of them. The figure seemed to know as well. After nothing emerged it began to lope silently toward the boy.

He runs. With speed and cold the air cuts into the boy's thin clothing, into the boy's flesh. His arm bends with every weird bounce of the sling. His other clutches the fur skin over his shoulder, and approaching the next rise he tightens his small fist into its

tearing warmth. The wool blanket is far behind him, seated at the base of the gully next to the dead fire. It cannot be got now. Snow falls steadily in big crystal flakes, down heavy, down soft and straight. To the boy and his direction they strip across his cheek. Branches loom, leafless spines and arcs and points, picking at the fur and his pants and his stomach. His eyes are wet and harden. The boy runs. When he reaches day the light is so bright he shields himself. His eyes over the fur skin multi-colored rounds in the sunrays. There is no one between the trees. There is no sounds or shape behind him under the dawn. He walks until he cannot and his stomach pulls at him and he settles down the irregular bend of an old pine with high branches as though it were a chair. He scrapes some of the green shoots from the shallow snow. He eats them and sleeps. When he wakes again no one has found him. There is only the sound of the wind and the trees and the trees are bare and wordless. He thinks to make some noise, to call out, but doesn't. He walks on. His soft shoes stuffing into the snow is his only companion sound, the breaking of the thin melt ice across the dimpled slopes. The sun is high and the sky is cloudless and the woods lay naked. The boy cannot help but hunch. When he stops he lets loose the fur cowl and rolls slowly the cuff of his pant leg over the low shoes one and then the other so that they do not bite and stick his legs with wet. His own breath passes over his downturned face and softens his red nose with heat. Then he regathers the fur and tightens his fist and continues.

He knows not where he goes, but he feels in his heart that a place in the woods will open up for him, too, and take him away from there. As he walks aimless and small under the glare of the snow there are no calls or creaks or groans, no sign of any converging moment that will do as he wishes. He walks. The air changes, comes cold and

damp and dry and spiced. He tastes the snow from a branch, lets the melt settle in his mouth and rolls his tongue over it until it becomes a hot soup to drink. The boy occasionally thinks to call out but he does not. He thinks of the distant taste of meat and marrow, and his stomach turns. He walks. He has no direction but its opposite. He passes a stream but there is no life there to bear witness to. The boy remembers he is not the child of a hunter. He has in another time only taken a doe. Bored he takes a thick dead branch and claps it against the trunk of a broken tree and watches it snap. The sound of the break hits the tree and the next and the next, and on it snaps ticking through the boles until it is gone from him and the boy wonders as he walks if it will catch up to him or he to it. As he walks he heads slowly and steadily into the west. The boy travels in turns, he boy sleeps during the day when he is tired and wakes at night when he feels compelled to move. The boy passes by another road. He stops upon it and tried to figure if he has gone in circles. He walks on. In his mind in the bareness of the horizon the image of the safe rises again. He shudders. At night he fears solids shapes of black, shapes unknown gleaming. The boy remembers the father giving him the key, giving him the key and closing his hand over it. The boy remembers opening the safe. Opening the door. Opening. The boy fears he has walked into it until he opens his eyes and the daylight strikes him. At night under the covered moon he hears a shouting, and he rises thinking he has neared some human landmark at last. He listens peeking over the fur skin, and at the human sound imagines they are only bedcovers. The boy sits in a wide plain and at the edges the voice calls, and the boy recognizes that it is only the commander. The commander is calling for the boy. He is calling child, child. The commander does not know his name.

The boy flattens himself out. It is night, the commander cannot see. The boy's mouth takes a rough taste. From the tree-line Harcourt emerges. The boy can make out little of him. The commander's outline is blurred and he carries no torch. He sees little save for the white that waves out in greeting. A shirt is tied around his neck loosely. The commander calls hoarsely for him. The boy realizes he has not known where to go without him. Harcourt pulls his horse blindly on through the snow and the horse resists and relents.

Child, he calls. Child. Help me.

Harcourt's voice echoes and evaporates into the wide space. The boy feels the snow creep wet and liquid onto his belly. He does not know where to look on the ground amidst the low spiked weeds.

I tried to go back, he calls. I saw your track, I tried. It is gone. The whole place. The wall. The fort. There is not even a ruin. Forgive me boy.

I tried, he yelps. Help me. I know you are out there. I saw you, I saw you. Please. They are after me. There is more of them. Please. I cannot go alone.

The boy listens to Harcourt try his pleas into the night and in the morning wakes from his drifted sleep and hears no one but the few birds who remain sheltered in the branches. The boy gathers the fur blanket and walks on. The boy's limbs shake but he walks on. He has eaten the shoots of uncovered brush. The boy begins to think he sees a pale ghost in the branches. The days warm, though the boy wishes for fire. He goes through his pockets in the evenings as though he might have missed some morsel. In the

evenings the boy tears the fur slowly from the cover and tosses it to the snow. He watches it blow and scatter, feed the howling winds. He puts his mouth over the leathered skin until it softens and eats. The boy's mouth is sore from snow and ice. He chews for longer. As the boy rises and walks he walks without aim but there is only one place the boy will go.

The moon is muddy, a sallow bone cupped between the branches. The land opens in the day and in the night it closes for him. There are no mountains to view, no vial waters. It is instead a great dance of flatness. The horizon like plates overlaps and shifts, but the boy feels large against them. The trees and the spaces he passes are large and continuing but in moments they strike out the sky altogether and the boy is made larger for it, measures up against the trees in the revolving darkness that forms flat before him and pulls aside its cover ahead of him like a fog. When the branch cover breaks the moon comes again for him. The boy tries to walk in the darker shade of the limbs where it cannot see. The boy is his own guide but the fold of the wood will not let him out. And as he walks he feels he is walking down, walking low. The boy resists the urge to crawl. In the night out of the blue dark and the patterns of bark that shift and surround, the boy sees the first faint glowings of fire. The boy kneels between two fallen logs and waits but he hears nothing. Dead pale moss sits brittle on the fallen timber and the boy runs his fingers through it and withdraws them. He hears nothing at all, he is too far from it. There are just the shadows of the embers flickering on the boles. He waits. There is the smell of burning.

The boy cannot help it. When he creeps upon the scene he crouches low into the roots of a dead old tree which stretch out above the ground like the legs of an enormous spider. The boy with his good arm hangs from one such loop and the dirt clumps in his hand. When he sees into the fire he quiets. A great rotund shape shifts and swivels, stoking the fire. And there is the mute in his skin poncho. The two of the brothers rest beside their long rifles, the fifty caliber barrels in the gleam of the fire as big as the boy's palm. They were waiting over something to eat it. They seem left for dead or escaped for the worse. The mute looks chewed upon even in the flame dark. He adjusts his limbs beneath the hairless skin poncho and its pattern undulates grotesquely and his wrists and elbows poke out of it as though loose ribs or bones or those of an unborn monstrosity. While the fat Morris stands before the fire like a great faceless idol the mute nurses a wound in his leg and watches patiently at the space between the fire and the darkness. The boy moves closer.

He settles into the rut of the snow where he can see and crawl away if need be, and here he smells burned flesh and hears the fats dripping into the fire and onto the stones which line it. The fat one gives some stringy hunk to the mute and the mute eats from it. The boy remembers how the mute held his arm in the stable stall of the barn to prevent his escape and the boy shudders as the mute grasps the burned hunk. The fat Morris stokes the fire with a thick log. The boy watches. The smell of meat turns his stomach and waters his mouth. The fire heightens and the wet sizzles. The boy shifts in the wet snow. The circle of the fire which makes the darkness beyond grows and the shapes of the brothers are cast in all the boles and rise into their heights and it is only then

in the hideous mirage of the brothers across the sky the boy hears the fat one speaking and sees the fat one has turned his back to the fire by the shape of his head.

I see you, he says.

The shapes and shadows flicker over the boy though he is yet outside the reach of the fire. He does not move. Neither the mute nor the fat Morris moves from where they are.

Come warm yourself, the fat one says to the dark landscape. There is meat spit upon the fire. There is nothing for you to fear. You're welcome to have your share of it.

Morris seems to shift his gaze and though the boy cannot see the man's eyes it seems the man cannot tell where he is exactly. But the boy is not sure. The fire is bright over the man's shoulder and he is wreathed in dusk and smoke.

No? asks the fat one, and the boy is watching the gleam of the rifles where they lay.

I suppose you want to know first about your father. The old commander, Harcourt. There is no need to worry over them. They walk these floors yet. Though the old man has stopped his calling.

They shot my poor brother, he says, and here Morris swivels and flattens to sweep his arm sideways toward the mute, and the boy could see partially the fire and the spit. The mute cuts more from the spit and his leg where the ball is stuck is raw and limp.

The boy can tell Morris is still looking for him.

The boy tries to put his knees back into the snow and begins to dig himself out, dig himself back.

Your father is far ahead, he took off with the mule. We were as surprised as you to know that he had left you. But I suppose we will all be there in a short while. Your track is easy to follow.

The boy inches back down the tunnel of dirt and mud. He recedes from the firelight.

I thought you might be curious.

Morris starts to shout while the mute eats.

The smell. This wilderness does put a hunger into you, he says. But you already knew, didn't you. You still have the key in your pocket. Still carrying it when it could have been left in the snow. You are your father's child, after all. All these things a father is given, they shall pass down to his child, and his children's children. All these dealings will come to pass down to you. And don't you know, that all the furred things are gone?

The boy is some distance from the fire when he dares make a sound again and some distance further before he cannot hear the man shouting into the wind. He walks a few days more when the image of the spit returns to him. Fire cups the reddened and blistered leg. He is right though, and even the boy must admit this, and he sees no signs of life for days.

And yet it is night again, and the boy walks in the predawn dark waiting for the sun to rise so that he might close his eyes. The wind comes low to shutter the leaves across the damp dark ground. The spots of snow that still remain linger desperate to the middling nights and this is one. The air is uneven and the wind is up and it hits the boy hot and cold and the boy shudders to the blanket. The boy's legs carry him without thought, of their own animation. They know he must go on. It is when the boy hears the mule that he stops. There, not far though again. He could not see it but its breathing. The snort of an animal. The image of the mule rises and the boy's collar is ablaze. He drops the fur cloak and presses himself into the closest tree and against it the key stabs him in the side and he whimpers. The bark is smooth and white and without blemish and the boy feels a fool. He begins to creep around the side of it when he sees the figure.

Tall and wide. In the dark it is beyond a man. The night eats away at the shape of it and its shoulders spread until the figure is a grotesque being, a two-headed thing which parts down the middle as it comes for the boy scared clutching the tree. It is Morris it is the father it is the mute it is his brother, the boy fears. The copse obscures the moon in bouts and though uneven the light hits half of the figure and becomes golden in its gleam, tawny skin and silvered fur ornamenting. The mother takes the boy from the clutches of the tree. The boy resists at first. He pulls away and stops. His weak arm beats against her breast still without consciousness. There is heat and warmth. The boy sees over her shoulder the figure waiting. The boy closes his eyes and on the lids silk points of the furs touch at his face and tease him. The furs of her cloak are soft and fine. The boy pulls into her body and her arms come up to touch his face, and then the boy pushes away. The mother is watching him with her tarnished eyes as he does so, and as the boy backs away

the figure moves beside her. Within the black shape there are eyes which reflect the mothers and his eyes are old, and his face is sharp and square and the boy sees in his face the face of his brother in a moment before the light fully breaks over the man. The boy knows this is his grandfather. They stand wordless under the trees, and the boy feels in his chest some pull, and he resists it.

The mule snorts again and the boy moves toward the noise. There are little houses here, and as the boy seeks the noise they spot the periphery. Bark strips and leathers, tented cloth slick with fats, mud and brush. The boy moves around a little dome with a hollow wholly dark. He looks inside before he goes on and eyes come out to follow him. The boy sees the mule. It stands tied to a low branch and its saddlebags are slung across its back and untouched. There is a worn and hay stung blanket where the saddle might be, and the boy recognizes it for one from the stable. When he comes upon the mule the mother has followed him, and the boy pets the mule and quiets it. He hastily works at the strap. As he works the wind takes under his shirt. He is pulling at the leather and the loop shaves the bark clean from the tree and its dust falls sticky over his hands before he has it and the mule is free. The mother says nothing and the boy will not look at her.

As he pulls the mule on the man who is his grandfather speaks to him but he does not understand the words he says. There is just the sound of his voice and the boy does not wish to hear it. And yet the wind picks up again and the old clatter of the trees and the man speaking and the sway of the branches follows the boy like a great tunnel, and the boy feels he must keep going. He pulls the mule by the strap. The old wood creaks. There are others, he sees. From out of the net of branches, from between the boles and the

slopes, there are other men and women who watch him. He goes on and the mule bays. As he goes there are more houses, places of rest and homes, lean-tos. There is a gathering of them. The boy passes the rotted wood walls of a long house and from the roof smoke spumes. The boy smells decay and the smoke stings his eyes and he passes through it. When the boy tastes the vapor on the air the smell grows stronger and the boy remembers the moment. He walks until the little homes end. He turns and looks at them. To either side of him they continue on sparsely until the tree line obscures them from view. Flattened together in the darkness the light shimmers over each like the scales of a fish. The boy goes on. He walks over the next rise, pulling the mule though his hand is slack and when he crests the mud slope he lets the mule go. He feels the eyes of the people behind him.

Down at the edge of the slope the father waits for him. There is the first faint crescent of light on the horizon though it is still dark above and below it, and it hangs like the crack of a door beyond which something burns. He is seated on a stump whose body lays twisted off below in the waters, or removed and purposed for some other feat. His father waits beside the hole. From the angle of the ridge it appears as though it were only a lake, a flat screen of water shimmers and waits as if for the father to push off from the shore and swim to its center. If not for the last timber wall of the house which lay broken down the hillside toward the water's glassy bottom it would seem just another pool among many.

The boy grips the mule's tether and carefully makes his way down. The melting snow has run off and collects in small dimples along the mud and the area around the hole gives way beneath the boy's feet. Behind him the boy feels the band herding him. He feels the gaze of his family. When the boy is close he sees the father is still wearing the ankle bracelets from the camp, though his arms are free. The father picks at the bark of the tree and below him are curled layers of the bark's cladding. The rings within the tree are yet bright and fresh. When the boy stops the father rises from the stump. He walks to the boy and takes the reins from him. the father asks for the boy to show him the key but the boy refuses. The father goes around to the saddlebags. He unclips the buckles and begins to pull out the supplies that Harcourt had prepared. The father throws to the ground rope. He throws to the ground iron chains and a threaded wheel. He throws to the ground great hooks, which arch cruelly and interlock teeth the boy does not wish to feel the weight of. When the father empties the saddlebags the boy wishes his father would say something more but he does not, and the boy watches as he threads the chains. The boy drops the fur wrap. It has lost much of the hair and much of its size, and at the edges are markings of the boy's teeth. The father braces the pulley. He presses the flat head of the wheel into the stump. While he holds it he takes the chain from either side and pulls until the wheel is locked against his weight and the roots of the gone tree. He takes the chains two in a hand and with his other begins to lengthen them. When he is done he tries his weight against it. The father pulls the length of chain and rope through to the end and then reverses it, pulling it hand over hand and feeling it out and at last he drops it satisfied. On the longer end he attaches the hooks. When he is satisfied he removes his clothes.

The boy does not recognize him at his back. He is thin and the muscles at his back knot and cluster like small stones and bead up and disperse. The boy can see the lining of his ribs and his arms when he shows them are thin and the bones of his wrists are unobscured. Still he proceeds and the boy watches.

When he is finished the father climbs slowly down the muddy slope with the end of hooks in one hand and the other waving for balance. He shivers, and skids down the wet earth and the mud dots his flesh. The boy watches. The boy watches as his head disappears, the unshaven face dipping beneath the waters and at last the ripples fade and it is quiet again. The boy waits and the wind picks up debris and the trees shift. On the surface of the water float animal skins and bits of wood. Occasionally some bubble stirs and the boy looks for the surfacing and the end of a chair rises to break the surface and bobs a time and gently sinks again. The boy leans over the pool and looks but there is no bottom to be seen and there is faintly the sound of water running somewhere deeper but deeper the pit is a mire and unviewable. The boy waits and he holds his breath and lets it go.

The father does not break the surface, but instead crawls out of the water from the steep side of the pit with a gasp as though he were some primordial thing retched from the underground darkness. He stumbles as he breaches in full and walks as though a current still pushes him and in his hand he guides the rope out of the water, and follows it from the hole to its top.

Naked he leads the mule. But for the watery sheen across his body, the pair is the amorphous survivor, the refugee of blighted deserts and desolate mountain tops, though

they bring destruction itself from the depths of the water. The boy has found nothing on the mule to stop him. He watches as the father leads the mule to the rope harness. The mule looks blankly at the father, and when the pulley is affixed and taut again, the father begins. His back is to the mule. With his breath he urges it on, leaning over his shoulder as he pulls and guides the chain, and at the same time pushing the mule at his back. The boy cannot help but watch. The surface of the water is evenly rippled and there are a few initial bubbles and then the water's surface flattens again. The mule bays and the father urges it on. His arm follows the length of the chains and it is nearly matched in width. The father urges it on and the mule sinks with each slow step into the mud forward. The boy feels the growing eyes on them but he cannot take his from the pool of water.

The surface of the water breaks uncertainly. It seems to stretch and shake, and at last the black bubbled surface rises slowly at the effort. The father and the mule pull on, either the beast and man encouraged or the safe's weight lessening at its being found. The oily surface gleams. The crack of the door has widened, the light from the dawn forthcoming. The sun rises slow and red.

The father and the beast heave. The sun rises on the mid body of the blackened iron box. The father and the beast heave. The boy sees they are not alone. He turns from the hole. The father and the beast heave. The safe drags solidly up onto the muddy bank. The queer metal knob sits alone on the door's surface and as it drags up the hill the father and the mule go further in the other direction. The mule bays as the father turns it toward the pit, for they have run out of room to run the rope. He urges the mule on and they heave. But the boy is not watching his father any longer, but the crest of the woods that

lay untouched by the hole's depression, and where stands the heads of the people watching. The boy feels with each pull the safe rises and sees its effect. Three more, eight, a dozen more people stand to watch. They begin to climb down, to close in on the hole and the boy feels them drawing close around him. The boy begins to move back. The father has climbed down into the hole unsteadily with the mule. He lets gravity take them, he urges the mule on. The mule reaches the edge of the water and stops and father sees the safe near the top of the pit and urges it one more step. The safe disappears, a mud flecked vision.

The boy backs away from them. They watch him with curiosity. The boy sees them with fire, black powder and steel, but this is not so. Their hands are black and white with ash from where they have been working and sitting and stoking the fire. Their faces run ruddily in hues, of golds and russets. On the front edge of the people the mother and the grandfather push forward, but they too, wait. The boy backs away and presses his back into the safe.

They wait. They watch him. The boy turns and expects his father, but when he sees the safe there is no one but him to open it. He hears his father climbing the hill, the baying of the mule. To the boy the key is hot to the touch. It burns as red as the low sun which even now refuses to rise further, but merely hangs, the brim wide and collapsing onto the hills bowed before the horizon and the woods and the earth. The boy watches the light pour over him and glare and redden, and pour to the edge of the pit. On the face of the safe door which lay skyward the boy saw the rim of the lock. He could hear his father struggling to climb. The boy put the key inside and turned it.

When the door swings open the father crests the ridge with the mule in his fist and sees the door point into the sky and fall. He stops. He slouches down into the muddy hill but cannot take his eyes from the boy. The boy is already reaching inside when the mule slides him back down.

To the boy the metal of the rim is bare and vanishes. It opens into the black mouth, and where the boy expected the bare interior laden with gold and silver and all manner of things to store and save he sees none of this. The boy reaches inside. He reaches. He feels no bottom, and first thinks of what the scalp-hunter told him. He reaches further and finds it, though his fingers do not scrape the heavy bottom. It is merely a paper, which the boy unfolds. He reads. It is a ledger page. It is the things the father has bought and sold from house, from the trade. The boy counts furs and powder, knives and traps and the things of European waste and native interest. The father has put them in the safe, the boy realizes. There is no transactional name, there is no accounting for a market or place of business, it is only its vortex, only a pit. The boy reaches inside, he feels around. He cannot touch its bottom. The boy returns his hand to the letter and reads on. He reads what he has always known. Names and weights. Alongside the column is a price. People the father has sent money to. No, the people the father has put in the safe. There are no furred things, the brothers said. There are red names, no, real names. There are prices. There are the names of pioneers, the list is overtaken by them. The boy sees the list for consumption, the boy sees his father has dealt in flesh. *enemy! eater! wendigo!* The boy's mind raises images the boy pushes away. The ledger breaks away but the paper continues. The writing changes. It is a notice, official. The boy has learned English thanks to his father. He reads. The treaty of Washington. A westward

hunger. Preservations for cattle. Father of a nation. The boy puts the paper down. He does not understand it. He is only a boy. He has only lived in the house and run from its collapse. Here he is again.

The boy reaches into the safe. He reaches deeper. They watch him and the surface of the sun trembles. The boy feels that the walls of the safe are not made of metal. They are soft and dry. They are brittle and flake and stretch. The boy reaches farther. Finally, the boy thinks he nears the bottom and stretches farther again, so that now his body bends over the edge and the boy's head is covered in darkness and he can see nothing deeper within. Within the safe he holds the letter and it is bright on the inner walls which look like nothing the boy will recognize. He looks down into the bottom and the boy feels heat and warmth. It is dark, black, but the boy knows therein is the beginnings of a fire. He does not remove his hand. He dangles the letter, and knows a fire does not really travel at all, but grows, like a weed. It grows in warmth. It grows in darkness. He lets go.

When they are done closing the safe the father crests the hill again. This time he takes the leather straps and heaves and the mule bays but it climbs the ridge in full. It is only then that he lets go. He is naked. Their eyes are on him. They wait for him to speak. The father's eyes float over the safe and to the men who have closed it. There are men and women and children as if this is an event. But there is no dancing, their faces are grave. One of the men takes the mule. The father looks for the boy. His eyes pass over the faces on the hill, and the boy is not behind the safe. The man removes the chain from the pulley and shortens it. He reattaches it to the mule. The father is looking over them. *Where is it? Where is it?* The words echo in his head. A round face a square face a sharp

one. He sees the mother and the grandfather. The man, finished with the mule, turns to the father. He is only naked. A few of the others help. They sit him on the mule, holding its hind legs one, and then the other to allow for the chain at his ankles. It now sits tight across the mule's belly. The father is looking. He sees eyes gleaming, eyes tarnished, eyes of another and older world. He sees in them fire and darkness. He sees the safe and its door closed.

Where is it? he calls. Where is it?

There is no answer. The men urge the mule on.

Why has the door closed? Has he closed it? Open it, open it.

He urges but there is no answer. His eyes find the mother and the boy's grandfather. The sun is ever widening redder. The father is front facing, he twists and turns to gaze as the mule crests the next hill and the hole becomes a flat ruddied water. He squints to see. There are children among the trees. The mother holds to a child, and so does the grandfather. Their eyes are fire and darkness. He squints to see them.

The dawn is yet rising and blooding the sky. The sun beats and where the mule pulls the safe and the pale flesh of the man it overtakes the hills and the path, the blanket and saddlebags and the mule and the safe. But the beast pulls on, on into darkness. On into a deep night. And there beyond the sun are figures waiting, who would dance before dimpled monoliths and fires loud, figures of wailing and figures of pain, figures of flesh and silently rotting. Figures who wait for a twilight made for them on that bare and braced plain.

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