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ALL MY TEARS

A Thesis

Submitted in Partial Requirement of the

Requirement for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Memphis

Major: Creative Writing

Jonathan L. Vowell

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They cannot save themselves from me. I can smell them now, fear like blood in the air. I'll find them, and I'll tear them apart. The thing will just be. Their scraps will dissolve in my fury. Forests and hills will burn. The mountains even will melt.

I have abandoned all hope, and I will become the only apocalypse I can find.

What have I to lose or gain now? What desire to fulfill or disappoint? They've taken her away. Not a piece of her left, and I am stripped bare, naked. I am a gaping wound.

Now I see them pass in my mind's eye, those villains and fiends. Damned monsters. Fathers false or otherwise looking stern with their sons dead or dying. I will become a terror that is older than the dirt and the stone, and I will swallow them whole. My innards are warm. Warm as hell itself. It will be their home.

There is nothing more I can say now. I will devour them all. That is truth. The only truth left for me: I will kill them all.

(Johnny's journal entry, marked "March, 1888")

Entry 1

This is a confession, so there will be no confusion. My name is Joseph Jefferson Adams, Brigadier General of the northern armies of Pennsylvania, former under-secretary to President Grant. I am retired now, retreated by my own volition, after forty years of service, to Tahlequah in Oklahoma Indian Territory, as far removed from the old world of the eastern states as I can get. The Cherokee folk that abide here are kind but sad, and I feel an increasing camaraderie with them with every turning year.

I am tired now. Old and tired. God knows I've earned exhaustion. Worn myself thin as a thread for this work. Several years have passed since I began. So many stories gathered. So many possibilities considered. So many voices. Voices crammed into my brain, saturating it like bread dipped in brine. How will I ever pull them all together now? How will I ever tell the truth? How can anyone ever do the truth justice?

Let me recount the beginning of it all.

I loved and married a colored woman, my dear Starla Rose. Educated as a freewoman in a fine house in Pennsylvania. I will not recall the guff we took in our marriage. She is dead now, near thirty years. Why should I remember more pain than I have to?

We had a son, Joseph Jr. I am ashamed to admit that now I love him as I should have when he was alive. He and I were always at loggerheads, for he took to his mother's world, her world of books, of fairytales and fantasies, from the Bible to the Faerie Queene. But I was a military man, and tolerated what I thought was silliness for only so far.

What an ass I was even back then. I know this because my son took great pains to enflame me. Every stance I took, he countered for the sake of counter. Everything I found disagreeable, he grew suddenly fond of. When the war broke out, my duty was to the Union, and

so he talked long and hard about the valor of the Confederacy, a stance that put me even further out of sorts with him than usual.

Then dear Starla died. Neither husband nor son took it well. I heaped thunderous scorn upon him: how dare he speak of joining the Confederacy while his mother stood nearby? How dare he drive her to ill health and death? How dare you? How dare you!

Damnably lies. I was a man in pain, knowing only how to deal out pain. My dear Joseph fled from me. He joined the Confederacy. I did not see him for near twenty-five years, estranged from me, a true stranger. He sent me letters regularly, but they were all of his exploits and meant to give me pain. All natural affection dried out. There was a time where I would have gladly killed him if I saw him on the battlefield.

But I did not see him till long after, after the war, after pattering around in meager military duties, after retiring to Tahlequah, after I had spent my twilight years reading over my wife's books, a vast library I kept around merely as a monument to her absence, now restoring her to me. I was in the middle of reading the Faerie Queene, of Redcross confronting the monster Despair, when a strange man arrived at my home, bearing the body of my son in a cart.

The only affect my son had on his person was a journal. I have added them to the letters. I interrogated the strange man who brought my son to me, and he told me a strange and fabulous story that I penned down. Together, they make up the fragments of my son, as the library carries the remnants of my wife. The words she wrote or the words they loved are all I have of them now.

I have pored over my son's journal the most. For years it was my daily devotional, my sacred study. I strained my eyes over each line and scribble. Indecipherable sensations rise to

meet my face—angers, terrors, blood spray, but then something further, deep and cool like an underground stream.

What has happened to my son? Who can tell me now? His journal begins in March, and it is a terror of madness and pain. But by November, he has changed. My son, like Dante, went through hell, and somehow found paradise on the other side. It is as clear as lightning in a dark room, but how? My son, who was so lost, who *I* lost—what saved him in the end?

That has been my torment for the past five years, and seeing as how the letters and journal offer only brief sketches, and my journeys to Appalachia found no one to tell me the whole story—only spurts and slivers, ghost stories and tall tales—and with twilight closing in on my soul, I feel compelled, perhaps possessed, to settle the matter for myself, in the only way I can. I will write the book, the last testament of my son. May God do it justice. May he give this old head of mine grace at last.

I must begin where I imagine it began. Dark. Dark with dawn waiting restlessly far beyond the high green hills of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

The silver moonlight touches a circular clearing in the woods, its grass aglow but dull like an enormous nickel. The burnt ruins of a house rise from it, smelling of harsh smoke. Only the chimney remains upright, black as coal, raised to the sky like a forbidden mound, a dark-drenched finger pointing outrageously at the sky.

Heaps of ash over the foundation stone. Gray peaks on black slopes, a miniature snow-capped mountain range. There are bones in those ashes.

There is a man digging on his knees. His hands cup ash to his face. He lets it slowly sift through his fingers, falling in powdered streamers that dissolve in the wind.

Nothing. Nothing hiding nothing.

His face lies hidden beneath the brim of his hat. His eyes neither narrow nor blink. They watch the ash like a battlefield surgeon, detached but focused, passions locked tight, giving the soul a kinetic strength and skill.

He wipes his hands on his pants legs and then gazes at his palms. Sooty and stained. He's been digging too long. Will he ever be able to wash his hands clean?

He stands up slowly, his right hand clutching the long silhouette of a Winchester repeater. He marches out of the ash heaps and walks around, head low, eyes observant of the ground. Past the chimney, he digs his boots into the grass, and then eyes the nearby trees.

Then, he runs, steady and fast like an arrow set loose. One hand grips his Winchester and the other clutches his hat to his head. He fades into the pitch-dark forest interior without stutter to his step. Dawn is hidden. He has much ground to cover. So much ground left to go.

West Virginia, Valley and Ridge, April

“So that’s what blood tastes like,” Nix says.

Morning, shadowed under trees. Septimus, broad-shouldered and dark-bearded, looks up from the smoldering remains of the campfire to Nix, who sits upright and cross-legged on his gunnysack, a pale yellow Stetson resting on his knee, looking burnt around the brim. His buckskin coat is as yellow and as strangely burnt as the hat. He holds a bloodstained Bowie knife to his beardless face.

“Crazy-ass,” Septimus says, then as to himself: “They can’t feel anything anymore.”

“Neither can I.” Nix frowns. “How boring.” He licks his teeth with his tongue and wipes his blade on his pants leg. “When will our dear judge get here?”

“We got to go to him.” Septimus stands, looming. “So I ain’t got time for yer shit.”

“You are quite the sun-blocker.” Nix raises a hand to his face and gazes up at Septimus. “Do you think we can ever blot out the sun?”

“I been large my whole life.” Septimus spits, the dirt sizzles then pops in the acidic juices. “Broad shoulders run in my family.”

“You told me you had no damn family.”

“Sure as hell don’t.” Septimus grimaces, baring sharp teeth. He wears a black akubra hat, the only hat to suit his frame. On another man, its brim sat wide and strong. On Septimus, it shrank to normalcy. “Tried to get me to take the family business. Railroads running into coal mines. I didn’t want no family business. Didn’t want no damn family. I set fire to the railroad yards and now here I be.”

Nix grinned, his lips a blood smear across his face, dark eyes moist in their sockets.

“The hell you smiling at?” Septimus says, clenching his teeth.

“You remember when we burnt the house down?” Nix says and leans forward.

“Judge said it had to be done. Nobody leaves and gets away from us.”

“That’s not the point.”

“There’s yer shit again.” Septimus snarls and lumbers over to the horses, one dark brown, one bone white, tied to a tree.

Nix frowns, eyes hurt. “Didn’t you want to see something burn?”

“I always want to see something burn.” Septimus leads the horses over, his own head level with theirs. “That don’t meant I got to swoon over it.”

They’ve been scalping families all across the Appalachian range. Irrespective of color or sex or age. When they’re not on call to their dear judge, they’re cut loose to do as they will.

They do their deeds with surgical efficiency, though Nix may sing. He sings this time, gaily ringing a melody through the woods, his Bowie paring the scalp from the skull of a screaming child like he was peeling a potato. A poor family waylaid on the road, too far from any town to be saved. The father’s head was crushed when Septimus gripped him by both legs and hurled him against a tree.

Septimus did not sing, but is machine-like in his kills. Once the skin is pulled from the skull of the child’s mother, and her scalp flaps in the breeze like a limp flapjack, he sets his teeth to her skull and chomps down until her screaming and squirming stop altogether. Then he sits in silence and chews like a dog over his bowl.

Nix sits with his back to a tree, the child’s corpse in his lap. Blood pools into the cup of his hand, which he brings to his mouth again and again. He raises his head, mouth blood-smearred, and stares at fox squirrels scampering across low-hanging branches.

“The squirrels seem pleased,” Nix says, grinning, teeth pink with a film of blood. “We could learn something from that.”

Septimus grunts, jaw pumping like a cow chewing cud. Blood trickles down his face and chin like streaks of oil.

“Nature is the great omnipresent teacher,” Nix says after another drink. “The Greeks and Romans knew that.”

“I ain’t cared what Greeks and Romans know.” Septimus casts the mother’s corpse aside. He thrusts his hands into the dirt and scoops out a small crater. He fetches wood and fills the whole, lighting it with matches from his pocket. Then he stands towering, stomps his way over to his horse, and digs out a black, labelless bottle of whiskey. He sits back down, cross-legged, and offers some to Nix, who refuses. He grumbles and takes swigs. Occasionally, he spits into the fire to watch the flames expand and contract like a heaving chest.

“What do you care about, Septimus?” Nix says, cradling the child in his arms, nibbling the face.

“Do you know what the death of God means?” Septimus says without looking at him.

“Too easy. I make my own rules.”

“No you don’t,” Septimus snarls, glaring up at Nix, face orange by the fire. “No you don’t. You make no rules. Little preferences, maybe, convenient for yourself. But no rules. Nothing binding beyond yourself. Don’t speak to me of your rules. There are no more rules, except one.”

“Which one?” Nix sits forward, eyes wide.

Septimus spits into the fire, lets the flames expand, and takes another drink.

Nix's smile cracks across his face, a broken plate. "You know where everything is headed."

"Down."

Nix giggles. "Say more."

Septimus holds up the shimmering glass of the whiskey bottle. "It's all headed down. Down, down, down into entropy. Cold. Still. That's what Nature tells us. That's where it is all headed. Into the dark."

"Everything exists so it can die." Nix giggles, holding the child's head up with two hands like a goblet. "I see now, with a blinding clarity. That's why we're killing people. Killing anybody. We are a revelation. Revelation of the real. Death is real. Everything else, all this noisome nonsense, this struggling and strutting about. It's all just a veneer that fades away, like skin when it rots leaves the skull behind. Life is an accident. Death is the only constant, the only truth left. And when death is the only truth—"

"Killing's the only logic left," Septimus says. He corks the bottle.

Nix grins pink toothed. He wraps the dead child to his chest as though to nurse it instead of feed on it.

"I like you Septimus," he says. "I hope you and I ride these hills for a long time."

Septimus and Nix ride on to meet the judge, Judge Mal, their leader in blood and pain. He has called them, called all of his men to come to him. For protection, he had said in envoys. Something is coming this way, and safety in numbers is paramount. So Septimus and Nix heed the call.

They cannot help but be sidetracked, however, like wolves in a slaughterhouse. They ride a ridge of a small, squat hill and spy a large clearing in the valley below. Hidden amongst the trees, they set their horses awhile and watch.

A small cabin sits in the clearing—ranch-style porch littered with several chairs, a tall stone chimney seething out black smoke. A shed sits beyond the cabin, and the wood of both structures is blackish-brown, spotted with gray like an ashen pox. The bright figure of a man stands on the porch and directs a small girl in blue to the shed. She walks with her hands angled out at her sides, as though trying to steady herself.

Septimus and Nix watch her approach the shed and struggle to open the door. The man on the porch says something to her, his tone warm.

“Isn’t that a sight to see,” Nix says.

“We ain’t got time for this.” Septimus eyes the sun. “We got to meet the judge day after tomorrow.”

“That hasn’t stopped you before.”

“No. No it hasn’t.”

They stare at the clearing. The small girl opens the shed, disappears into it, and reemerges, clutching some long, metal tool in her arms.

Nix draws his pistol, a Dragoon revolver, and holds it near his face, which is fixed and pale and grinning like a gargoyle.

“Do you know how hot this barrel can get?” he says. “Just four or five shots and it glows white like a star.”

“Emhmm,” Septimus growls, turning his gaze to the dimming sky.

“I could extinguish its light in that little one,” Nix says and draws a bead on the girl, following her with calm precision. “Stick it all the way up in her and let it die. I could watch it die in her eyes. Then I could pull the trigger.”

“Not yet,” Septimus says. “Tomorrow.”

“What the *hell* for?” Nix almost screams.

“Night’s coming. They’ll expect danger in the dark. Better wait for the morning when their guard is less.”

Nix pouts. “But...what about our dear judge?”

“To hell with him.” He bares his sharp teeth again. “We eat when we eat. He knows that.”

Nix’s smile returns. It crawls along his face. “Strike at dawn. Without warning. Spill their blood under the sun, where safety’s supposed to be.” He holsters his Dragoon and giggles. “Much more satisfying.”

The two make their way slowly down the hill, silently, cutting through the trees and underbrush like two snakes. At the foot of the hill, still under cover of the woods, they camp by their horses and sleep without a fire. Moonlight makes it possible for their eyes to adjust to the dark if they stay open long enough, but Septimus and Nix have no such desire. They pass into sleep the moment they touch the earth, Septimus curls up in his long jacket like a bat, and Nix leans against a tree, the hint of a grin resting on his red lips.

Septimus dreams little. The only part he remembers is trees burning gray in the moonlight like quicksilver. A shadow moves amongst them, smooth and silent as a wolf,

drawing closer and closer to where Septimus sleeps and crouches at his feet, watching, its features indiscernible.

Septimus feels no fear. He feels and thinks hardly at all, and has not the sense to fear. The shadow leaves without a sound, back into the gray twilight trees, and then Septimus' mind fades into emptiness and he dreams no more.

Dawn's golden threads weave their way through the trees. Septimus and Nix mount their horses and descend upon the cabin.

A thin morning mist rests across the clearing like sackcloth. The cabin sits silent. Its chimney gives no smoke, and every window is black as coal. The grass is moist with dew, and songbirds have fled every branch. The early morning sky is cloudless, its western edges bruised with the purple remnants of night.

Septimus and Nix ride forward slowly, their horses soundless upon the wet, soft grass. They ride slouched, with rounded shoulders and lowered heads, feigning exhaustion. They stop before the cabin, and Septimus dismounts. He crosses the porch, wood creaking under his large frame.

At the door he knocks twice and waits.

Nix straightens up and rests his hand on his Dragoon. His grinning face pale and fixed upon the cabin, tongue hanging from parted lips.

Septimus looks left, then right, then draws his pistol. He turns the door handle and pushes the door open. Its hinges squeal as it turns, and Septimus' dark shape fills the empty frame. The cabin interior is blank with darkness.

Then a flash of fire breaks the cabin dark, and a thunderous bang shatters the morning.

Septimus lurches backwards into one of the posts of the porch, blood black and sticky pouring from his mouth and chest.

Nix flips backwards off of his horse and tumbles through the mist and to the ground, his wounded shoulder whipping a blood trail through the air.

Both their horses take off running, disappearing into the woods.

Septimus fights to stay standing, his feet pushing his large body against the post. He fires wildly at the open cabin door, baring his teeth, snarling and howling.

He's answered by another great burst and bang, and another crater bursts from his chest, spitting blood black as tar.

Here he slides down the post, sits, and is still.

Nix crawls along the ground, clutching his shoulder, blood pouring through his fingers. His hat is missing, and his eyes are wide and wild. His mouth pours blood where his tongue bit off.

Close to the earth, he's in the heart of the mist. He sees nothing. No cabin or trees, nor sky overhead. The mist is wrapping around him like a fist. Not even dawn light is getting through.

He stands slipping on the wet grass. His Dragoon is raised, but terror pulls the trigger early, and he blasts the ground not far ahead of him.

Then another thunderous bang resounds in the distance. A sharp whistle cuts through the mist, and Nix feels fire pierce his other shoulder. He spins like a dancer, slips on the grass, and falls to the ground.

Nix lies on his back, staring at the sky, the mist beginning to break as the sun rises further. Nix's breathing is sharp and shrill, a steaming hiss. He tries sitting up, a Herculean effort considering both of his arms are useless, dangling against his body.

He somehow gets to his knees, and here, kneeling and shrieking like a broken train whistle, he sees the man approaching. Through the parting mist, cloaked in Confederate gray jacket and cavalry hat, ashen as a ghost, as death himself. Closer still and the shape of a smoking Winchester repeater draped across his shoulders like a crossbeam. His eyes are deep gray and set like a flint.

Standing before Nix, the man bends over and recovers the Dragoon from the wet ground.

Nix gasps harder, chest heaving, air hissing.

"I can't...I can't believe it," he says, eyes widening in a slow recognition. "I thought...that I...would be ready...for you. I thought...I would be...ready for this."

The man points the Dragoon at Nix's chest.

Nix is no longer smiling.

"How," he whispers, like a prayer, "how can I not be ready?"

The Dragoon erupts with fire, punching into Nix's chest and bursting out of his back. A stain of gore slaps the grass behind him.

Nix's body dies from the top down. His head slumps and his chest lurches forward and his legs and knees lose life and he crumples to the ground in a heap.

The man stands over him, the Dragoon in his hand, smoke wisping from the barrel's hot edge. He is as silent as the morning, eyes cold as steel. Eyes so young, it breaks the heart.

Late the night prior, the man emptied the cabin of its occupants. Came crashing against their door with the butt of his Winchester. Had to sock the father down to the floor with the rifle barrel, and told them to flee to the woods tonight. Take blankets. Take food. Take no light. Let no one see you flee.

“The dark has teeth tonight,” he said, and they fled from him in silent terror.

Then he extinguished all lamps and fires in the cabin, sat in a chair facing the door, and waited.

A mind reeling in the dark, a body still and certain. He did in the darkness what he often did as a child—etching fantastic and horrid shapes upon it. Teeth, like he had said, and eyes empty as the black they moved through. Outside the night was windless, and he reached out to grasp at the darkness, searching for substance, a hand or body, some other presence but found none. He was alone.

Was he afraid? Did he long for home then? Was he shaking like a teakettle on the stove at home? Whistling and sweet? Hot bread baking? Summer breezes?

He steeled himself. Steel. Had to. Please be brave. Be brave in the lonely dark.

The mist is gone, the sun is high, and the family returns to the porch. The child clings to the mother, unable to face the blood pool on the porch. The mother and father are blanket-wrapped, cocooned, staring out with worn eyes across the clearing.

The man is there. He'd dragged Septimus' body, and Nix's body, and all that they had, and laid it together in a pile. He'd found their horses in the woods and removed the gunnysacks from their backs and then set them loose into the wild. Then he'd returned to the pile and

dumped out the contents—scalps smeared with gore, hair of every color. He'd thrown the empty sacks on as well. With some lantern oil and matches from the cabin, he'd lit the pile on fire.

There they see him standing, ghostly gray against a heaving stalk of flame. The fire moves inward, leaving burnt, ashy ground behind it. It does not spread, driven to the center of itself, heat redoubled on heat, scorching away every sinew and fragment in its bowels.

The man's hands are stretched towards it. He reaches over and down and fetches a burning coal from the flames, pulses bright orange like a molten heart. It sizzles in his sooty hand like a cake in a hot grease pan, and he treats it the same. Raising it to his mouth. Swallowing it whole.

And the family stands watching, hands to mouths, child's face buried in her mother's dress. And the ash and heat carry along the wind, flecks touching their cheeks and hair and necks.

And the man drops to his knees before the contracting fire, scoops handfuls of ash from its immolated edges, raises and then dumps them over himself, covering head and shoulders and knees in a layer of speckled gray and white and black.

And he weeps. He weeps like a man still alone in the dark. Like a child.

Lord have mercy. Lord have mercy on every damned one of us.

Entry 2

There are small creeks, frail blue cords, that cut through the woods of the Appalachian hills of Pennsylvania. Beneath the canopy of tree limbs, their waters are dark and cold looking, gray-blue like the sea. In clearings, however, the sunlight can pierce the water's substance, and you can see through to the brown, stony bottom, the sun reflecting its shape against the water, a wild and rippling white disc stamped to one spot. Always moving. Never moving.

I remember Starla showing this to Joseph when he was a boy. We walked together in the woods, up the hills, many times in his youth. She wanted him to develop a contemplative soul, which requires a patient, thirsty eye. He seemed born to drink, and his enthusiasm for her fantastical explanations only encouraged my harshness. "You tell that boy the woods are populated with nymphs and ogres and he'll never stand the harshness of real life."

I was an old, spiritless fool even back then. A corpse with legs. Eyes rotted out. I could not see my wife's wisdom, how she was trying to show our son deeper truths about the world, a reality that punctures through it like buckshot. A reality he lost when he fled from home, but one he seemed to recover again before the end.

Dearest Starla, you saved our son from beyond the grave.

I'm quite sure he carried his mother with him, even into the darkness he cast himself into. I'm sure it was an anchor to his soul. I'm sure he still walked in woods, finding quiet moments. Stillness that saved his life.

I can see it now: he finds another such stream in the woods. Somewhere in the Appalachian hills. He wears a worn Confederate cavalry hat and jacket, the kind I received him in at the end.

The jacket's unbuttoned. His boots are tall, and brown like the creek bed. His belt is covered with buckled pouches and bullets and a sheathed knife. The buckles and bullets shimmer in the sunlight like sparks. His gray clothing fades near to white.

A thin beard covers his face. His eyes are gray as granite, ancient and full of meaning.

He lays his rifle down on the creek bank and steps into the water, taking careful steps to its center. He stares down at the sun's rippling reflection. He stares and smiles and crouches down to the water. He dips both hands in and scrubs them fiercely, fingers in between fingers, into palms, like kneading a tight ball of clay.

He lifts his dripping hands out and wipes them on his pants. He stares into his palms. Still stained. Soot creased into every palm line.

He looks up. A cinnamon-colored black bear is staring at him curiously. Its nose snuffles the air.

He neither reaches for his rifle nor changes his stance. He just sits like a great stone in the midst of that ever-moving water, eyes unafraid. Then he shows a palm to the bear, and it smells and licks the palm, its rough tongue scraping across it like sandpaper.

He looks at his hand. Red but still stained. He sighs and tips his hat to the bear.

"Thank ye for trying," he says, and the bear moves on.

Kentucky, Appalachian Plateau, May

The house at the foot of the hill belongs to the Ambrose family. Scots-Irish that fled the British Isles over a century prior, finding isolation in Appalachia. A merchant family. Skilled with money and mining and little else.

It sits in a hollow carved into the hill. Cut out by generations of Ambrosian men and women. Three stories of oak and ancient stone, stacked like a cake and shoved into the base of a lone foothill, the peak of a vast stretch of foothills that roll into the green and blue of the mountains.

A crypt is the soul of this house. Dug into the hill with each passing generation. Holes upon holes stacked into the walls of long tunnels that snake away from the house like tentacles. The whole hill base is riddled with dugouts and sockets, tombs and ossuaries, bodies stacked sometimes two or three in a hole.

The place is cursed with the dead. It mattered not what any Ambrose did. Younger generations squandered their inheritances in New York or Memphis, and came home in shambles to find their parents dead. Bodies haphazard across the floor, stretched and frozen in writhing, both perished within minutes of each other from illness. Or one buried in the crypt, the other dead in a chair with their head blown off and a scattergun on the floor, the tip of the barrel black-stained with gore.

So the children inherit the house and the dead.

Now the hill sets itself against the house, as if to swallow it whole. Its dirt slides over the roof further and further. Its vegetation, animated by some darkness, clambers across the sideboarding, a silent, slow, and sideways set of green flames.

Cornell Ambrose is the last man of Ambrose house. His only child—his son Gabriel—is an imbecile. His wife Julian is on in years, having ceased in the ways of women.

He and Julian are working outside, their son's contorted body sitting nearby in a rocking chair on the porch. A thin boy with pale hair and complexion, his mind damaged in ways they've yet to understand. Face crooked, mouth hung open as if the air itself horrifies him. He beats his chest with curled hands, useless as flippers. He gurgles and stares and says nothing.

Julian pulls endless weeds out of a dead garden. She clears it every day, unquestioning the constant resurgence of dandelions and clover. She is beautiful in an ancient, sage-like way. The creases of her face are symmetrical, almost like ornamentation. Her eyes are starry silver. She grips each weed with bony fingers, bird talons catching prey. Pulling them up, she catches clumps of dirt falling from dangling roots. She loves the smell of earth, wet and deep. The feel, granular in her palm. She smiles, skin pulling taut against her face.

Cornell, grimaced and gangly, is taking an ax to a large stump clutching deep into the mud. With each whack, the shock vibrates through the ax head, up the shaft, and into his veined and calloused hands, where arthritis burns in response. Point to counterpoint. Harmony and melody. He never mentions the pain. He just hits the stump harder.

"Nell," Julian says, tasting earth with her tongue tip.

"Talk to me, Jule."

"Do you remember when Gabe was born?"

Cornell rips the ax out of the stump. "I remember it fondly as hell itself sometimes."

"There was so little pain. But so much blood."

"Thought you shat out one of your own organs, Jule." Cornell grimaces deeper and sinks the ax into the stump, taking a rest. "Thought I was about to lose you both."

“I remember I wanted to hold him before he was cleaned off.” Julain wraps her arms around her. “He left his mark on me, Nell. Still got the stain to prove it.”

“I ain’t worth your fond memories, Jule.” Cornell leans against the ax shaft, arthritis still singing. Hard eyes rimming with tears. “I ain’t worth the love you gave me.”

Dinner at the dining table. Gabriel sits next to Julian, and she feeds him. He gurgles, chews the air, spits food, drools, but says nothing. Julian wipes his mouth and pats his leg.

“Nell, listen to him,” she says.

Cornell sits nearby in one of the two tall chairs facing the fireplace. He watches the fire keenly, eyes squinted. “Dammit, Jule. Can’t you see I’m trying to read?”

“You got signs aplenty right here.”

“Let me be.”

“Signs and wonders.”

She rises and comes to him, placing a hand—thin and bony as a spider—on his shoulder.

“You remember our first time?” she says.

“I recall you knew not how to keep silent even then.”

“Nell.” She grips his shoulder tighter, and he stills. “Do you remember what I said?”

He says nothing, listening. She kneels down near him. “I remember you pressed deeply into me. I remember I could tell you anything.”

Cornell grumbles to himself, at himself. “That was so long ago, Jule. So long, I’ve forgotten how to love you.”

He cannot look up at her. Instead he strains his eyes towards the fire. Reading the flames. Looking for signs. Faces and eyes. Mouths open in pain.

Julian strokes his arm and smiles, skin taut. Not a drop of malice left in her. Not a fear in the world. Ancient but beautiful.

A knocking at the door. Rapid but steady, like a machine piston.

“Dammit,” Cornell says. “I ain’t got time for strange people.”

They rise together, Julian peeling him away from the fire and sending him to the door.

But before he reaches the door, he walks to the gun cabinet and fetches the black-tipped scattergun. Cracks it open and presses his calloused fingers against the loaded shells.

“Let them in, Nell.” Julian sighs. “Don’t be that way.”

Cornell grumbles again and levels the gun at the door. “Who’s there?”

“A traveler,” comes a deep voice. “Weary with the wilderness.”

“This ain’t an inn.”

“I have money.”

“Bullshit, you do.”

“There’s only one way to know, sir.”

Cornell snuffs once through his nose. He looks back at Gabriel, silent and slobbered. He looks to Julian.

“Let them in, Nell.”

He opens the door and steps back, but keeps the gun leveled.

A man stands in the doorway, taller than Cornell, bulky, with broad, terrible shoulders. Mustache thick and wiry like tumbleweeds, black as coal. He wears a flat-rimmed hat and a long black coat buttoned almost to the top. Like a priest, but with no collar, and a gun belt with a large, strange gun held in a leather holster as long as a short scabbard.

The man's hands are behind his back, and he stands straight as a soldier, for soldier he is, or had been. His eyes are dark and stern, his mouth hidden behind the bushel of mustache.

Cornell regards the man up and down. "You some kind of a circuit-rider?"

"No, sir." The man's mustache ruffles when he speaks, like a bush full of birds. "I took these vestments off a Presbyterian reverend. Native American man. Headed a small church further south and east from here. He was incapable of begrudging my taking them."

"So you ain't a reverend?"

The man shakes his head. "I am a judge."

Cornell squints. "A judge?"

"Absolutely."

"Bullshit."

"Agitation cannot send me away, sir." He lowers his gaze. "Quite the contrary, in fact."

"Damn you to hell. This is my house, ain't it?"

"You should have manners when addressing a guest."

"You ain't no guest." He gestures with the gun. "Git, or I'll bore another shitter in you."

Fast as a coiled serpent, the judge swings one of his hands out from behind his back, chucking a small purse. Cornell's whole body flinches as he fumbles to catch it, losing his grip on the gun in the process. The judge plucks the weapon out of the air just as Cornell secures the purse.

They stare at each other, Cornell dumbfounded, the judge calm and steady.

"There's my money," the judge says. "And here's your gun."

Cornell clutches the purse, caressing it in his fingers. It's heavy for its size, and he can feel the circular shape of large coins.

He eyes the judge, who holds his gun by the barrel as if it were a scepter.

“Maybe,” Julian says, walking up behind Cornell, “we don’t want your money.”

“His manners say otherwise.”

Cornell glares. “The hell you mean?”

“You are uncivilized,” the judge says, then regards the barrel-tip of the scattergun. “Odd color.”

“What if it is?” Cornell says. He clutches the purse tighter, but Julian places a hand on his shoulder. He grumbles and tosses the purse back at the judge, who catches it with his free hand.

“Keep your damn money,” Cornell says, then steps aside.

“We just sat down for dinner,” Julian says, stepping aside the other way, gesturing to the table.

The judge sets his dark eyes on the table, eyeing Gabriel. The imbecilic man, mind of a child, mute as a stone, stirs under the gaze of this stranger from the night.

The judge’s mustache twitches without words. Then: “As you wish.”

He hands the gun back to Cornell as he passes through the door.

Cornell and Julian scrounge together what extra food they have, unaccustomed to visitors. Some misshapen potatoes and carrots in a cupboard. A large loaf of bread. A molding cheese wheel, which Cornell shaves with a knife.

Julian slices some bread and cheese and a carrot. Placing it all on a chipped pewter platter, she sets it before the judge, who had taken a seat at the head of the dining table. He removes his hat and places it beside the plate. His head is bald and white as an eggshell, as if the sun had never once touched or seen it. He regards the food with those stern, dark eyes.

The judge removes a small leather case from his inside coat pocket, unlatches it, and removes an ivory-handled multi-utensil. He inspects it, and then unfolds the knife and cuts the cheese and bread into tiny cubes and the carrots into thin orange discs. He refolds the knife and unfolds the fork and eats each piece one at a time.

Cornell, Julian, and Gabriel all sit near him, plates almost empty, except for Gabriel's. His plate and hands and face are smeared with food, and his head is cocked towards the judge, glazed eyes staring. Julian wipes his mouth.

“Well, friend,” she says. “You have any stories?”

“Stories?” the judge says.

“Bout being a judge and all.” Julian finishes wiping Gabriel's hands and smiles. “We're a house full of stories.”

“Perhaps you should tell one to me.” He chews a forkful of cheese cubes and carrot discs. “While I'm eating.”

She sits back and looks at Cornell. “You recall what I told you, Nell? During our first time?”

Cornell grumbles and nods, eyes looking down the table to the lit fireplace on the far wall.

Julian looks to the judge. “I told him how my grandfather sat me down when I was a girl and told me about his home back in France. A small town with a giant cathedral resting atop a hill. That cathedral was built right on top of old Roman ruins, and how there is a well down in the foundations where the Romans used to throw Christians.”

“I recall.” Cornell squirms in his seat. “I recall not liking that idea at all. Falling into that darkness, hitting the unseen bottom in an unseen moment, drowning in the water. Or terribly

injuring yourself and being left to die, or waiting until another body fell, and another and another until your death was a slow suffocation under the weight of others.”

“It’s still there,” she says. “That site is holy now.”

“I don’t see how a place of death can be holy,” Cornell says, looking into the fire, imagines it spreading across the walls, slow and smooth like spilt water, like a rolling tide. Fire washing the world away.

“Once,” the judge says, folding away his multi-utensil, “I shackled a murderer to the corpse of his own victim.”

Gabriel shudders, lips puckering like a fish.

“You did what?” Cornell says.

The judge fetches a long-necked pipe from his coat and fills it with tobacco. He makes no sign that he even heard his own words. He does not light a match, but simply sucks and puffs the pipe, until smoke comes creeping out the top, and the dried tobacco leaves burst into a small flicker of flame that settles into a soft glow in the pipe bowl.

“It seemed fitting. He would drag the corpse in the sight of all the prisoners, and as it rotted and stank he would become even more abhorrent to them. Then he would be alone with his corpse, his victim, his choice and consequence. With it till it dissolved into dust, and only the bones remained, clattering behind him all his days.”

“What possessed you to do that?” Julian says.

“Absolutely nothing.” He crosses one leg over the other. “There is nothing there to possess or be possessed. I simply wanted to do it. Because I could do it. My will is my only possession.”

Cornell grumbles and rises from his chair. Arthritis simmers in his ankles. “Damn your madness,” he mumbles and walks to the fire.

“Madness is a matter of perspective,” the judge says after him, his hands in his lap and his eyes remaining stern. “Nothing more.”

Cornell turns and spits into the fire. “I ain’t so sure,” he says, standing at the fireplace, staring down, hands in his pockets. “I ain’t so sure you’re a judge at all.”

“Nell,” Julian says. “It’s all right.”

“He’s full of shit,” Cornell says, arthritis burning like hot iron coiled in his fingers.

Julian stands up and joins her husband. They stand shoulder to shoulder next to the fire, bony hands on his shoulders. They say nothing, but stare together into the flames. Flames low and dying, until a slew of sparks spit up like a swarm of copper insects, and Julian and Cornell’s faces are tangerine with the light.

They see faces in the flames. Faces of Ambrosian men and women, long lost. Weeping and angry, pointing accusatorily at each other. Grinding their teeth into each other’s skulls. Ripping out eyes, tearing off ears, biting off tongues. But no noise. Just cracks and pops and hisses of a low fire, dying.

Cornell’s grimace softens. Julian clasps his hand. She can feel the arthritis pulse in his joints like a dozen tiny hearts.

“I seen too much evil,” Cornell says, “to not know it when I see it.” He gazes aimlessly at the walls. “This place drips with so much sorrow. I can still hear every death committed here. It festers like the gangrene.”

“Tell me what you see, Nell,” Julian says, placing her head on his shoulder. “What do you see in him.”

“Emptiness,” Cornell says. “Darker than black. A bottomless hole walking about on two legs. An open mouth and endless gullet. Hunger, Jule. That’s what I see. Deep, awful hunger.”

“Then he’s not leaving, is he?” Julian says. “Not without feeding.”

“There’s nothing left to do, I suppose.” Cornell turns and kisses her creased forehead.

“We’ll see what happens.”

“Nothing good,” she says.

“Can’t be helped now.”

At the table, the judge sucks and puffs out smoke like a steam engine, eyes glistening in the smoke, wet obsidian orbs. He watches Cornell and Julian stand near the fire, murmuring to one another.

Gabriel sits near him, glazed eyes staring still. The judge eyes him. He puffs one last bit of smoke out the pipe, knocks the burnt flecks out of the bowl and onto the table, and returns it to his jacket.

“You have a name?” the judge says. “Have you words to make a name?”

Gabriel chews the air, eyes widening.

The judge plants his elbows on the table. “You’re a listener. A fine quality. I listen well, too. You have to as a judge. You have to hear what others can’t hear. The smallest whispers. The slightest gestures. You have to be able to tear a person apart with just a look.”

He points down the table to Cornell and Julian, still at the fire. “I hear what they’re saying. I hear everyone in this house. The shrieks and moans. The loud violence. I heard it clear across the wilderness, sounding out like a bell. It drew me in.”

Gabriel shudders again.

The judge leans back and rubs his mustache. “I feast on pain, you know. Indulging them like wines. The deeper the sorrow, the greater the meal. And I have felt this house, this meal, for years. Only now do I come here. A last meal, perhaps?” A grimace washes over his face, but then he chuckles. “I am not easily given to fear, and will not start now.”

He glances at Gabriel, who’s shivering in his seat.

“But I can’t hear you,” the judge says. “In all this house, your silence speaks loudest of all. And that’s very, very interesting to me.” He cocks his head. “What are you?”

Gabriel shakes, making the chair jump. Cornell and Julian glance back.

The judge raises an eyebrow and leans in. “What’s this? Are you trying to speak? Or are you silent as God himself? You are God in this house, aren’t you? A whole universe of pain, surrounded by a vast wilderness of violence, and in the center, the silence. Void. Nothingness at the heart of things.” And then he laughed, deep like a pit. “I like you, friend. You give me great assurance.”

Gabriel’s lips part, and his body jerks, and something gurgles up from his gut, releasing in a belch of air and words. Low words, a hoarse whisper, but the judge who hears everything hears it ringing in his ears.

...yours is the way to the cities of pain...yours is the way to the cities of death...you will not live out this year...you shall be visited...your darkness brought upon your back...a wolf at your heels...crouching at your door...you will not live out this year...

It’s too low for Cornell and Julian to hear, but they see the lips moving, and they watch the judge’s face fall expressionless.

“Oh, Gabe,” Julian says, hand to mouth. “What did you say?”

The judge rises. Calm and polite, resetting his chair at the table.

Then he reaches down and draws out his weapon from the leather scabbard. A 10-gauge shotgun, barrel and butt sawed-off, looking like an enormous single-shot, break-action pistol. He levels it at Gabriel's chest and fires.

The violent concussion rattles the windows and chairs. Gabriel folds into himself and his chair, shattering into a shower of bloody bits and shards of wood. Shot clear in half at the sternum. His head, shoulders, and arms topple to the ground. His belly and legs stay seated in a chair with no back.

The judge breaks open the 10-gauge, releasing a gasp of smoke and the used shell. As he reloads, a stunned Cornell snaps to and springs for the scattergun at the edge of the table.

But the judge is ready. He aims and fire. Cornell's heart evaporates, and the gore that flies out of him extinguishes the fire. He collapses before the table. In a moment, his arthritis is gone.

The judge breaks open the 10-gauge again, reloads it, and then eyes Julian. She stands by the now dead fireplace. She is not afraid, but her face is crunched up with sadness, tears tracing the creases of her face.

She walks over to Cornell's body, grabs him under the armpits, and drags him, staggering over to Gabriel's sitting lower half. She sets down Cornell, pushes over Gabriel's belly and legs, grabs one of Cornell's arms by the wrist and one of Gabriel's feet by the ankle, and drags them away, slow but sure, tears dripping down her dress.

"This house has eaten us all," she says, heaving with her struggle, but no less determined. "You have done nothing that was unexpected. We are hell house. We always knew something like you was coming. But now," she gazes down to Gabriel's head and arms, "we know someone else is too."

She looks back to the judge, and the sudden hope, clear as light in her starry eyes, gives the judge pause as though stupefied, unsure what to do for the first time ever.

Then she carries on with her burden, passing through many rooms, moving both corpses a few feet at a time, stopping here and there to catch her breath. She unlatches doors with her elbow and pushes them with her feet, making her way to the back of the house where the great door stands, wood ensconced with ironwork. Unlocked, she elbows the latch and presses her foot against it, and the door swings in to darkness, the dull light of the house falling rectangular on an earthen floor.

The crypt sits in the dark, its smell delivering its presence. Dry and dusty, stale. A waxy tinge. Holes in the dark, full of bodies. Tunnels stretching out deeper and darker still. There is no wind, only the static and lifeless air.

Here she lays her burdens down, cradling Cornell in her arms, kissing his head, sitting next to half of her son.

“It’ll be all right, Nell,” she says, rocking his corpse, pressing his wound against her dress until she can feel the wetness of blood against her skin. “It’ll be alright.”

In the dining room, the judge stands by the table, listening, watching the upper torso of Gabriel lying across the floor, blank eyes staring out at the black spray of his own gore.

The boy speaks still. The mouth moves, and the judge is listening.

...this house will consume you...it is the world...

The 10-gauge is scabbarded, and the judge stands, listening, breathing.

...a wolf in the night...gray as a ghost...he finds you at the end of the world...

Breathing grows deeper, thicker, like some great bellows of a furnace. The judge’s chest expands and contracts, and he shivers as though holding something in.

...you will see light without fire...night with no moon...faces without fear of your darkness...you will feel fear...

The judge's eyes are red hot, his breathing cacophonous like miller stones grinding together. His jaw unhinges, his lipless mouth splitting his face open, rows of small fangs, set in the blackness of his mouth like lines of arrowheads.

...you will feel fear...

In the center of that open maw, a rising glow, illuminating the curves of his gullet. Pulsing. Roaring.

...when you are no longer feared...

Fire erupts from his mouth like a cannon, spewing like vomit. It rushes through every room, charging like a wave after a great weight has dropped into water. It finds the crypt, and before Julian can console Cornell's corpse again, she and it are consumed. Gone in a flash. Bones and flesh and all. The tunnels are swept with roaring flame, every socket pillaged and burned.

The whole house is gripped with flames, lighting up the moonwashed foothills, and in a matter of minutes it folds in on itself like it was made of wet paper. A great dome of fire and smoke pushes up into the night, and so passes the house of Ambrose, unquiet to the end.

From its smoldering wreck, the collapsed roof is itself is shoved aside, and in a swarm of sparks and shards of flame, the judge emerges unharmed. Face reset. He walks right out of the fire and turns to watch it burn.

In the sky, the moon is full now, and though the heat of the house is great, a chill whips across his neck, and he can feel every bead of sweat on his face.

Entry 3

I know the judge only by my son's journal, and a few letters. Mallard Fredrick was his name. A judge out of Georgia, he formed an infamous band of bushwhackers in the war. Stayed together afterwards. He was a violent man, but diabolic in charisma. I doubt my son admired him. He probably knew I'd abhor such a man—dishonorable, savage, wrapped in a skein of civility.

Judge Mal, they called him. His bushwhackers. My son and his friends. They thought it was humorous. For a while.

I remember one letter my son sent me, the first (not the last, thank God) he sent me after the war. I know he wanted to hurt me with it over his mother, and why not? I told him her death was his fault. That running off and joining the South killed her heart. It was a damned fool thing to say, but we all speak cruelty when it comes from a place of pain. Like father, like son:

“At Shiloh, bodies popped with pink wounds like melons being shot. It helped make things feel less real. More make believe.

You taught me a keen eye, but I don't think that helps in battle. You can only take in so much before your skull feels fit for bursting. Did you not think I would need to know that? Did you think I would go by unscathed?

I am wounded out here, in my heart. There's a hole there blood won't even fill. Don't think that means I'll give you an inch. You and I have nothing to give each other now but further blows. If I'm a wounded animal, so be. It explains my lashing out. I have to hurt something. It'll make me feel better.

Mal understands this. He smells blood in the soul like a grizzly smells it in the air. He narrowed in on me not long after Shiloh. The damn Indians ran out on us. Everybody ran out on us. He narrowed in, not out. He found me in my pain. Dragged me out of a ditch. I was embarrassed by my cowardice, but he smelled the wound on me. He said I could find strength in that hole.

That's nothing like mom told me, but what does that matter? Where are the fairylands now? Where is Virgil walking in the woods? Arthur returning from Avalon? Jesus walking on waters full of blood and eyes, empty eyes staring up at the sun? Did the things she told me mean anything real?

Pain is real. I can taste it at the back of my throat, but worse still is the thought that she was wrong and you were right. Nausea rounds my stomach to think of it, to think of you, sitting in your study, confident and hard like a stone mountain, just as barren and cold—”

It ends without signature, a long scribble where the pen must have swiped away in fury. I have spent years poring over it. I was dumbstruck at first, and then I knew why. He sounded so much like my son, and yet not like my son. As though something took possession of his voice and hand, but a father can tell. You are not my son.

Charleston, Tennessee, June

“You play cards, rev?” Sightless says, leaning his elbows and ham-sized forearms against the counter.

Reverend Hall gazes at sacks of corn meal that sit squat and bloated on a shelf. He only comes into the store for corn meal. Once he came for licorice sticks, buying the whole jar and munching on one while he paid, but that was a while ago.

“In my younger days,” Hall says, poking a meal sack.

“Aw, you ain’t that old, rev. You sound like you’re in your thirties.”

“Thirty-six,” Hall says. “My wilder days, then.”

Sightless snorts and adjusts his dark-lensed welders goggles. Hall fetches one sack off the shelf, placing it on the counter.

“What’s funny?” Hall asks.

Sightless runs a finger through the inside of his collar. “I don’t mean no offense.”

“It’s all right. You can say whatever you want.”

“You always sound like a tender young man. I can’t fathom you having wilder days at all.”

Hall chuckles and looks down at his hands. Thin and long with angular knuckles. Piano hands. His whole body was like that. Thin and long and angular. A piano body.

“I don’t mean no offense,” Sightless repeats, large hands rising.

“None taken. I know I don’t look much like a rascalion.”

“A what?”

“A ragamuffin, then.”

Sightless shakes his head. “I still don’t register ya.”

“That’s all right. I’m just agreeing with you.”

“Ah,” Sightless says. “Much obliged.”

The bell rings on the front door and a man walks in. A short-brimmed boxy hat cocked to the right. Cotton suit that had been a much darker brown before miles of trail dust lightened it. Collar undone, sweat on his neck and chest. Unshaven. Standing in the doorway, hands in his pockets, looking forward, tapping the tip of his boot on the hardwood floor.

“Heyo, stranger,” Sightless says. “I don’t recognize the sound of those boots.”

The man pulls a red handkerchief out of his inside jacket pocket to wipe his neck and face, and as the jacket moves out like a curtain, Hall notes the shiny line of throwing knives hitched to the man’s belt.

“Fine assortment,” Hall says. “Collector.”

“I collect knives, yes.” The man scans the store. “You carry any?”

Sightless furrows his brow to think, and in his concentration he smells the sharp scent of chili powder.

“You Mexican?” Sightless says.

“Half.” The man hooks his thumbs into his belt. “My father rode with Santa Anna.”

“And your mother?”

“Not a story I tell to just anyone, senor.”

Hall steps forward. “May I buy you some candy, sir?”

The man scans Hall up and down like he stepped straight out of the sky. “The hell for?”

Hall says nothing. He walks ten steps over to the candy section where large glass mason jars line along a shelf. Each contains candy of all types and colors. Peppermint sticks with interlaced red and white. Licorice sticks black and shiny like obsidian. White gobstoppers with

rainbow stains etched across their hides like spilled paint. Jellybeans with their infinite colors looking like a mosaic in a jar. Sticks of gum and blocks of fudge wrapped in wax paper. Some chocolate bars, of which Hall took special notice.

“Are these milk chocolate?” he says.

Sightless drums the counter, smiling. “Fresh received. Afraid they’re more than a penny, though.”

“That’s fine. We’ll each take one.”

Hall fishes two out of the jar. The man gazes nonplussed, thumbs still belt hooked, head cocked like a cat’s.

“What is it?” Hall says, a chocolate bar in each hand.

“The last reverend who served here was a Cherokee half-breed, yes?” the man says.

“Died a couple months ago.”

Sightless places both hands flat on the counter, as though attempting to hold it down, and leans forward. “He was a good man.”

“Killed by a large fellow, I hear. Took his scalp,” the man says. His cocked hat shades half his face, and his unshaded eye stares at Sightless like a bore into wood. “Coat and everything, yes? Left him ass naked in the sanctuary, in a pool of blood and piss.”

Sightless grits his teeth. “You just outstayed your damn welcome, boy.”

The man sighs, bored. “You know where I can find this large, reverend killing man?”

“Why?” Sightless says. “You with him or something?”

Silence. Sightless grimaces and raises his hands to remove his goggles, but Hall drops the chocolate bars onto the counter in front of him. They clack like blocks of wood.

“Grace, my old friend.” Hall smiles to Sightless, then to the man: “Grace covers a multitude.”

“That a fact?” the man says.

“Absolutely.” Hall fetches a dollar bill and places it on the counter. “Though I try not to be too superstitious about it. Grace is more about what we do, not what’s done to us, if you catch my meaning.”

Sightless lowers his hands, huffing. “Grace save you from cards, rev?”

“I don’t need saving from that.” He lays another dollar on the counter. Then: “You have any for sale, by chance?”

Sightless reaches a hand under the counter and pulls out a brand new deck of Bicycle cards. Its box is red and smells like sawdust.

“Got a slew of these,” Sightless says. He places them on the counter and uses his index and middle fingers to slide it towards Hall. “Grace have a purpose for them?”

“I may have a purpose,” Hall says, smiling and collecting his chocolate and cards. He turns towards the man. “Did you want to look for knives?”

“The hell you buying me chocolate for, padre?”

“We need to talk.” He walks past him to the door. “I just know we need to talk.”

The man’s name is Patricio, which was all Hall could get out of him by the time they reached the river. The two stand on the bank, watching the ferryboat in the distance cross back and forth from Charleston to Calhoun.

“The church is a few miles down on the right,” Hall says, pointing. “But we don’t have to go there if you don’t care to.”

Patricio nods and sucks on a cigarette, smoke spitting through his teeth. He's finished his chocolate bar and tossed the wrapper away.

"That's the Hiwasee River," Hall says and points to the brown water. Beyond it sits the ghostly blue imprint of the mountains.

"Muskogee," Patricio says. "Means copperheads."

"You know this place well?"

"I grew up around here."

Hall stands still. "Really."

Patricio takes a few steps and then turns back to look at him, eyes squinted and teeth clenched around the cigarette. "Been away for awhile."

"Where you been?"

"That's not a story I tell to just anyone."

"Well, who would you tell it to?"

The cigarette twirls in Patricio's mouth. Besides that, stillness.

Hall smiles and then sighs like he drank cold water. "I must apologize for what happened back there."

"Where?"

"At the store."

"You don't need to apologize for another man's shit, padre."

"True, but it wasn't very Christian."

"That's alright, padre." Patricio drops the cigarette and smother sit with his heel. "I don't give much reckoning to Christ anyway."

"Really."

“I’m cursed.” He lets the word linger and rolls another cigarette, taking out paper and tobacco from a leather pouch and folding it all together with dirty fingers. He lights it and puffs once. “Cursed as hell.”

“Is that a story you can tell?”

Patricio breathes in the tobacco, warming his lungs, like stirring the fire in a furnace.

“I’m sorry to pry,” Hall says.

“You don’t need to apologize for another man’s shit, remember?”

“I admire your candor.”

“You’re welcome for it, padre.” He spits tobacco flecks out. “You seem awfully calm about things.”

“I’m paid to be a rock. The shelter of a rock in a weary land.”

“Poetic.” Patricio scans Hall up and down again. He counted him for nothing back in the store, but now Patricio senses an indefatigable will at work.

Hall steps closer to him. “Every past has a certain stigma about it.”

“I’m not talking stigma, padre. I’m talking fact.” Patricio turns, hands in his pockets, face serious as an undertaker.

“How do you mean?” Hall says.

“I *mean* that I’m sick. Plagued. Hell, I’m haunted. I don’t sleep much.”

“You’ve done things.”

“I *am* things.” Patricio gestures to the air, cigarette in hand. “It’s not the one thing, padre. It’s the whole thing.”

Hall’s face goes blank as a mannequin. The transformation is so total that Patricio is actually startled, a sensation he has not felt for years. He scrapes the dirt with his boot heel.

“Folks told me I have no mother. They said I was born straight out of the earth.” He bends down and draws in the dirt with his finger. Hall leans over to watch, but the symbols are gibberish, and Patricio keeps erasing them and starting over. “Some brujo summoned me out of the muck and slime down in the valley.” He points to the west without looking. “Out of a creek bed. Snake skins and arrowheads. Menstrual blood. I clawed out of the concoction mud-drenched and screaming. He held me up to the moon and destined me for great and terrible things.”

“Things?”

“Vengeance. That valley’s an evil place.” He resumes writing nonsense. “They told me evil would follow me until vengeance was done.”

“Sounds made up to me, Patricio.” Hall smiles.

“I’ve come back here to settle up.” He stops writing. His arms and back lock up. “Heading out to the valley tonight. I’m tired. I tried vengeance for years now. Fought in the war. Killed every white man I could on both sides. Played for and against both sides. Fell in with a grand lot that just kept on killing. But you burn out on that, padre. It just burns a man out.”

“Forgive me. I don’t quite follow.”

“I’m struggling for words, padre.” Patricio tosses his cigarette down the road and turns back to Hall. “I heard a rumor, years ago, that my actual mother’s grave was up in Calhoun. Where I just come from.”

“You said you didn’t have a mother.”

“So I was told, but I was unbelieving, just like you. So I left my lot of killers and went searching for it, and I thought I found it. Back lot of a cemetery, grown over. A mound of earth with no marker. I spent all night digging into it with my hands, but when I reached the end of it, there was nothing there. No coffin. No body or remains. Someone dug and filled an empty hole.

“The next day I said, to hell with it, and drank enough whiskey at a saloon to keel a horse. Passed right out into bed, and had terrible dreams. As always.

“I dreamed I was in the graveyard sick in the stomach. Everything felt twisted inside.” He places his hands on his abdomen. “Like someone stuck a hot pipe in there and stirred about until all my innards were knotted up around it. I could feel shit come burning out of me, and I was staggering about in the moonlight, and I kept hearing hissing everywhere. Like they were coming right out of the sky or soil. Then I see that open grave and hear the hissing coming out of it, all together, sounding just like that river.”

“And then what happened?”

“I heard a horrible howl all around me, and felt great hands coming for me, and I ran and dove into the dark of that hole without thinking. Then I woke up on my back, wet from head to toe and shivering in the early morning air. I was in the hole, padre. I’d been taken right to it.”

“That’s...that’s very...” Hall bites his lip, unable to find an appropriate word.

“I’ll be headed to the valley, padre.” He stands. “Be in town for the day, but the valley is calling me home. I’m going to settle up with it.”

“I could pray for you.”

“Won’t do no good. There’s no God out there. That’s for sure.”

“All the same—”

“Don’t you prayer for me, padre.” Patricio glares at Hall, his eyes squinted white slits.

“Don’t you dare pull that prayer shit on me. I’ve had enough words said over me.”

Hall nods. The chocolate tastes bitter in his mouth. He walks on, leaving Patricio behind.

“Hey, padre.”

Hall stops and looks back. Patricio is facing the river, thumbs hooked in his belt, jacket back, row of knives gleaming like silver fangs.

He says: "You really think God or Christ or whatever can forgive us all our sins?"

Hall swallows. Warm wind rustles the leaves in the trees, and he has a sudden thought of being tempted in a wilderness.

"I'm supposed to believe that," he says, after a moment.

"But do you?"

"Yes."

Patricio looks down the way they came, like he was expecting someone else to come walking up behind them, but nothing came save dirt kicked up by wind.

"Yeah," he says. "That's why I don't believe in that shit, padre."

He tips his hat and walks back to town.

Someone is sitting on the porch of the church.

Hall is not unaccustomed to visitors, but this last stretch down the river burdens him. His steps drag the dirt, head hung low, and his journey took twice as long. Upon sighting the steeple past the trees, he sighs in relief. Upon sighting a person sitting on the porch, he sighs in disgust. But the closer he comes, and the more the figure comes into view, its presence slows him down further, and he's brought to a total standstill a stone's throw from the porch.

The church porch has two rocking chairs to the side of the main doors, a quiet place where Hall can offer counsel, or sit and think alone.

Now, our man occupies a chair. Late thirties. Strong build. Confederate gray, including a gray cavalry hat resting on his knee. A Winchester repeater leaned against the wall behind him,

the Dragoon sticking out of his belt. Unshaven, his hair shaggy and brown but graying. His eyes are ancient and hard like winter itself.

He is not rocking, and he eyes Hall. “Afternoon.”

“Afternoon,” Hall says curtly, then tries to settle into a pastoral performance. He smiles and steps onto the porch and sits in the other chair. “You have something on your mind, I suppose?” Hall clasps his hands together in his lap.

Our man rocks back a bit, pushing up on his toes. “What’s your name, reverend?”

“Marshall Hall. Been the reverend here for a few months now. They called me down from—”

“You replaced the Cherokee?”

“Why...yes, I did.” Hall leans forward. “You’re the second person to bring that up to me today. Some half-Mexican fellow. Seemed a bit troubled, though.”

Our man looks down, jaw stirring.

“Do you know him?” Hall says.

“I do.”

“He’s in town if you need him.”

“I don’t need him. That’s the God’s truth.”

“You a man of faith?”

“Hard to say. I have crossed a wilderness. If that’s any comfort to ye.”

Hall’s smile flattens, his congeniality strained. Too vain to admit defeat, he resists an impulse to excuse himself. Instead, he pulls out the deck of cards, removes them from their box, and shuffles them. The quick buzzing sound of the cards coming together catches our man’s attention.

Hall says: “May I ask your name now, friend?”

“My father called me Johnny,” he says, bitterly. “Last I saw him.”

“Oh. Like Johnny Reb?”

Nothing. Hall squirms in his seat.

“I see,” he says, shuffling the cards from one hand to the next. “Well it’s a good name.”

“You play cards reverend?”

Hall laughs. “Again, you are the second person to ask me. Do you like being the second man?”

“I’m unclear if such things are possible these days.”

Hall nods, still uncomprehending. He grips the deck in between his hands and stares down at it.

“I never got a chance to play professionally,” he says. “My father raised me, and he ran a casino out of Philadelphia. I met all kinds of gamblers, some savory and some not. They taught me a thing or two about cards.” He drops the cards in chunks into his open palm. “I suppose I was groomed to go far in that industry, but it was not to be. My father—he was a good man—but he kept ill company for sure. One of them, an Irishman out of New York, came to collect a debt my father owed him. My father drew a knife and the man drew a gun and...well, some things aren’t hard to image.”

“You see that happen?”

“Right in front of me.”

Johnny’s eyes narrow. “You seem awfully casual about it, Reverend Marshall Hall.”

Hall stops shuffling, deck squeezed and bent in his hand. Congeniality draining as from an open wound.

“I’ve accepted that we can’t control what happens to us,” Hall says. “We can only control our own perspective.”

“Is that right?”

“Absolutely. One’s perspective goes a great deal towards healing or harming one’s soul. Take that Irish fellow. He kept that debt as the apple of his eye. It led him to murder. Indeed, past grievances are especially dangerous. If we hold onto them, they fester. They can’t heal. Not if we won’t put away childish things. Like St. Paul said, I would not have you be children forever, living on milk and not meat.”

“And what about guilt?”

Hall blinks. “Guilt?”

“What’s a man to do with that?”

“Perspective, friend! An act of mature will can dislodge anything. Release its hold on you, and it departs like a fog at noonday. Honestly, I think we weary God with such questions. Again, meat over milk. We can never progress if we’re always dependent on handholding. Why, I’m sure Christ said something about—”

Johnny lurches forward as though to strike Hall, but instead brings his face close. His eyes, gray and old, are intense upon him.

“What if guilt *is* your perspective, reverend?” he says. “What if guilt’s all you are anymore? Burning in the chest like a furnace, like you’ve been gutshot by an unseen foe in an unremembered fight? Guilt feels like that. Like bleeding out, forever. You leave it all over the place, everywhere you go. And what do ye find at the end of that trail of blood? A guilty man, bleeding out. A bled man’s a dead man. Powerless. What’s he supposed to do? The hell’s he supposed to do, Reverend Marshall Hall?”

Johnny is leaning so far over he's come out of his chair, standing, curved over Hall like a shadow.

Hall blinks, bewildered, sunken into his own chair. "Wha...what are you feeling guilty about, friend?"

"Guilt's a maneater, you chickenshit," Johnny seethes, but then snaps straight, waving a hand. "I ain't here to talk to you. I thought I was, but I ain't."

Johnny walks off the porch and down the dirt road, leaving Hall alone at last.

The night is chill but calm. Patricio steps onto the lone street of Charleston and scans the world. No wind. No strong shadows. Moonlight is liberal and broad, the moon sitting straight overhead, full like a nocturnal noonday. Every panel and beam of every building in town is silvered by it. The rocks are silvered by it. Patricio's face is silvered by it. He spits out a wad of phlegm and tobacco flying moist and silver. He waits, but nothing stirs, so he steps forward and walks out of town.

The further west he walks, the more the river's roar fades away. Silence. No crickets or critters. This is the night, truest night. He looks up at the sky. Deep royal blue, shifting to stone gray and milky white as it nears a moon so bright it has washed out all the stars from sight. He chose well.

The valley is barren. Sad shrubs erupt from the earth, but nothing good grows. The creekbed has dried, ground cracked, snaking through the valley. Patricio stands amidst it. He removes four flat knives from his belt, two in each hand flattened together. He uses them to carve a thin line in a circle around him. He scrawls gibberish along the circle, the language of dark things, deep things in the earth, who have lost the good of the intellect.

His artistry done, he stands in the center, knives out. He clacks them together, and they ring out unnaturally loud, clear and sharp like breaking glass. He rubs their edges together, an awful music, screeching, echoing down the valley. He is calling out. He wants help. He does not want to do this alone.

But he is not alone. Since the town, Sightless has followed him. Has followed him ever since Patricio left with the reverend and then came back alone. He could hear a man's heart beating from yards away. Made haggling easy, but Patricio was silent as stone. It made him easy to follow too. A hole in the world, moving like a black stain amidst the sounds of life.

So Sightless sits nearby, down the bank, squat behind rocks and shrubs, listening. The clacks pierced straight through his skull, squeezing tears from his eyes. The screeching scrambled all his senses, and the world became static. Truly blind, he fought the urge to cry out, but now the awful music stops, and Sightless waits, listening.

He can hear the earth tremble. A slow, solid sound. He presses his hands into the ground. A million things seem to be sliding across the land towards the creekbed, and Sightless half-fears the river had come to cleanse the valley for good.

Then the serpentine shape slithers over his fingers, and the truth came to him, and he dares not move.

In the creekbed, the snakes congregate around Patricio. Copperheads and rattlers. Kings and gardens. Some unrecognizable, blind but fanged worms erupted from the deep belly of the earth, worms that eat the heart out of the world. The all amass around him, coiling around his legs, holding him steady, in place. A dull symphony of hisses rise around him to the sky, and the creekbed is full this night.

To Sightless, the creatures so compound together around the man, they all feel and sound like one thing. A great, amorphous mass without a heart.

Patricio stands. Two knives in each hand, between his fingers, gleaming in the moonlight. The silver land stretches out silent around him. This is his universe, and he is the center.

Sightless hears, over the noisome slithering, another heartbeat, steady and solid like a drum. A heavy drum. Deep, war drum. He feels the snakes shiver as one. This new thing is coming, but Sightless cannot tell if it is a man, for the beat is too strong, too fierce. Close. At the very door. Sightless mutters prays to himself. Never had his blindness felt so dark.

Patricio waits, arms out, knives ready. The snakes coil tighter around his calves and ankles. He blinks slow. Nothing. Silver lands and moonshine. Blinks again, and there it is.

The shape.

Tall. Mannish, but looming. Horns, or perhaps ears pointing straight up. A silhouette blacker than hell. Blacker than nothingness. The only discernible element is its two eyes, pale and empty. Staring out of the black like something hidden beyond an open door in a lightless room.

Patricio anticipated fear. Terror even. What he had not anticipated was weakness, an intense craving to lay down and die. The snakes sense it. The roil about him and climb further up his legs, rats climbing a rock, fleeing a flood.

Patricio grits his teeth and swings his arms. The knives are set loose. They cycle forward, buzzing the air, a silver streak trailing behind them. Four shooting stars flying at an abyss.

But the abyss fades fast as a blink, and the knives fly on harmless, arcing down, stabbing the dirt. Only Sightless knows what happened. Quick as a breath it moved, and quicker still it had done its work.

As the shape vanishes before him, Patricio feels a sharp hand slap against his belly and once again the twisting and burning and the flowing down his leg, and he is awash with terror and a sense to run.

But he does not run. He stands immobile in his futile helpers, dumbfounded and in pain. A howling pierces the silent valley, and Patricio topples forward, caught by the snakes. They slither away en masse, bearing his body away, away from the valley and back towards town.

Sightless can still hear the deep drum, beating as steady as ever. Massive, ready to burst. Too awestruck to remain hidden, he steps out of hiding, steps to where he is in line with the drum. He feels it move towards him, and he swallows and instinctively reaches up and removes his black welders goggles.

There is a sight clearer than daylight. Piercing and bold. Mistaken for muses or madness, true inspiration. Those were only flickers and hints. Glimpses and tastes. Very few have the gift of Sight. Very few understand the wonder and terror of what it means to truly See.

Sightless' eyes light up like stars, and the world is laid bare to him. He sees a myriad of ghosts congregating, Cherokee long dead from dysentery and neglect from the dread encampment and march, long ago. They stand along the creekbed, a creek full of blood burning red hot, red like a rose. It colors everything in scarlet, ghosts and rocks and even the sky whose royal blue has evaporated, and the heavens have opened. Wheels of stars churn through the air. Far off spheres flying in full syncopation with each other, except our world. Except this valley. Except the creek of molten blood where stands a poor lost child, shivering with cold, standing in molten blood but shivering with cold, crying for mother, for father, for home for home for home, and when will he come home? Will he ever come home?

The ghosts weep, and the wheeling stars slow their journeys, and Sightless drops to his knees, cheeks tear-streaked in grief, deep stabbing grief that does not leave him, even as the vision fades and the drum flees into the night, and the moon wheels its way back into the sky.

Something is sitting on the porch of the church.

Hall had spent the evening recovering from the day, reading books of German theology, cooking some biscuits with the cornmeal. After a while, he had stood up to stretch, fetched a lantern, and took a walk around the church grounds in the cool of the night.

That's when he found a mass of dead snakes piled up on the porch, humped up against the door as if they were trying to break in.

Hall stares at this heap, wide-eyed and agape. A human shape sits on the dead snakes, back propped up by the hump, legs sprawled out in front of it, head slumped forward. Pants shimmering in the lantern light, soaked.

Hall can't think of a prayer to say. His sweaty hand grips the lantern handle, and he steps forward cautiously. On the porch, he prods the snake heap with the tip of his foot. Nothing stirs, so he steps around the heap and leans down to look up into the man's face.

Black hair glossed with sweat, matted to the forehead. Hands clutching the gut. Shirt smeared with blood, chest rising. He is breathing.

Hall recoils in fear, but then the face of Patricio looks up at him, eyes squint in almost-sleep.

"Help me, padre..." Patricio mutters. "Help me...before I go..."

"Patricio?" Hall says, near whisper. He clammers up the snake pile next to him.

"Patricio...you should have woken the doctor. I can't help this!"

“I’m going, padre. You can...you can help that.”

Hall reaches up and hangs the lantern on a nail by the door. Then he raises both hands as though looking to grab something he can’t find. He looks back down the road. Dark, dead of night, easy thirty-minute run to town.

“It’s so cold, padre,” Patricio says. “They say hell is warm.” He chuckles, coughs, and winces. “God, I hope it’s warm.”

“Patricio, please! Don’t say that.”

“Don’t you worry, padre,” he says. “You don’t need to give me no prayers. No gospel. Jesus didn’t help me in life. He sure as hell ain’t gonna help me now.”

“Patricio—” Hall keeps raising and lowering his hands in meaningless, defeated gestures. Frustrated, he pulls Patricio’s hands apart to inspect the wound.

“Patricio,” Hall says after a second, “you’ve been torn open. What did this?”

“I can’t say, padre,” he sputters, blood curdling in his throat. “All I know is...I’m drowning in the earth.”

Patricio lurches up, back down, coughing blood. A dark grimace travels from his face and across his whole body, making it shudder.

Hall places both hands on Patricio’s shoulder in a vain attempt to steady him.

“Patricio, please,” he says. His throat feels like a dry and hollow trunk. “What do you want me to do?”

“Don’t preach no damned gospel.”

“I want to help.”

“I don’t need no damned gospel!”

“But you want my help!”

“Don’t pray.”

“I won’t,” Hall says, quieter.

Patricio quiets too. His breathing slows.

“Don’t pray,” he whispers, mechanically.

“Then...what? What do you want me to do?”

“Just...just...don’t leave me, padre. D...dn...don’t leave me...don’t leave me cold, padre. I don’t wa...dn wn...to be alone. Stay...till the warm...pad...re...”

Patricio’s chest rises and falls stiffly. His eyes squint out towards a deep and endless sleep for the body but not for the soul. Hall feels the weight of it on him. For the first time, the burden of the cloth, sitting lead-like on his shoulders. He looks down to his hands, lying palm up and open in his lap. So very, very empty.

Then Hall blinks as though waking. He reaches into his pocket and retrieves the deck of cards. He pulls the deck out of its box and shuffles it, slow and stiff at first, like the uncertain start of a beginner.

Patricio, speechless now, scans his squinting eyes to watch the cards move in unison in Hall’s hands. Falling like water, moving like magic, stirring like wind in the grass.

“The game...is Twenty-one,” Hall says dryly, cracking a smile. “Closest to twenty-one wins.” He deals two cards each for him and Patricio, laying the latter on the dying man’s leg. “Let’s see who can get the most wins tonight.”

They play. He deals, and they play. And the moon wheels slow and waxes long into the night, infusing the sky with much blue, the cold fire of the sky. And stars sit hidden and mute in that dark ocean overhead, until dawn breaks the night, and two men sit on the church porch, on a

bed of dead snakes. One sleeps with a card deck clutched in his hands, and the other is bloody and broken and gone.

Entry 4

He asked me once, right after his mother died, how I knew there was a God.

I told him I knew there was a God, because there had to be somebody to punish my son for killing his mother, breaking her heart.

And pain answers pain.

I have mulled over his plea (for plea it was, if I had had but ears to hear), but I still have no satisfactory answer. I have pored over books, my notes in books, notes on the scriptures. Nothing gives me peace.

The best I acquired was a story told me by Douglas Winters, a Negro who works my stables here in Tahlequah. Exceptional character, dogged worker, he is head over all my horses and hands. I trust no one more.

Once, a few years ago, he told me a story about having been freed just after the war. He immediately cut his way north from Alabama through Tennessee, following the Tennessee River, which sheds off in endless tributaries, cracking through the land and hills like veins of blue blood.

He told me he wandered the hills for weeks in nothing but a straw hat and dirty shirt and pants, but a fresh pair of solid shoes. A Lutheran missionary couple he met on the road gave the shoes to him. They said they saw him walking barefoot along the scorched dirt and felt the love of Christ constrain them. He thanked them kindly for the shoes, and once they were out of sight he took a rock and scuffed them up so nobody would think he stole them.

Along one tributary he knelt down and removed his hat and cupped handfuls of water to his mouth and over his head. He described the place fondly, a small sliver of Eden off the beaten path: scarlet tanagers and dull-colored warblers chirped and fluttered from branch to branch and

across the water. The water flowed on, quaking and swirling, the sunlight sparkling against its ripples like stars caught in the current.

Caught in reverie, he cast about and spied a willow perched on the bank, and what looked like a body leaning against the trunk, legs sprawled out towards the bank as though the tree had birthed a man while growing its roots.

He regarded this sight calmly, being familiar with dead bodies (many of his family had been cruelly killed). He walked over to get a better look, but stopped when he saw the chest move up and down in the soft, slow rhythm of sleep. He also saw the gray Confederate uniform.

He told me the Confederate looked young, with a thin beard and light brown hair. A cavalry hat lay on the ground next to him.

He came closer and crouched down next to the sleeper.

What he told me next I had him write down, for he stunned me with his candor:

“Sir, it was funny finding him like that. I had half a mind to take a rock and crack his head open like an egg, but something stopped me. He looked like a child, and he looked like he’d been through enough. I’d seen that look before, every day in the mirror those past thirty years, a third generation slave on an Alabama farm. Defeat and heartache so thick you can’t help but carry it with you in your sleep. That’s how he looked: like the world had fallen in on him. Like the hand of God himself pressed against him. I had to leave him be. I knew a man needs to sleep sometime.”

I never gave Douglas my thoughts on this story. Was it my son? He served throughout Appalachia, and every southern son was scattered up those hills like chaff in the wind when it

was all said and done. Did God spare my son? Why him and no others? Why did He let him fall into the clutches of Judge Mal and his cohorts: Septimus and Nix, Pole Tom, the spidery killer who never gave a name, and a filthy, greasy man who had no name nor barely a coherent thought in his head? Why such a band as them? Was it necessary? Was it?

The answer is incomprehensible. Life and death are in God's hands. He kills and makes alive. He spares and spares not, all for His inscrutable purposes. We sit in the unknown, frustrated with questions. Did he spare my son that day?

God knows.

Nashville, Tennessee, July

Augustus Rogers steps through the great iron gates of the prison and out onto the cobbled stretch of the street. Two guards uniformed in blue watch him step clear of the threshold, and then they slowly swing the gates back, creaking then slamming them silent.

Augustus stands in the street. His blank, hairless face stares forward, people abuzz all around him like he is a stone in a creek.

An economic boom is in full swing, and everyone is rushing everywhere. Stiff businessmen in long coats check their pocket watches and stare up to the blue afternoon sky as if to measure the watches' accuracy against the sun. Young ladies in frock dresses laugh and point and move along, skirt rims wafting. Children of urchin age squat like gargoyles along stone fences and walls, surveying a kingdom of bustle and noise.

Augustus feels the swell of surging humanity and breaths in their ignorance of his presence, an ignorance made palpable by how many elbows and shoulders thud against him. How insouciant everyone is at walking past a man freshly released from the Tennessee State Penitentiary, an imposing structure that shadows the street and nearby buildings like a wave of gothic stone.

Augustus wears the very clothes he had been arrested in two years prior: a simple gray suit and a white shirt unbuttoned at the collar. Dusty and smelling of stone, the ensemble is bland as a canvas.

His shoes had surprisingly survived his imprisonment. They are good leather boots, brown. A special gift from his former fiancé's father, a Mississippi abolitionist who decried the cotton gin as "the devil's ploughshare." The father was a righteous man, and righteously

demanded the prison return those boots, for he would not have them shod the feet of the wicked. The warden was unobliged. He declared the boots state property and that was that.

The only other possession he has is the satchel under his arm. It holds art supplies—brushes, tubed paints, colored chinks, and graphite pencils—for he was and is an illustrator by trade.

He stares down at his boots and sways side-to-side amidst the passing people, smiling. He is free in every way he could imagine and hope for: free from his pretentious fiancé and her righteous family, free from prison, free from the gaze of others. He feels fully dislodged from existence, a ghost.

Then he deeply inhales the crowded air, an admixture of perfumes, sweat, salted meats, fried foods simmering in butter, bitter colognes, and the lingering specter of Tennessee whiskey.

Reality surges in on him.

“Take it or leave it,” he says loudly. “I’ll leave it, thank you.”

With one move, he thrusts his hand into the satchel. With another move, he pulls it out, a long brush in his hand. He holds it over his head and waves it about like a conductor’s baton, and the gray suit and blank face transform color and shape into that of a handsome middle-aged man with a full, dark beard and long, dark coat.

Not a soul notices, which is his intent. He paints the world, and not just himself. No one can see, unless he lets them see.

He stuffs the brush into the satchel, and sticks a hand forward to cut through the crowd.

“Pardon me,” he says, and the passersby part.

He walks aimlessly for a while, observing every one and thing. Banners crisscross overhead, announcing the completion of the merger between the Tennessee & Pacific railway with the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis railway, right in Nashville. The tracks now stretch from St. Louis, Missouri all the way to Lebanon, Tennessee, and it makes the city the momentary hub of the south. As such, depots are being built, jobs being created, and new housing being erected for all the incoming workers.

Augustus observes many rougher types prowling the streets, their faces hidden under wide-brimmed hats until they upturn to look and point at and jaw about the many banners and posters announcing pre-celebration festivities, including fireworks later that night. Each man is in various stages of grizzle, and their leathered faces and dusted jackets signal ex-ranch hands looking for city work. There are farm boys too, freshly run away from their family farms, straw hats cocked back and boyish faces balking at the thickness of the city.

Augustus cuts across to a sidewalk and mounts an apple crate next to a lamppost. His one arm pinches his satchel to his ribs while keeping his hand in his pocket. His other arm stretches out and steadies himself on the lamppost. He watches the stream of people, and by his strange influence, no one takes notice of him.

“Easily alone.” He grins. “I’ll own this town.”

He lets out a whoop and steps down, unmasking himself in the process. He approaches a nearby street vendor, a Dutch gentleman freshly transplanted from Canada, who sells small baked goods—cookies and sweet biscuits and glazed pastries. The man smiles at Augustus’ approach but frowns when there is no interest shown in a purchase. Augustus asks the man whereabouts he can acquire illustrator work, and the man replies that he has only been in town a month and is not acquainted enough to know.

Augustus shrugs and thanks the man and continues down the sidewalk, sidestepping fussy children and nodding hello to their mothers and hitting up every street vendor he could for news of illustrator work. One portly man with a monstrous curled mustache tells him he came too late to Nashville for illustration. The train companies had all the posters and banners they needed.

“You could try working *for* the railroad,” the man says, rubbing his thick, square palms together to dry their sweat. “As a coal man or a depot worker.”

Augustus frowns. “I don’t care for hardness.”

The portly man considers this and then ignores him. Augustus moves on.

As evening approaches, it is a Baptist street-preacher who has useful information. The man is beside a small dais he stands on to preach. It’s made from an unused coffin that had been cut in half and then half again. “Death is trampled underfoot” is his favorite phrase, emphasized with a hearty stamp of his foot to the dais.

When Augustus approaches, the preacher had just stepped down, now peeling an orange with a buck knife.

“I hear,” the preacher says upon receiving Augustus request, “there is a tavern yonder that needs some painting.”

“Is it artistic painting?” Augustus says.

“It is a den of iniquity,” the preacher says, wiping orange juice and pulp from his lips.

Augustus shrugs. “I go where the work is, sir.”

“As you should,” the preacher says, now chewing the peel. “As our Lord did. If you are called there, then do not tarry, just be wary. Lions prowl in vagrant’s clothing.”

“I hear that,” Augustus says.

“I’ll pray for you.”

“Much obliged.”

The preacher points to where Augustus should go, and as Augustus leaves he hears the man’s hard-heeled boots clomp up on the dais and stomp away.

“Death is trampled underfoot!” the preacher cries. “Trampled like a hog under horses!”

This den of iniquity is a decommissioned riverboat sitting just off dock of the Cumberland River, forever moored. Passed off as a floating tavern and inn.

Augustus walks across a pier to reach it, cutting through many classes of men. Hardy customers looking for ambrosial imbibement. Occasional upperclassmen in black jackets and red kerchiefs, white-haired and puffing cigars. Augustus bobs and weaves, long brush out and twiddling in his hand. His color and shape changes with every step, here grizzled and menacing, there dandy and foppish, here bland and unassuming, all unnoticed, shielded by his spell.

“So many options,” he muses. “Whatever shall become of me?”

The tavern is thick with talking and music and drifting cigar smoke. The smell of apples is everywhere, as apple pie lightning moonshine is in high demand this evening. The tables are large, disused whiskey barrels with card tabletops bolted to them. An empty stage is against the wall opposite the bar, and a mechanical piano—playerless and powered by a bowlered man turning a hand crank—croaks out random gospel or drinking songs wordlessly.

The coalescence of sweet apple and sharp whiskey and woody tobacco scents reminds Augustus of Christmas, and he feels a pain of something like homesickness stab him sideways through his lungs and heart, but he resists it with clenched teeth and steps to the bar. He’s settled

on a young looking man with black hair and a thin face. Plain clothes, jacket buttoned up almost all the way. Hat in hand.

He asks the barman if they need any illustration work, to which the barman shrugs and says he'll check with his employer. Augustus thanks him and sits on a nearby barstool. The barman walks down to and out a door past the end of the bar.

The mechanical piano cranks on and the hoarse voices rise and fall, but now that Augustus is sitting and not so focused on job-hunting, he feels the whole tavern softly sway up and down and back and forth. He scans the room. Every man at every table sways the same in strange unison. The bowlered man sways as well, his hand cranking steady and sure, his face sleepy.

“They call it *The Flying Inn*,” says a voice nearby. A skeletal man with sunken eyes, age impossible to determine. Holds a glass of water-clear moonshine that reeks of sharp apple smell. “This place floats but doesn't go anywhere. Ya look out the portholes or the open door and see the city sitting bright and still, but ya bob up and down and it feels like ya're hovering right above the ground, just out of contact with the earth.”

Augustus regards the man further. Dirty denim jeans and a dirty white button-up shirt buttoned all the way. Gun belt on the counter. Eyes black and sad. He drums long, bony fingers on the counter. They sound like sticks beating a board.

Augustus takes this image in, then smiles. “I like that. I'm fond of detachment.”

“That a fact.”

“The only one I acknowledge, sir.”

The man eyes Augustus and grinds his teeth behind closed lips, as though chewing on that last statement. He raises his glass and smells the apple.

“Think you’ll find work?” he says.

“I don’t consider illustration *work*.” Augustus opens his satchel and removes some rough-textured parchment paper and a snubbed charcoal pencil. He raps the pencil twice on the counter.

“May I illustrate you?”

“Couldn’t hurt,” the skeletal says.

“Tell me about yourself,” Augustus rummages in the satchel and removes a thick rubber eraser and a gray-tinted paper stub used for smudging.

“That’s awfully friendly, son. Not very detached.”

“Oh it is.” Augustus uses a pocketknife to sharpen the pencil, and black curlicue shavings spiral to the floor. “I need to know what I’m drawing against.”

“Ah.”

“It’ll be the perfect picture of what you are not.” He blows off the sharpened pencil tip. “It’s how I operate. Why, not too long back I painted a mural on the mess hall wall of the prison I was unfortunately a tenant of. Warden assigned me to the project. I used bright colors with smudged edges, in sheer defiance of the drab brick and mortar confines I found myself in.

“Took me a year’s worth of lunch breaks to paint. I’d balance myself on a stool, holding my paint palette in one hand and my brush in the other, only stepping down to take a bite of my food. An occasional gawking inmate sometimes used spectating as an excuse to swipe part of my meal, but as the mural took shape these incidents became less and less. My fellow malefactors grew to respect my colorful endeavor. Guards and murderers alike. You could say they were entranced.”

“Well,” the skeletal man says. “How long were you in for.”

“Put up for thirty years. Conning and robbery.”

“Well.”

“Got out early though.” Augustus grins. “I have my ways.”

“I can see.” The skeletal man says, and then stares at his gun belt lying on the counter like it’s a dying animal. “I’d like to see what I don’t look like. I really would.”

Augustus feels an upswell of pleasure rise from his chest and to his head, which was abuzz with creative energies, an intangible that only lovers sympathize with—a tingle through the veins and skin, sparks and fire ants. He poised his pencil over the parchment paper, and his mouth was so wide in a grin and his eyes so wide in staring at the man that Augustus’ face threatened to burst at the seams.

The man took one last sip of the apple pie lightning, sighed sharply as it went down, and motioned with his hands and mouth to speak.

But the barman returns and tells Augustus he has convinced the owner to hear him out.

“Convinced?” Augustus says, irritated at the veiled insult.

“These walls *are* drab,” the barman says then shrugs. “I convinced him.”

Augustus frowns but repacks his things.

“Don’t leave, sir,” he says to the skeletal man. “I’ll try to hurry.”

“I’ve got nowhere to go, son.” He leans against the counter with his elbows. “Nowhere at all.”

“May I have your name?” Augustus slings the satchel over his shoulder.

“Pole Tom,” he says, wincing at the sound of his name. “On account of I’m long and thin like a pole.”

“That’s the first thing I’ll work against,” Augustus says.

“I’d like to see that,” Pole Tom said, watching Augustus walk away. “I really would.”

The meeting with the owner goes well. To his credit, Augustus knows how to speak his craft. He neither oversells nor undersells, but always hits the dead middle, his comfort zone, vagaries and generalizations, sounding neutral enough for anyone. Augustus prefers neutrality of explanation. It allows surprises in the actual, finished work.

Both he and the owner shake hands satisfied, the owner because of wise business savvy, and Augustus because he is free to paint as he pleases. Descending the stairs back to the tavern, he feels tickled inside.

Pole Tom is not at the counter.

Augustus clenches his fists and casts about the room in outrage, but quickly finds his skeletal man. Pole Tom sits at a whiskey barrel table near a wall. He is not alone.

With Pole Tom is our man Johnny. Confederate gray, cavalry hat on the table. A thick bush of long, curling brown hair is on his head, and a rim of beard wraps around his chin and mouth. The barrel of his repeater rests against the back of his chair. His one arm rests on the table, the other hidden below it, Dragoon in hand, unseen.

Pole Tom sits, sunken eyes downcast, hands on the table, gun belt returned to his waist. His expression is unchanged from Augustus first meeting him. Sad and weary, leathery and creased skin taut against the bone.

“Fascinating juxtaposition,” Augustus mutters, amused. He is still determined to sketch Pole Tom against his story, whatever it was.

So Augustus masks himself from sight and strolls over to the table and sits down across from the two men. He sets his satchel on the floor and whips out his pencil, eraser, snub, and paper again, laying them on the table.

Then he waits. Everything about Johnny and Tom—posture, expression—is heavy, burdened. Shoulders sag. Muscles tense. Everything poised to spring, like a rattrap.

“Fascinating,” Augustus mutters again, this time truly. He decides then and there to draw both men against themselves. So pencil poised he waits for them to speak, and it is Pole Tom who speaks, and his words suggest the continuance of a previous conversation.

“How many did ya kill?” Tom says.

“My head’s full of nightmares,” Johnny says.

“Tell me, son.”

“I’ve come cross the mountains. I’ve seen blood-soaked hills.”

“How many did ya kill, son?” Tom says. “Tell me quick.”

“Three so far, and I’ll have the others. But I want the one.” Johnny speaks this last word with a harsh breath, like it sucks the very voice out of him.

“I lost track of the one,” Johnny says. “At the tip of the plateau. I found a miner’s son nailed to a yew tree. Ten-inch railroad spikes, rusty and red with his blood, plunged through his chest. His eyes were closed, like in prayer.”

“God, son.” Tom’s skeletal face looks up, near withered and stretched to the skull shape entire.

“Do ye know where I found the father?” Johnny glares. “Nowhere. They immolated him in his house.”

“God.” Tom weeps. His skeletal sockets bleed tears. “Why don’t you go home?”

“The last time I was with him was ten years ago,” Johnny says. “Pennsylvania hill country. We came across this wagon headed west. Had an elderly man, old age dug right into his

face as if by chisel. Had a wife old as him. And I suppose their son, and I suppose the son's wife, on account of they were holding each other so. Mennonites I think. Had the hats and beards. The bonnets. Judge fired on them for no reason other than he could, cause he will. Thunderous. Old woman's face spread in shock to see her man's torso burst like an apple chucked against a wall. Chunks flew."

Johnny's shoulders shake, but every sinew of his face locks hard against it. "Judge killed all of them. Slumped them in their wagon seats. He said to scalp them, but I was so suddenly appalled. Sickly so, like it had been building for months behind the scenes, and now the dam burst all at once. Something snapped the spell. Maybe it was that old woman's face, or Mal's easy violence, are deep, small voice inside of me, haunting me with her stories.

"Whatever the reason, I turned and blew him off his horse instead. One shot to his face and he flipped and flailed to the dirt. His horse fled, and I stared, unbelieving."

"And then did ya go home?"

"He stood up." Johnny's voice cracks and he shivers, cold. "Dusted himself off. Face splayed like flower in bloom. His eyes cursing me. I fled away. I fled as fast as a horse would carry a man, until it collapsed under me and I took to my own feet and ran away."

"Why didn't ya come home, son?" Tom pleads, is pleading. "I know what burdens mean. I have my own. I know the road ya're on. That dust is on my shoes."

"I ain't looking for peace now."

"Forgive me, son."

"I ain't looking for peace."

"Son, will you forgive me?"

"Only if I can kill you."

Johnny's hidden hand snaps up. He levels the Dragoon to Tom's temple and fires.

The eruption is outrageous. Tom's head bursts against the wall behind him, followed quickly by his shoulder and body as they fling into the boards with a thud.

Pandemonium ensues. Souls rise in terror and flee, knocking chairs and tables about. The barman scrambles out the door. The bowlered man vanishes, crank abandoned in the now silent piano. Everyone makes their escape except Augustus. He sits still, chewing his pencil.

"No, no." He eyes his drawing. "What good is a dead man to me? I don't do still life. Too constant. I need change—"

"You change your skin for nothing," says Johnny, now standing.

Augustus gawks up at him. "You can see me?"

Johnny upends the table, and Augustus scrambles away, losing his drawing. It loops through the air and lands at Johnny's feet. He picks it up.

Augustus recovers his satchel and then clutches it to himself, eyes wide.

Johnny holds the drawing up to his face. "Who is this man?"

"You just killed him," Augustus says.

"What is this?" Johnny mutters. "I see a face I cannot account for it, for it's so full of ferocity and pity both boiling to a fever pitch that it seems two faces overlapped with each other."

"You like it?" Augustus straightens up, forgetting himself, or rather everything but himself. "I brought the two of you together. You were such contrast that you complemented brilliantly. Working perfectly against each other."

"That's not what I see."

Augustus shrugs, still forgetful. “Art is open to interpretation. Like me.”

“This is no interpretation,” Johnny fumes. “I know this man. I left him behind. I hated him before I hated anything else. And yet....” He crumples the drawing against his chest, eyes stretched wide open. “...you thin me out, paint me with pain, put a droop in my shoulders, and there he is clear as a bell. My father. My damned, damned father! Will I never be rid of you? Won’t you finally *leave me alone?*”

In a seething rage, Johnny shreds the drawing. His eyes glaze pale, his whole face snarls, and he cries so sharp it shatters the glass portholes.

Augustus breath catches just as the whole boat rocks as though a great weight had plunged into the river outside. Through a shattered porthole, he sees the whole of Nashville bob up and down, toss about, and suddenly vanish. He gazes around. Everything—tables, chairs, cups and plates, abandoned hats and coats, Johnny’s bent and writhing body, Tom’s headless corpse, the mechanical piano—it all suddenly dislodges from the floor and floats about. The tavern turns around them all like the inside of a barrel rolling downhill. It’s all so discombobulating that Augustus eyes moisten with joy. Again, he forgets everything but himself.

Then there’s a sharp twist of the world, and everything snaps to the ceiling like it’s been nailed there. Augustus crashes against the back of the bar, bottles crushing, shards piercing. Never before or since did he feel such a strong belonging to the world. As the accoutrements of *The Flying Inn* fall upon him, he howls in pain and fear, but a deeper howl and louder roar drown him out.

The howl comes from a bulbous black mass of fangs and claws, with pale eyes spread across the whole awfulness like some cherubic nightmare. The roar comes from the river water, rushing in through the doors, the portholes, every orifice giving way.

The water crashes in, fills the room, buckles the walls, swirls everything about. Augustus can only be carried along, body battered against every bit of debris. The bulbous, howling mass floats along, as though made of air. It bubbles, boiling. The water froths around it. In all Augustus pain, he's never seen such a sight. He feels drawn in, strapped down, gripped and throttled. No hiding now. He must surrender to it. There's nothing but surrender now. There's no fight possible. No trick or trade. He's whole body feels broken in pieces, shaken apart like leaves from a tree. He gasps and is plunged underneath, and his world fades to black.

No one from the banks is sure why it had happened. The what is generally agreed upon.

A flood of humanity had poured from *The Flying Inn* like blood from a wound. Then, without warning, the waters around it bowed in and pushed out, as though spewing the very boat out of its mouth. It made one slow flip in the air before landing on its head. Water shot up in geysers, waves shoved out, spraying the banks, slapping against the pier. Then the thing sank and was no more.

Entry 5

He wrote me regularly during the war, but afterwards it was sporadic, and after ten years, it stopped all together.

Then, out of the blue, they resume. He had news to tell me: he was married.

Having fled the judge and his bushwhackers, my son disappeared into the mountains for years, hiding, living in silent solitude. When he felt enough time had passed, he slowly but surely made his way back into society, coming down out of the mountains to look for work or trade in animal pelts he'd hunted.

Not long after his return to civilization, he met Anna. Not long after they met, they were married. His wife saved his soul, he said. She was the beginning of his reconciliations. I watched his letters grow less and less vicious, and as I had softened over the years, I hoped he would invite me to see here. I would have gladly made the trip.

In the last letter he ever sent me, he told me when and where he knew he loved her. It was near evening in Virginia. They were riding a coach, rolling along a dirt path that cut through fields of grain. Her father was raised on grain and cattle fortunes, and could not fathom his daughter being simply walked back home, insisting the family coach and coachman accompany her. If the young man would court her, he would do it the father's way, thank you.

Inside, my son sat, hands on his knees. Across from him, she slept, laid out across the cushioned bench seat, her hands tucked under her head. She had dozed off not long after they started their slow crawl to her home, and he had spent much of the journey watching her. Her deep brown hair and milk-white, pastel skin were almost comical in contrast, but it made him like her even more. She was beautiful, but not just any beauty. She was her beauty. "Her Anna-beauty," he called it, unique and irreplaceable.

This understanding brought strange feelings into him. He recalled the first he laid eyes on her, months prior, in a town square somewhere, for a town function he no longer remembers. He had a feeling of lightness in his chest, like a pocket of air had swelled up within his rib cage. He feared he'd float away from her.

But in the coach that one evening, seeing her beauty—her self—stand out against the rest of the world, singular and solid like the dark teeth of the Appalachians against the twilight sky, he felt a heaviness settle into his belly, a deep thickness like mud hardening into rock. He felt his soul harden and sharpen. Every consideration he had—every once wandering fear and desire, preference and opinion—focused itself tighter and tighter, contracting more and more to a single point, sharp and narrow like the tip of an arrow, pointed straight in one direction, towards the prone, sleeping woman, her eyes softly shut, her pale lips held slightly open, her breath passing in and out in easy flows that made her body rise and fall.

He swallowed and set his jaw in resolution. He leaned his head back and coalesced his thoughts together, fusing their disparate characters into an ultimate, dominate Thought.

“I must protect her,” said his mind, his heart, his soul and strength, as one voice. “She’s a fighter, but fragile, lost forever if once lost. I must fight for her. I live and die for her.”

I never had a chance to ask him: had he known the roads before him after that moment, would he still have walked down them?

It is not an easy question.

Hopkinsville, Kentucky, August

“Daddy, do you believe in ghosts?”

Martha stands in her father’s tobacco field. Her father, hunched and sweating and holding a curved pruning knife, has been topping his crops for the past hour, cutting off the flowers that grow out of the top, spouting upward like fragile pink trumpets.

Martha trails behind him, gathering flowers to put in her braided brown hair or cast into the cool wind. She holds a cluster of them in her small hands, sprouting out between her fingers. She watches her father tip his straw hat back and wipe his brow and smile, his dimples creasing his grizzled chin.

“I do believe in ghosts,” he says.

“Does the preacher believe in ghost?”

“The preacher believes in ghosts, too.”

“Really?”

“Course he does.” He tops another patch of flowers from a tobacco stalk. “Why wouldn’t he?”

“Preacher believes in God,” Martha says and approaches her father, eyes lowered, dropping flowers behind her.

Her father smiles and picks up a fresh cut flower and hands it to her. She takes it, giggling.

“Martha May,” he says, “if you can believe in God then you can believe in ghosts, I’m sure.”

“It’s all sticky, daddy.”

“What is? The flower?”

She rolls the one he gave her around in her hand, a shiny film present on her fingertips and palm.

“I got sap on my hands,” he says.

“Will the flower be okay?”

“The sap can’t hurt it, baby. It’s already been topped.”

He spits into his hands and pulls a red handkerchief from his beltless waistline and massages his hands with hard thumb rubs and knuckle kneads. Then he gently takes the flower from her hand and places it on the ground and spits in her hand and rubs it with the red handkerchief, moving in soft circles with his fingers.

“I’m sorry, Martha May.” He continues to work out the sticky film, taking his time.

“Maybe you want to go inside for a while.”

“I’m okay,” she says matter-of-factly, somehow both like the eight-year-old she is and like the late mother who birthed her. “How come the sap can’t hurt ‘em?”

“They’ve been topped, baby. There’s nothing else to do for ‘em. They’ve been set free.”

“Really?”

He grins, mischievous. “Kinda like ghosts.”

Martha stands wide-eyed and stares deep into her father’s face, waiting for more. His eyes are dark and shimmer like the pond down by the church in town where she watches the boys catch frogs. His sweat makes him smell like the pond too, earthy and wet, and his raspy breathing when working hard in the heat makes him sound like a frog.

She considers all this thoroughly, still waiting in great expectation for him to continue, while holding a small cluster of tubular pink flowers loosely in her free hand, careful not to crush them. Her awareness is multifaceted, intense in many directions.

Her father taps his chin as though in thought, then nods and hums to himself, smiling, coming to a deep understanding. “Ghosts are free. Cut loose. Nothing can hurt them anymore. They’re done for today.”

“Oh,” she says. “Can they still hurt us?”

She watches her father’s smiling face knot up in concern. “I don’t mean to scare ya, Martha May.”

“I’m okay.”

“Maybe you want to go inside for a while.”

“I want to know.”

Her father stuffs the handkerchief back into his waistline. “Depends on the ghost, baby, though I figure they’re like hornets. You don’t hurt them and they won’t hurt you.”

“But they’re flowers too?”

“Well...sure. Yeah.” He smiles. “A sweet thing like you has nothing to worry about. Ghosts know the difference between what’s hurting them and what’s not. I’m pretty sure ghosts are like flowers to little girls.”

Martha goes wide-eyed again, smiles and giggles. Her father returns satisfied to his topping, and she flings to the sky the few flowers in her hand. They scatter and waft, and a few fall back to her face, softly crumpling against her cheek and forehead, softer than raindrops.

She smiles open-mouthed and laughs and dances down the lines of tobacco as though the world is reborn in her image, and everything in it bares her favorite colors and sounds.

The sky is blue like the robin eggs fallen from the nest outside her bedroom window, landing unbroken in the summer grass.

The trees are bright green like the rock candy her father bought her from the general store, back when they took the wagon into town to sell tobacco loads last harvest, and he had let her drive the wagon some of the way in and rewarded her with the hard, craggy candy that crumbled between her teeth and tasted like sharp apples.

The wind is like the wordless singing voice of her mother, who hummed simple songs to her as a baby and stroked her hair.

It's her world now, all things secure and wonderful. She's sure of it. Her father had told her so.

Later that day, she wanders from the fields and past the house to the tobacco barn, a tall, square structure with a slanted roof. The barn is made of thin, long boards, weatherworn, tan merging with a moist gray. There are no windows, only smoke slats high up in the walls, and one large, doorless opening.

She steps fearlessly through the opening and into darkness broken-up here and there by slivers of light coming through the open smoke slats. Long wood beams stretch from wall to wall high overhead, beams for hanging tobacco stringers. In the dirt ground, rows of small craters, each with black and gray ash nestled at the bottom.

The place reeks with the bitterness of smoke, a scent she is accustomed to and even finds pleasant, as though she could still smell the warm, sappy qualities of the different hardwoods that had long since faded into fire. Cherry, sweet and crisp. Oak, acrid and sharp. Her perceptions are natural and acute in any space or room, and the darkness does not shake her.

She walks and skips and twirls around amongst the craters, one tobacco flower stuck in her hair, placed there by her father. She giggles and takes in the smells and the dimness around

her, but then she stands still and silent and listens. There is no wind in the barn, but the dust is stirring around the craters far in the back, in the dimmest dark, where no smoke slats are.

She focuses and narrows her eyes, and she can just see small puffs of dust rising up quickly and then wafting in the air lazily. A patch of it floats towards her and catches a shaft of light, and the specks and flecks sparkle like prisms.

Her lips grin mischievous, like her father. She balls her small hands into fists and raises them up and places them side-by-side against her mouth, and her body cannot help but shake from giggling.

Puffs of dust continue to raise up at the back of the barn, moving step-by-step in the dark, back and forth slow and steady, a cautious animal in a cage.

“It’s okay,” she says. She removes her flower from her hair and stretches it out towards the dusty darkness. “Daddy said you won’t hurt me, cause you know the difference.”

There is no wind.

Weeks later, Martha wakes early to be with her father, who washes her hair in a basin, combs it out carefully with his fingers, and then braids it crisscrossed, the way her mother showed him, not long before she passed on.

After breakfast, they bring their single-mule wagon up next to the tobacco barn, which reeks of fresh smoke. Martha can still see wisps of it curling about high up in the air at the back of the barn. Curling like her mothers hair, like fingers grasping.

Her father brings out the tobacco stringers from the barn, wraps them in great bundles, and then stuffs them into a couple of hogsheads, giant casks larger and taller than the washtub

Martha takes baths in. If one was lying empty and on its side, she could walk straight into it without ducking.

Using two wooden beams for a ramp and a third as a lever, her father laboriously rolls one massive cask up into the wagon and secures it with twine. He wipes his brow with his handkerchief and leans against his wooden beam, breathing heavy, brow and cheeks glistening.

Martha sits turned around in the wagon seat, arms crossed on the seatback, chin resting on her forearms, watching him. He breaths thickly but then looks up and gives her his mischievous smile.

“I’m getting’ old, baby girl,” he says.

“How old?”

“Old enough to probably hire some help next year.”

“Can I drive the wagon again?”

“Maybe.” He sucks in a deep breath and lets it hiss out. “I think we can do that.”

“We do good this year?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He reaches up and tips his straw hat to her. “For such a small patch. Got one more hogshead to do. God’s been good.”

“What about the ghosts?”

He chuckles. “I suppose they’ve been good too, if they helped out at all.”

“What about if they didn’t hurt nobody? Were they good then?”

“Sure.”

Martha looks down to think about that. Then she nods and looks back up. “I love you, daddy.”

“You too, sweet baby.”

He props the lever beam against the wagon and walks into the barn to get the other hogshead.

Martha props her elbows on the seatback and eyes the wisps of smoke in the barn again. They drift in and out of sunbeams, strands of gray that flash into brazen streaks of gold for a moment. Spirals and twirls. Knots that unfurl slowly with long, sinewy fingers that stretch out and out until they thin into nothing. Martha likes the hands the best, especially when they unfold in her direction. She feels like she is being waved to or signaled, or perhaps even warned.

She stretches one of her arms slowly into the air towards the smoke, her hand a tight fist that opens up easy like a flower in the morning.

Her father returns rolling the next hogshead to the back of the wagon. It clunks against the two ramp beams, and he leans over the barrel, breathing heavy again.

“Daddy?” Martha says, then adds: “You sound like a big frog.”

She hears his breathing buckle hoarsely with laughter. “That’s called a toad, Martha May, and thank you kindly.”

“Are you okay?” she says.

“I’m okay, sweet baby,” he says, his head still down, but his one hand raising and waving at her. “This one’s full to the brim. Tipping it over was even harder than rolling it.”

He stretches his back and then grabs the lever beam he left leaning against the wagon, jimmies it under the cask, lifts and moves forward, grunting with each heave.

Martha grips the seatback as the wagon lurches softly from side to side. She glances back at the smoke in the barn. The hands bloom upwards, but something else catches her eye. A patch of smoke, hovering just near a shaft of sunlight, ripples like boiling water, like a swarm of bees got loose in the barn, buzzing around, half-blind and half-mad by the smoke.

She squints her eyes at this, the wagon beneath her swaying back and forth like a ship at sea, feeling the first crests of storm water. Then she hears her dad howl out and then a thick cracking noise followed by a thud and a wet crunch. Her father screams out high and loud like nothing she had ever heard before, and she slaps her hands to her ears, more afraid of that sound coming from her father than anything else in the world.

The mule cries a raspy bray and takes off, Martha and wagon in tow. Martha falls into her seat with a yelp, and then stares forward in horror that the mule is moving without her father to drive it.

Then its head whips back as though an unseen hand hooked it by the neck. It suddenly tires out, rolling to a stop not far from the barn. Calm again. Entranced.

Martha holds a death grip to the seat and lets big tears fill her eyes. She cries for her father, but when he doesn't respond she remembers the awful noise he had made, and a sick slop seems to form in her stomach.

She climbs down from the wagon and runs back to the barn.

The hogshhead is on its side. The two ramp beams lie in the grass, snapped in two.

Around the hogshhead, she finds her father. Alive, but unconscious, his mouth open but his face relaxed as though he had nodded off. His right leg lies under the hogshhead up to the knee. Left leg bent up like he had tucked his knee in, his foot pressed against the hogshhead. His chest rises up and down softly.

Martha wants to wake him, but she recalls he told her once that sleep is good for the body, helps it heal. So she lets him be. Instead, she presses her hands up against the hogshhead and pushes, but it's solid like the walls in her bedroom and gives nothing. She puts her back against it and digs her bare feet into the ground, but still gets nothing.

She collapses next to his softly breathing chest and cries. She wants to wake him, but knows he needs his sleep right now.

So she rubs her eyes and gazes back at the barn. Smoke swirling like a storm.

“Help me,” she says, standing and pointing to the hogshead. “Please. You’re good. I know you are.”

She’s asked before, at other times. When she fell out of a small tree, busting her knee open, and they carried her all the way to the porch. When her mother died, they came to her. They lived in the barn silent but watching. Sometimes she’d seen the eyes, floating in the dark.

So she calls on them again, and what happens next is hard for her to describe. It’s like the time a storm ripped the sky apart with light, and standing outside her hair tingled and wanted to float off of her head. The air, once thick with humidity, seemed empty and roomier, like a door or window had been opened on a hot day.

The tingling and the openness roiled softly around her. The hogshead stirs, then gently rolls forward. Grass black with blood, calf muscle split out like a flayed fish. Bone shards. She does not see this. The air around it turns foggy, and she knows a hand has been placed over her eyes.

She runs into the barn, finds her father’s pruning knife, and takes it to the wagon. She jumps into it and cuts the twine everywhere she can until it all hangs loose around the hogshead. Then she climbs into the seat, presses her hands against the hogshead, and pushes.

Still nothing. Tears well up again, but through blurry sight she sense the tingling and openness, the unseen storm coming across the grass.

“NO!” she says, and it stops. She rubs her eyes clear. “I can do this. You watch daddy. I can drive the wagon.” Sniffles again, looks around. Sees the mule still entranced, its reins dangling from its back. “Daddy said I could drive it.”

She fetches the reins and pulls them to her, and then stands up in the seat and leans back and sets her bottom against the hogshead.

She snaps the reins as hard as her arms can, and she tries to yell as loud as her father would when he wanted to get things moving.

The mule snaps awake and brays again, lurches forward, and as it does Martha digs her feet into the seat and pushes her bottom against the hogshead, pushing hard.

There’s a tingle, but not too much. Some openness, but not a lot. The hogshead makes a slow turn and then rolls down and out of the wagon. Thuds heavily into the earth, sides splitting and expanding outwards, tobacco sprouting out.

Martha squeals when the cask leaves her bottom, and she fall back into the wagon, dropping the reins.

The unburdened mule finds new energy in the commotion, and it shoots forward.

Martha rolls around in the bed, almost falling out. But she catches herself with her hands and knees and then crawls forward. Climbs over the rumbling seatback and snatches the reins about to slide off the floorboard. Retaking her seat, eyes wide and breath pumping, she gazes over her shoulder to the barn.

“Look after daddy!” she says. “I’ll get help! I know I will!”

Then she sits dumbstruck for a moment, unsure of how to steer or guide the charging mule anywhere.

Whether by instinct or some other power, however, the mule makes for the road, and shoots down it. Martha tries recognizing any of the trees and shrubs whizzing by, to figure if she is headed into town or not. But the bumbling wagon ride and her hurting bottom distract her, and as big tears well in her eyes again, she remembers the cry her father had made, and how she never wants to hear it again.

At some point, the mule slows to a trot, its thick neck glistening with sweat. Still no sign of the town, and Martha cannot reckon if minutes or hours have passed.

She stands up in the seat to let her bottom rest. She grips the reins and tries to stay awake. Tries naming the trees and shrubs along the path—flowerless crepe myrtles and wild hibiscus—but grows frustrated with ones she does not know, and wishes her father was there to tell her like he always did, which made her cry more.

So she gives up naming and focuses on the road ahead, her eyes sometimes drifting down to the mule's rolling hindquarters.

Farther along, the trees and shrubs thin out a bit, and she hears the soft gurgle of a small river nearby. In a clearing is a massive cypress tree, boughs stretching in a great circle of green shade.

The mule, wheezing from thirst and exhaustion, makes for the shade and the sounds of the river, and Martha makes no attempt to stop him, sitting down instead.

But as soon as the wagon enters the shadow of the cypress, the mule brays and bucks. Martha cries out and leans back on the reins, her feet pressing the floorboard. The mule groans in protest but comes to an uneasy halt.

Martha sits huffing, letting her heart stop pounding in her ears. She glances about to see what spooked the mule so, and there it is. Leaning against the tree and facing the direction of the river sounds.

It is Judge Mal. Flat, wide-brimmed hat perched on a knee. Bald head white as an eggshell. Bushy mustache hanging from his nose and hiding his terrible mouth. Long, black coat buttoned up except at the neck. Massive pistol, scabbard and all, resting in his lap. His dark eyes regard the mule and then leer up to Martha, expressionless. She does not know him. She does not know what she has crossed.

Martha clutches the reins to herself. Grateful to see another face yet fearful of a stranger, she neither speaks nor moves. The cool shade calms her mind and seems to relax the mule, though the animal still shuffles uneasily on its feet, and its long snout still points towards the sounds of water.

“Well, child,” Judge Mal says, “your animal is famished.”

“Yessir,” she says. “Are you a preacher?”

“No, child,” he says, and his bushy mustache ruffles as he speaks. “I took these off a poor Cherokee fellow down in Charleston many months ago. He did not need them further.” His cheeks puff, grinning. Then: “I am a judge.”

“Oh,” she says. “Do you believe in ghosts?”

“I am very fond of them.” He laughs, deep but hollow like a drum.

Martha feels a flat thickness grow around her, humidity or some other pressure. She knows how alone she is, and the slop forms in her stomach again.

“So...you do believe?” she says.

“I believe your animal needs water.” He stands up, hat in hand. “I’ll refresh him for you.”

Martha does not like how wide-shouldered he is, or how dark his clothing looks in the shade. But she doesn't know how to lead the mule to drink, so she nods and drops the reins.

Judge Mal unhitches the mule easily and leads it beyond some tall grass to a thin yet rushing strand of river beyond, out of sight.

Martha waits, hearing only the slow static of the river. Then the mule shrieks and is silenced. Crunching. A splash. Then, through the tall grass, Judge Mal returns alone, licking his lips and the tips of his mustache, fanning himself with his wide-brimmed hat before placing it on his head.

He looms over her now, hands clasp behind his back, looking her over.

Martha knows the mule is dead. She has been a good girl her whole life, read all the right stories. She knows what she is dealing with, but she is still small and afraid, and does not know what to do.

"My daddy's hurt, sir," she says, embarrassed, for he is very tall, and she is unsure how much she needs to say.

"Oh?" the judge says and looks down at her. "Where is he?"

His eyes and cheeks look more sunken and skull-like now. She had seen a cow skull once, hanging on the wall of the general store, bleached-white bone with two gray, crooked horns. She had not liked how it seemed to look so intently ahead, like Judge Mal looked intently down at her, as though invisible blinders hung from his face.

She does not cry, however, for in that moment the memory of her father's scream comes flooding back, and it shakes all other fear out of her.

"The hogshead fell on him," she says, hands at her hips. "And he fell asleep."

Judge Mal narrows his eyes. "Was he still breathing, child?"

“I can’t say, sir.”

“Is your mother with him?”

“My momma’s dead since I was two, sir. Preacher said tee-bee killed her.”

“I am surprised your preacher would be so scientific,” he sneers, but she does not understand. “Where exactly were you going?”

“I can’t say.”

He chuckles, and she frowns. He doesn’t sound mischievous when he chuckles. He sounds angry yet silly, like he finds something funny and awful at the same time.

“Come,” he says, offering his hand. “Take me to your father.”

Martha stares into that hand. The palm and fingertips are smooth but sinewy, muscular yet lanky. She cannot imagine what he does with those hands, and she is afraid.

When she says and does nothing, Judge Mal contracts his hand, face grimaces. A sound comes from beneath his long coat, like bones rattling together. Then, slow and slithering, a monstrous scaled tail coils out from under the coat hem. It curves its way up behind him, a sharp sting fixed onto its end. It wafts back and forth over his head, as though tossed by the wind.

Martha locks in terror. Her toes grip the grass.

Then the tail lurches back and swings fiercely down to the side, right on top of the muleless wagon. It shatters it in two parts, and proceeds to batter it into kindling. With every hit, a sharp thud echoes through the ground and up Martha’s feet, and she can no longer keep from crying.

The tail finishes its violence and returns to looming. Judge Mal looks very serious, schoolmaster serious.

“You will not tell me?” he says.

Martha bites her lip, cheeks tearstained. She shakes her head.

Judge Mal sighs. “It really does not matter. I gave you a chance for your benefit, but I don’t need your help. I can feel the pain from here. Great pain.” He licks his lips again. “Much greater than a mere hogshead can supply.”

He steps forward quickly and snatches her by the wrist. She cries out, and he lifts her up, letting her dangle before his face.

“I won’t kill you yet,” he says. “Consider your pain the cherry on top. Have you ever had such a thing? Ice cream sundaes? It’s hard to find them in the country. Harder still to make them yourself. So I count myself lucky, more lucky than you.”

His tail returns, more so, a thick, muscular thing that presses against the ground and lifts Judge and Martha both off the ground, she still dangling by the wrist, crying.

“I will make you watch,” he says, and then slithers down the road from whence Martha came.

Martha stops crying after a while. She tries naming the trees to distract her mind, but her thoughts return to her father. She wonders if he’s gotten enough sleep and would be awake when they arrived. Maybe he’s limped back to the house to deal with his leg himself.

She remembers how once he had fixed a young man’s arm in town. The boy fell off his horse in the middle of the street and snapped his forearm in half. He cried out bad too, and while folks ran for the doctor, her father had leapt out of the general store and set the boy’s arm, using a stick of shaved hickory kindling and the only belt he had, a strap of leather he cut in half and used to secure the stick.

She remembers that general store, remembers she had stood in the doorway while the shopkeeper, an old shawl-covered widow who had inherited her dead husband's business, gaped at the scene, one hand covering her mouth, the other laying on Martha's head. She remembers the awe she had felt—a warm lightness spreading in her head—watching her father work quickly and without a word.

Now she imagines him sitting in the house, legged propped up, braced with a broomstick and wrapped in twine. Wiping his brow with his handkerchief and wondering where she'd been, suspecting trouble, shotgun armed and ready. The whole house ready. Everyone.

“Child,” Judge Mal says, and she snaps to like a wasp stung her, “I do hope your arm has not fallen asleep.”

“I'm fine,” she says crossly, though her wrist and shoulder burn.

“Mind your tone,” he says, glaring down at her. “You have earned my attention. That is your bad luck. You do not want to earn my ire as well.”

Martha cannot understand his look. She knew scolding, but this was not it. His eyes are narrow slits, and his face muscles are as tight as a clenched fist.

“No, sir,” she says, weakly, eyes wide in fear. “No, sir, I don't.”

“Good,” he says. His gaze snaps back to the road like his head is on a spring. “You may be in a fix, and are going to die soon, but that's not reason for you to not be a good child and help me when I ask.”

“Yessir,” she says, and then adds out of fear: “I can get Smith to help you too.”

“Who?”

She looks down and whispers, “Or Path.”

“And who are they?”

She doesn't answer. Knows she said too much this time. Her eyes rim with tears, angry, angry tears.

With a calm precision of movement that can be mistaken for care, Judge Mal reaches over with his free hand behind Martha's head and grabs her by the hair. Then he releases her wrist, and she drops till her hair catches.

Martha tries not to cry out. She doesn't want to cry for this man anymore. She hates him with a depth of hatred she didn't till then know is possible to achieve. She tries scratching at his wrist, but strength dissipates as she feels the sharp burn along her scalp.

"I asked you a question, child."

"My friends!" she blurted out, followed by tears and angry, tiny sobs, "and they're gonna *kill* you!"

He laughs. Deep and hollow. "Kill me, will they?"

"They're like hornets to you! They know the *difference!*"

"You are a confused, silly child," he says, still holding her, "if you think you can lure me into a trap."

He shakes her by the hair and she screams, but then he releases her and she plummets for a moment, only to be caught by the wrist again. The sudden bounce makes her sobs and screams skip a beat.

"I will see to your friends," he says. "And your father, and then I will kill you." He reaches down and pats his pistol. "One shot. You will feel it. I'll make sure. This gun is powerful, but I still know how to shoot to wound little girls. One bit at a time."

Martha wipes her nose and eyes with her free hand and uses what anger she has left to force herself calm. She will spend no more tears on this man. She will spend them on her father.

Her friends will save them both, and they'll take her the right way into town, and she will save all her tears for the doctor, or the old widow of the general store, or any friendly face she sees.

Dangling from Judge Mal's vice grip, she stares out at the trees and shrubs, trying to name them to pass the moments, to hold in the tears, as Judge Mal keeps slithering straight.

Crepe myrtles, she thinks. Hibiscus. Flowers. Like flowers to little girls.

They reach her house, turning onto a dirt path that cuts through some trees off the main road. Judge Mal stops alongside the path and retracts his tail. His feet touch the ground, as do Martha's, though he still has her by the wrist.

Then he pulls out his weapon, chucks her forward. She tumbles a few feet, and he orders her to take him to her father and her friends.

Martha picks herself up from the ground, angrily smacking the dust off her dress, and then balling her hands into fists. The dust on her palms grit between her fingers, and she likes the rough, coarse quality it gives to her hands. It makes her feel stronger, and she resists the urge to cry.

She walks ahead of Judge Mal, her fists balled tight at her sides. She can see her house up the path—a gray, weatherworn shotgun shack with no roof over its porch. The tobacco patch is next to it, and the barn further behind it.

She also sees smoke curl through the air in silver wisps beyond her house, and she feels her stomach freeze. She had already given her friends away to the judge, and now it looks like they have given themselves away.

“Your friends are not cautious,” Judge Mal says. “Let us go around the house, yes?”

He grabs her by the arm and drags her along, and right then and there Martha makes a pact with herself. Live or die, she will not let this man hurt her friends or father.

At the house, Judge Mal peers into the open front door and sees straight through to the open back door. With no signs of life, he walks to one side of the house, Martha in tow, and hugs tight to the wall. When he reaches the corner, he slowly looks around it to the barn. After a few seconds, he wrenches Martha around to look as well.

“And there they are,” he says.

Martha looks towards the barn. Someone had lit fires in the pits, smoldering low in their craters, pockets of pulsing red and orange. Smoke pours straight up from them like they’re holes to hell.

The hogshead is still out front, but Martha cannot see her father’s body from this angle.

What she can see are two men, White and Path, standing near the hogshead, each dressed alike in buttonless blanket coats held shut by tight leather sashes. They each have on a sash turban and ribboned buckskins, and if not for their separate postures, you’d think one is a mere projection of the other.

One stands next to the hogshead, head lowered, hands resting one on the other atop a long, crooked staff. He seems deep in sad thought, face creased with long-felt pain.

The other stands beyond the hogshead, his head upturned, staring at the sky, arms out and palms up as though in petition, eyes open and weary.

From a distance, both men look to be in different forms of prayer, and so it was. Old chiefs of the Cherokee, White Path and Fly Smith, dead generations ago during the sad march of their people. Never reaching their new home, buried in strange soil. Noble hearts to the end, they know how to act around suffering.

Judge Mal can feel it. A deep, sweet suffering. Oozing through the air like honey squeezed from the comb. Pain immortalized in the heavens, meaningful, burdened with great purpose. His knees nearly buckle underneath it.

“What place is this?” he mutters, eyes wide, but then checks himself in front of the girl. He sneers and then grabs her by the hair again. “You did not tell me, child, that this place was sacred.”

Martha doesn't know what that word means, so she say nothing and instead screams. Loud and piercing. As loud as her father had. Louder if she could. The time to die is now. She knows it is time.

With a great scowl and no words, Judge Mal flips her by the hair, through the air, and whips her fiercely against the house.

She hears a flat *whack* and sees a burst of white and then the sky and the world seem to roll away from her down a long, black tunnel. She never feels the impact of the house, nor the thud of her body collapsing motionless into the grass.

It is hard to conceive this man's mind, but so be it.

He thinks to shoot for good measure. He had said he would, and his word is a contracting law with himself against the universe. A ballast of his own will amidst a chaotic Nature. All else in existence was fluid, a flux of meaninglessness, but he stands firm, so he says.

But he sees the blood pour from her tiny head, and deems her unmoving body as no consequence. He leaves her where she lies and peers back around the house, weapon at the ready.

He looks in time to see the two men disappear into the smoking barn.

He sneers. Fatal retreat. No escape. “They think to trap *me*?”

He steps out from the house and walks straight towards the barn, no attempt to hide himself, weapon aimed at the doorless opening.

At the hogshead, he peers over and sees the girl’s father, who appears to be dead, unmoving. He aims at the undamaged leg and pulls the trigger.

The body lurches up and the eyes pop open, wild and alert. Its back arches in pain, but doesn’t make a sound, its breath apparently catching in its throat. It flails for a moment than arches again.

Judge Mal’s jaw unhinges, and his terrible mouth splays apart, and he drinks in the pain, wafting up to him like the scented heat from meat roasting in a greasy iron skillet. He sighs in pleasure, and once he’s had his fill, he reloads his weapon and fires again, this time into the poor man’s head, which bursts like a pumpkin, chunks and juices sprawling. Then the body is still.

“But a taste,” he says, jaw back together. “Time for the meal.”

He steps to the barn opening, weapon aimed. Low fires smolder in a dozen shallow pits. Smoke is everywhere. He cannot see to the back of the barn.

“A fitting lair,” he mutters. “If I believed in hell, I would deem this its entrance.”

His weapon scans across the obscured interior. Smoke rises steadily from each crater like steam out of a dozen boiling pots. The fires within pulse like heartbeats, slow but quickening. Their red and orange glow infuses the lower fringes of smoke.

He fires, calmly and deliberately, into the barn. He starts in one corner and moves over to the next. The shots bore through the smoke, leaving a swirling funnel behind them. They *thwack* and *pop* into the wooden wall in the back, leaving a few blurry, jagged squares and holes of light where they had shot clean through.

One of the blurry exit holes blinks as though something passes by it. He quickly reloads and fires in its direction.

The smoke swirls and parts, but there is only the wooden *thwack* and another blurry hole, this one right next to another. Side-by-side, they look like two massive burning eyes looking out through a fog, as dull-bright and blank as twin suns behind a line of clouds.

Judge Mal glares at these two holes that seem to glare at him, wide-eyed and luminescent, a specter come to watch his work unfold, or perhaps to unfold it for him.

“I believe in ghosts,” he says. “I feed on them all the time.”

He glances from side to side and listens. There is only the quiet crackle of the low fires in the barn, sending up smoke like censers full of incense. He has a sudden sensation of standing on the threshold of an awful place, more awful than hell. He stares hard at those pulsing craters, half-thinking there is some rhythm or pattern to their pulsations, like they are not just separate fire pits but also separate notes to some song, some deep music so fundamental to all things that it is too loud for him to hear.

He banishes such foolishness from his mind. There is no order outside of himself, only meaninglessness compounding meaninglessness, fools fretting about in emptiness, signifying nothing.

Yet he considers himself more than nothing. A mind and a will, ready to engage and impose upon that nothingness that hangs over everything like a giant maw, that infects everything, a disease as pervasive as life itself. He’ll bind the smoke itself. Plug up the craters and burn the barn down, and then let the ashes scatter endlessly by the invisible madness of the wind.

“I scour the earth,” he says, gritting his teeth. Then his jaw unhinges again, he breathes deep, and spews fire.

The barn lights up instantly and collapses just as quick. Sparks spray into the smoky air. Mal stands triumphantly, watching the flames dance.

In the middle of those dancing flames, however, two figures stand, hazy amidst the smoke, untouched by flames.

Mal stares at these figures, his features frozen. He feels the heat of the smoke on his skin, and his wide eyes burn, but it is what he cannot see, rather than what he can, that gives him, perhaps for the first time in his life, a twinge of doubt, a stab of fear.

For what he cannot see but instead feels, like a tingle down his spine, is goodness. A deep, abiding goodness, deep as the foundations of the earth, standing out of the fire, out of the wreck, its presence intertwining every grass blade and tree root, racing up trunks and flourishing out of branches like the sound of trumpets cracking the welkin sky, gushing from the ground in unseen fountains, rising like a song, and Mal half-thinks he hears voices: chantings, war songs, dancing songs, beautifully sad songs, gloriously joyful songs, cascading out of the earth and sky to meet him like an army with banners.

It surrounds him. Wraps him up. He panics, grapples with the air, with the sky, with existence itself, but stronger hands than he has ever known hoist him off his feet, and his stab of fear erupts into terror at being so helpless.

Then the presence flings him across the farm where he tumbles end over end across the ground, kicking up dirt and grass chunks. He rolls onto his back and lies still, waiting, listening, terrified.

But that great, unseen goodness leaves him be. It has done what it needed to do, for as Mal lies on his back, recovering his senses, he remembers the words spoken to him.

You will feel fear. You will feel fear.

Martha dreams that she's lying in her mother's soft lap, rocking back and forth on their front porch. Her mother came and picked her up out of the grass behind the house and brought her up front.

"Martha May," she says, "you'll burn your forehead."

Martha leans that forehead into her mother's chest and breathes in deep. Her mother smells like the sky on a clean day, cool breezes and sparkling sunlight. Sweet bird song in spring, like the robins hatching outside her window. Rains that dance on the roof, lulling her to sleep, fresh rains, the kind that do not smell of mud but of the earth, of the richness of grass and soil rising together and mingling as one, the two becoming one in the wet air and in the wet ground.

Her father steps out of the front door, leg whole, and all is well. His sleep has done him good.

"Where you been, Martha May?" he says and stretches and grins. Then he kisses his bride and his girl on their cheeks.

And Martha leans into her father's kiss. His lips and chin and cheeks are rough and cracked like the dirt he tills and turns without aid or assistance, without any ever again, world without end. His breath is warm like summer, like a dry summer when the humidity fades and the June bugs cease and there is a lazy peace like the land has been wrapped in a thick blanket and laid to rest. Her father is at rest, like the land. Those hands that patted her head will be made

no rougher than they are now, and it is perfect, a completion. He has finished the harvest without aid, and the muscles of his fingers and palms seem tense with joy.

And her mother rocks her gently back to sleep, and her father stands over them speaking, and as she dozes she hears him tell of ghosts and flowers and the whole of things with easiness and familiarity, even frivolity, laughter between each word, as though all creation is a playground, and everything in it a toy fit for naming and using, fit for delight.

Path is there. Smith is there. Their families and children. The people they led so far and so long, from home to home, some making it, others not, all present and accounted for here, encircling the two men with song and dance that lifts up the heavens in gladness so sweet and thick it saturates every inch of earth, every drop of pain spilt upon this land. The pain is a stain no more, but another color caught up in a work of beauty so true, if any eye caught one facet of it, they would know for sure everything will be all right.

And Martha dozes listening, feeling the soft solidity of her mother's body, hearing the simple substance of her father's words, the joyous song and dance, and she feels peace beyond any grown-up's comprehension come over her, like she's being dipped into a warm bath, and she sighs as the deepest sleep she'll ever know, so deep it feels like another awakening, comes over her.

Entry 6

My son is a runner. Not a coward, mind you. He runs out of defiance, not fear. He ran from me out of defiance, and I know he must have run from Mallard for similar reasons. Not fear. Defiance. Disgust even. As angry as he was with me, my son is a good man, I know. Know too late.

He could not ride with monsters forever. He has his mother to thank for that. She gave him a healthy hatred of monsters, so his disdain for them was inevitable. It just took awhile for all his bitterness to dry up, but once it did the rage came out. It drips from every word he wrote, thicker and thicker after his old partners—sent by Mallard, no doubt—visited him. My son, having come out of hiding, was soon discovered, and his home tracked down by his old friends, now enemies. They took his Anna from him.

I can only imagine what that horrible day of her death did to him. When all the running in the world failed him, and his old world caught up to him. He scattered references to it throughout the journal, all in pieces I can only put together in speculation and hope, as everything else.

Maybe he had been out hunting that spring day. Came up the trail to home exhausted in the late afternoon, dragging his rifle and sporting his uniform that he wore proudly despite its controversy, for he felt comfortable in the woods wearing nothing else. He did not live in town, anyway. He lived up the mountain.

Maybe he saw the smoke up the mountain, concentrated. Ascertained its meaning like a shot to the face, and charged up the mountain to his home, but it was too late. He smelled the bitterness of burning wood. He saw the rising smoke plume draw closer, thick and balled up like an angry fist.

All was lost. His wife ashes beneath ashes, smoldering. Smoke boiled into the air, coiled like ghostly snakes.

Maybe he raved around the burning ruin. Stamped and screamed and clawed the air and earth, and in the deep woods deer kept their distance, fearing wolves, but wolves kept their distance, fearing something dreadfully kin and yet other.

Maybe he lumbered back down the mountain, broken and babbling and pointing accusatorily at nothing. As evening fell, he approached the town and took to the tavern and drank so fiercely from such thick liquors that his eyes began to burn, two spouts of flame in his sockets, and he cursed God and all mankind and the day of his birth.

Awake the next day, outside the tavern face down in the mud of the street. His rifle next to his body. The dew of the morning along his back, and dawn's bright edge resting across the mountain ridge.

He felt the wetness of the dew on his hair and neck, and the throbbing of his brain. He sat up in the mud and leaned against the tavern's coarse wood. He sat unmoved for hours, through the hot noon sun overhead that dried and caked the mud around his legs and dried the dew of his shoulders so that he sat steaming against the tavern.

Maybe he sat for hours more, until the cool of evening fell upon him and a sharp wind cut through his body and rattled his bones and he came to himself and all blind rage was gone and he wept thick tears of mourning that cleansed the dullness out of his brain.

His tears expended at last, he breathed in and out and felt his soul come together like water hardening into ice, the elements locking together into a single, solid result.

He gathered his effects together—hat and rifle and self—and set his face like a flint back up the mountain, back to his home, back to an ending that was now a beginning.

Kentucky, Wilderness, September

Smithy Adams is not lost, though she does appear to wander. She cuts her own way across western Kentucky, and though her path zigzags from road to rabbit trails, she knows exactly where she's going and what she's doing—heading to Mantle Rock to meet her lover.

He had left a letter for her the last night she saw him, giving the location of Mantle Rock. The very next morning, she packed up her things and left the house she was staying at, asking the Methodist minister's widow who ran the place to send a message on up to Philadelphia for her.

“Tell them Smithy's got to detour, but I shall return with haste.”

She cuts a striking figure on the road. A colored woman, beautiful chestnut skin, but she walks with a man-like swagger, as confident as a young soldier striking out for the territories, or for war. Her dark hair shimmers silver against the sunlight, long but smooth, draping down almost to her waist, tied into a ponytail close to her skull.

She carries a knapsack with a few essential—a sheath knife, flint, a bag of fluorite, a box of matches, a couple of apples from the minister's widow, a blanket to sleep in, a brush for her hair, and thick, long-sleeved leather gloves for plying her trade.

Her trade she slings over her shoulder. A cupola furnace, long cylinder of metal that looks like a tin smokestack. Even small ones are massive, but she is massive. Amazonian, taller and stronger than any man, more feminine and graceful than any woman. A long lost woodland goddess. A traveling smelter and blacksmith. The cupola is a gift from her father right before he passed, bought with his own money he saved up for months.

If ever she happens upon a town, she marches straight to the nearest smith and asks them if they needed any ore smelted. Most smiths find her size unnerving and her brass amusing, but

when she demonstrates her skills at the cupola, they are in awe. She sets up the cupola on its thin yet strong legs, lights the forge, works the bellows (borrowed with permission from the smith), and then dumps in the ore, coke, and finally the flux, a mixture of whatever the smith has on hand plus the fluorite she carries, mined by herself whenever she passes Livingston County.

Fire surges out the top of the cupola, and slag pours out a hole and into its own bucket. Then she holds a railroad spike to the clay plug of the tap hole and breaks it open with a few swift strikes of a miniature maul, and purified molten metal pours out like honey.

Sweat glistens across her skin like drops of gold, and her face locks stern like a concert pianist at the keys. The ropey muscles of her large, long forearms knot as she hefts the ore into the top of the furnace, strikes the spike to rebreak open the tap hole, or hauls a bucket of molten metal to the smith, who usually stares at her wide-eyed and hat in hands like she is some female Vulcan with a carry-on volcanic forge.

So the cupola is her lifeblood, her sustenance and substance. Hangs from her back by a multilayered leather sling carved and cut herself, and her tools hang from its metal hide by catgut strands she took from a broken guitar, and they clang against it with each step she takes—maul and railroad spike and tongs. Clattering her presence for miles down the road, for she fears no one, white or otherwise.

The cupola is not, however, her most prominent feature, nor her most prized possession. That is the boar spear that lies across her shoulder, her fingers wrapping fiercely around its smooth-sanded shaft.

The spear had been a hoe, also given to her by her father, Willie Adams. He had been one of Nathan Bedford Forrest's slaves. When war broke out, the infamous general freed all his

slaves, and then asked if any of them cared to join him in the fight against the North. Of the over fifty slaves he had asked, Willie was the only one who refused and ran away, taking his just-born daughter with him and a hoe he stole from the shed. He'd use it to fend off bandits and bushwhackers on the road, and then tend his own garden if he ever had the land for it.

Willie made his way to Texas. Although a slave state, its wide country was sparsely populated, and many a freed slave or immigrant recently landed made their way to that wide country, founding towns that sprang up almost over night. The truly daring headed deeper south to the Mexican border, where ranchers kept grand estates. They cared not whether you were colored or Christian or anything at all. If you could work, they'd pay you.

And so Willie made his way to the border, and learned how to shoe horses for the ranchos and vaqueros along the Rio Grande. He named his daughter Annie, but everyone on the ranch called her "Smithy," since she spent every day at the forge, watching her daddy hammer out horseshoes. He learned smithing fairly well, and soon his new knowledge led him to despise his old slave life more than he ever had. He taught his daughter the only trade he cared to teach then, refusing to teach her farming or any kind of plantation work.

"You take that hoe, honey-Ann," he said one day. "You take it and do with it what you want. Make something nice out of it, but don't let it be a hoe. We Adams will never till ground again. Never again."

When she was fourteen and beginning to grow large and tall, she made it into a spear, a choice that shocked and amazed not only her father but also all the ranch hands and the rancher himself.

The only one not surprised was the rancher's wife, a former schoolteacher who tutored her own children, and taught Smithy to read and write and also gave her access to any book she

wanted in the ranch's sizeable library. Her favorite quickly became *The Faerie Queen*, and when she was not reading or helping her father at the forge, she'd pretend sticks were swords and that she was a knight errant in a land of sun and horses.

So she knew exactly what she would do with the hoe, because her favorite character in *The Faerie Queen* was Belphoebe, the huntress of the woods, armed with a bow and a boar spear.

Smithy asked one of the blacksmiths—a barrel-chested Norwegian man whom she saw making replica sabers for the rancher—if he could help her, and he said he would gladly try, for he respected the horseshoes of her father.

They worked for weeks on it, in between other work. The wooden handle was too dried out and brittle, so they crafted a new one from ash wood. The hoe head was made of iron, and wasn't too rusted. They purified it easily enough in the furnace, and hammered it out together, adding iron ingots to strengthen and enlarge it. The Norwegian man knew of boar spears from his own childhood hunting them, and he and Smithy managed to make a solid, teardrop-shaped blade head. Once fitted to the now sanded ash wood shaft, it was a thing of beauty. She laid it across her shoulder like a fishing pole and strutted around the ranch before heading to the stables to show her father.

“Lord sakes, honey-Ann,” he said but could say no more. His daughter stood tall in the stable doorway, silhouetted by sunlight, her fist balled into her hip and the spear standing tall next to her, hand gripped tightly around it. Tears welled into his eyes. “I came in with a daughter, but she's walking out a warrior.”

She took that proclamation to heart, and from that day forward she took no guff from anyone. She carried the spear everywhere with her—to bed, to eat, to the outhouse, to the forge,

into town, and on the road when she finally left the ranch after her father's death. And for years on—after making a name for herself smithing and smelting wherever she could, tangling and tearing up any drunks or varlets that dared accost her for her race or gender—if anyone asked about her, there was always someone who would say, “There goes that ranch hand colored girl, Smithy of the Spear.”

Now she walks the miles towards Mantle Rock, seemingly incapable of exhaustion, humming to herself a few hymns the minister's widow had played on an old upright piano every afternoon. Songbirds sing along overhead, flittering from branch to branch like animate leaves. Oak and cottonwood shoot up along the path she walks, boughs full and green. She takes a break under an oak with a high canopy, not because she's tired but because she wants to enjoy the late morning.

She drops her cupola down next to the tree, propping it within the roots, and leans her spear against the trunk. She pulls out her sheath knife and an apple and carves wet apple slices straight through like she's scalloping a potato.

Smithy enjoys the cool day, the cool apple, and the joy turns her thoughts to her lover. Met weeks ago in Memphis. There had been a man, a white man, standing about watching her work, differently than the others watched. The heat of the furnace made her skin sweat and run hot, but every time she had turned her back to this man, a sharp cold patch formed at the base of her neck. In the midst of her heated labors, it was not altogether unpleasant. Nor was he, from the glances she cast his way while waiting for the slag to rise. His sandy-blond beard was unkempt and his clothes dirty, and his heavy rucksack signaled a vagabond lifestyle, which appealed to her. Another wanderer of fairyland, like her.

Smithy chucks away the apple core, sliced square from her odd cuts. She fetches her spear, steps out onto the trail, and whistles to the songbirds, but then stops midtune. She is being watched.

Our man Johnny is watching her, not ten feet down the road.

Smithy narrows her dark eyes and looks him up and down. He was white, too manlike to be young, but not withered with age either. A haversack is slung across his back. His repeater is in one hand, and his other hand is hooked around his belt. The dragoon makes his belt sag. His eyes sit shaded under the brim of his hat. Everything still Confederate gray, though dusted and fading near to bone white.

“What business do you have gawking at me, rebel?” she says and places her hand on her hip.

“I apologize,” Johnny says. He removes his hat, revealing shaggy brown hair, eyes gray like a slab of cold granite. “My name’s Johnny.”

“I didn’t ask for your name.”

“All the same, ma’am.”

Smithy is playing with him. The moment his hat lowered and she saw his eyes, she knew he was a dangerous man. But she fears no one, takes no guff, and she wants to play some more.

She sweeps her free hand back and bows, jutting out one leg to counterbalance herself. The spearhead shoots up straight overhead.

“My name is Smithy Adams. Smithy of the Spear in these lands.” She snaps back up straight and returns her free hand to her hip. “And to whom do I have the honor of speaking to on this glorious morning, on this glorious road?”

“I already said my name was Johnny, ma’am,” he says, grinning.

Smithy frowns, embarrassed that he won't play along. "So you did."

"You talk strange, ma'am," Johnny says.

Already embarrassed, Smithy gives in to outrage. "And exactly *how* am I supposed to talk?"

Johnny's grin collapses and he looks down, red-faced.

Now Smithy grins, surprised but proud that she can turn a white man red.

But then she finds it odd that a white man is ashamed at all at offending a black woman, especially where no one else can see.

"You don't need to be embarrassed," she says and lets her spear stand next to her.

"Though it does speak to your character."

"Thank ye," he says, hat still in hand. "Where you headed, lady?"

She perks. There's softness to his pronunciation of "lady" that she likes, and she strikes a more impressive pose, cocking her hips and holding her head up.

"I'm off to meet my lover at Mantle Rock, sir."

"Why that sounds mighty fine, ma'am."

"Indeed," she says, deepening her voice on the back end. She's playing again. "And where are you headed?"

"West for now."

She raises an eyebrow. "Oh? Where are you from?"

"East."

She frowns. He looks ashamed again but keeps eye contact.

"Sorry, ma'am. I haven't had to fully explain myself in a long while."

"Ah. Got secrets?"

“Burdens.”

He says this with a soft yet stern finality, like someone hitting a lonely high key in a sad piece of music, and there’s a gravitas to it that awakens similar music in Smithy. She stamps her spear excitedly on the ground.

“You sound like you’re on a quest.”

Johnny looks to the trees as though thinking about that. “I haven’t ever considered it that way, but I’d like to now, I suppose.”

“Excellent!” she says and hoists her spear back up on her shoulder. “May I join you as far as Mantle Rock?”

His eyes widen, and she suspects correctly that he’s not surprised very often.

“Ma’am,” he says, then swallows, as though savoring better words. “I can be...dangerous company sometimes.”

“All the better,” she says. “I fear nothing, sir. Monster or man.”

Johnny eyes her spearhead, coal black under the shade of the tree. She is such a jarring presence, but a welcome one, and that surprises him more than anything. Everything about her—voice, figure, size, poses, oddities—they all pointed him back somewhere, like dim stars in the sky, pointing you down a road long forgotten.

“Well all right then,” he says, replacing his hat. Then bows: “My lady.”

Smithy nearly bursts into tears of joy, or pain. She dashes over to the oak and hauls her cupola up onto her strong shoulders.

Johnny thought he had seen all a man could bear in this one meeting, but the sudden cupola, tall and cylindrical and seemingly plucked right out of the ground, shatters all future expectations. He makes a silent vow to never be surprised at anyone or anything again.

She joins him on the road. “We’re just like Sir Campbell and Triamond,” she says, then looks at him crossways, “though I hope I don’t have to fight you.”

“Ma’am,” he says and replaces his hat on his head, “I hope not myself.”

Sometime later they make a small camp under a live oak, shaggy with Spanish moss.

Johnny pulls biscuits and ham out of his haversack. Smithy slices up an apple, carves some strips of ham, and cuts several biscuits in half. She then assembles six ham-and-apple biscuit sandwiches, which they split even. He thanks her.

“I’m glad to do it,” she says, sitting back against a tree and eating. “I don’t get to put food together as often as I like.”

“You like to cook?”

“I like to *build*, sir.”

“I see.”

They listen to the rustle of birds hopping through the underbrush. Johnny removes his hat again and sets it on his knee. He removes the Dragoon as well and sets it in his lap.

“Where’d you learn to smith?” he says.

“My daddy taught me,” she says, licking biscuit crumbs from her fingers. “In Texas.”

“Texas is dangerous for colored folk.”

“Not for me, it isn’t.”

“True enough,” he says. Then: “You’re far from home.”

“I believe I could say the same of you, sir.”

He grins crookedly and rubs his face. “So who is this lover of yours, if ye don’t mind me asking?”

Smithy pulls her knees to her and leans back, her head looking up through the moss-heavy branches. Staring hard through the criss-cross of limbs and leaves and moss and light patches, as though she could divine the clearest memory from their geometric eccentricities.

“Down in Memphis, weeks ago, I met this man who told me he needed my smithing skills up in Pennsylvania, where he owned a slew of steel mills. My daddy taught me to be wary of white men in fancy clothes, and his were about as fancy as I’ve seen, and white to boot! He was as white all over as a snowman, and came off just as cold. But I had my spear, and my strong arms and legs, so I told him I’d make my way up there as fast as I could, which isn’t too fast. I like walking.”

“I stayed around and did some smithing, and there was this white man—worn looking, with deep blond hair like melted gold—who kept watching me work. I kept an eye on him at first, especially when I felt him following me around the town, eating where I ate, standing on the far side of stores and porches from where I was. I kept my spear close. Even showed it off to some kids in a churchyard who wanted to see how thick a limb it could cut. I obliged, looking over my shoulder to make sure that man was watching, which he was.

“The kids made great haste in finding all sized limbs. They set them up, one at a time, on some unoccupied fence struts, and I take solid whacks at them, swinging down like an ax, across like a scythe. Forward like an auger. I sliced everything they laid in front of me, and the boys cheered, and the girls gasped, which annoyed me a bit. I wanted them to cheer too.”

Her jaw muscles clench like she’s grinding her teeth, but then she relaxes. “Well, he was watching, along another side of the fence, one foot propped up on the bottom rail, leaning over and just staring. I had had enough and shooed the kids away and stomped my way across that churchyard and demanded that he explain himself. That it was not polite to stare at a lady.

“That’s when I got a good look at his eyes,” and here her voice softens and her breathing slows, and Johnny half-thinks she has fallen asleep, “they were the saddest eyes I’d ever seen. The curves around the sockets looked skewed further down, like they’d been heated and hammered extra crooked. The irises were deep green like wet grass, and for some reason that made them look sadder still.

“I was so taken aback that I actually mumbled an apology to him! He waved it off and said he meant nothing by it, except that I drew him in ways he did not understand.” She smiled. “I knew that talk the moment I heard it. It’s called love-making.”

“That it is,” Johnny says. His cold gray eyes grow sad themselves, but Smithy does not see it, her gaze still up the tree.

“Well, he walked off, and I felt bad to see him go, but I had miles till Pennsylvania. So I took off again, and by evening I found a preacher’s widow who let out her house to me. That night, long after the moon rose, I guess he had been following me, because I woke to find him standing in my room. I only knew it was him because he had his hat in his hands and stood in a patch of moonlight from the window. I could see his sad eyes again, though I couldn’t make out their green color.

“I guess any other girl would have screamed up a storm, but I fear no one, rebel. I deal with my own business, too. So I pulled my spear on him, which I keep in the bed with me, but he raised his hands and said he’d leave if I asked. I told him to do so, and he said he would, but he said if I would, or wanted to, would I come to Mantle Rock to hear what he had to say.

“I said nothing to that, and he left nice and quiet. I stayed up all night, thinking to myself, what kind of love story have I stumbled into?”

Smithy looks back down to continue her story, but catches sight of Johnny's face. Tears run down his cheeks, silvery streaks like the edges of knives, and he's gazing down as though lost in thought, or else listening to her very deeply.

The last man Smithy saw cry was her daddy, telling her about the first time he met her mother. She remembers how watching his strong shoulders and back tremble and then start to heave with sobs was like watching a grand old house slowly collapse in on itself. She knew then that men could be broken.

She leans forward and repositions herself so she can reach out and touch his shoulder, but before she can say anything, a filthy voice speaks.

"Damn if that isn't the best whore story yet."

Smithy and Johnny see three bushwhackers step out of the underbrush near them.

One is lean-faced and in dark brown buckskins. He carries a chip-bladed ax, with no other sign of weapons. The other two men are of average build—one with a great beard and one without—and both wear Union blue jackets, clearly stolen from the dead, seeing how they are the wrong sizes for them. One is too big and the other *far* too big, wrapped tight around the beardless man like a cocoon and held tight by a strand of rope, sleeves rolled up to his wrists. He and the bearded man both hold Navy six-shooters.

"Don't stop cuz of us," the ax-man says, the one with the filthy voice. "Tell us how you're goin' off to fuck a white man."

"Tell your whore story," the beardless one spits out too excitedly, like a sneeze, licking his grinning lips.

"Every peckerwood wants his nigger woman," the bearded one muses and then thumbs towards Johnny. "Like this one here. You done pecked her yet, peckerwood?"

Here his head explodes into a burst of red powder and chunks of gibs. This and the thunderous report of the Dragoon paralyze the remaining men in shock.

Johnny had snuck the Dragoon out of his lap and into his hand, and now he sits, outstretched arm aiming the gun at the headless trunk of the once-bearded man. The corpse collapses straight down like it's been dropped out of a tree.

The ax-man and the beardless one each take a step back. The one holds the ax handle as tight as if it was his mother's hand, while the other holds his six-shooter limply like he forgot what it was. Their braggadocio wilts.

Johnny's eyes brim with wrath so pure it boils his cold gray irises into molten quicksilver.

This does not compare, however, to the rage that erupts from Smithy. She gives an angry, deliberate, high-pitched scream like she's giving birth. Springs to her feet, spear already in hand. Takes a large, sweeping step towards the two bandits, and hurls the spear. It flies past the beardless one, making him blink. It plunges into the chest of the ax-man, whose mind has yet to catch up to or comprehend what just happened. He falls back, straight and instant like a board knocked from the side of a house.

The beardless one stands alone, wordless, trembling so hard that he shakes his Navy six-shooter out of his limp fingers, and it falls barrel first to the ground where it sticks in the dirt, lingers upright for a second, and then topples over like a felled tree.

Then his body doubles over and flies backwards as the Dragoon thunders again. He flies back farther than the blood that initially bursts from his gut, rolls once, writhes once, and then is still.

The ax-man is still alive, but is fading out. He lies on his back, spear sticking straight up out of him like he'd been staked to the ground.

Smithy steps towards the ax-man and lays one hand on the spear shaft. She leans over and looks down into his eyes, not sad but sleepy eyes, half-cracked, never to close. He has the ease of one who sleeps, or else the concerned yet losing battle of one trying to remember something before falling asleep.

She steps back, grips the spear shaft, and pulls it out. Then she thrusts it several times in and out of the ground to clean it off. She used the end of the man's shirtsleeve to wipe off the blood-congealed dirt.

Johnny stands. "You're very good at killing."

"I was mad."

"I noticed."

"You were mad too."

"So I was." Johnny walks to the dead beardless one. He retrieves the Navy six-shooter but tosses it when he finds the barrel stuffed with dirt. "What were you mad at?"

When she doesn't answer, he walks over to the headless one and retrieves his Navy six-shooter, inspects it, and then stuffs it into his belt opposite his Dragoon.

"Well?" he says.

She sucks in a quick breath as though startled, and then looks at him. "My daddy told me about bushwhackers. Told me they were monsters of the truest sort, vagabonds of violence, men more senseless than beasts. Monsters got no business being on this earth. No business messing with good people. No business saying horrible things to people."

"So you know something about monsters."

“This isn’t the first time I’ve had to kill, rebel.” She speaks with authority, heavy like earth. Then: “What were *you* mad at?”

Johnny looks down at the three dead men, as though waiting for them to say something. He walks back and fetches his haversack and Winchester repeater and comes over and stands before her much as he did when they first met that morning, except his hat is on his head and shading his eyes, his sad, gray eyes.

“I enjoyed your story,” he says. “I didn’t like it being interrupted.”

Mantle Rock is a sandstone land bridge thirty feet off the ground and almost two hundred feet long. It stretches itself in the midst of the woods, running alongside a large, long rock face, forming a kind of open-air grotto. A lone tree sits in the open space between the bridge and the rock face, and a green pond lies just nearby.

Many people, for good or ill, on long adventures or sad journeys, have made camp beneath the bridge, under its long shadow, and here, in the cool of the early autumn evening, Smithy and Johnny make camp again.

They place their most cumbersome items out of sight, leaning them against the back of the lone tree—knapsack and haversack and cupola and Winchester—and go about making a fire.

Johnny digs a fire pit with his hands and lines it with rocks picked along the rock face. Smithy finds wood scraps among the trees, and returns with quite a load of limbs in her long, strong arms. She drops the load next to Johnny.

“Good haul,” he says and arranges them in the pit.

She strikes the flint with her sheath knife. The fire lit, they sit down against the tree and have another meal of apple and ham biscuit sandwiches.

The fire hisses and crackles in sharp flames out of the pit, and the great roof of Mantle Rock wavers with orange and yellow light. Beyond it, the woods are darkness.

Johnny sits staring at the flames, hat perched back on his knee. Smithy sits watching him, spear cradled against her.

“Why did my story make you sad?” she says.

Johnny shrugs. “It was a nice story.”

“I didn’t finish it.”

“I know. We’re still in the middle of it.”

She grins a sweet, childlike grin. “Did it remind you of something?”

“I had a wife. She died. Killed.”

Her grin drops. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m after the men who done it,” he says. “The ones who burned her alive in her own house.”

“That’s...that’s awful.”

“I’m dealing with it.”

He says these last words with a sharp bite, a sound like winter winds or drawn swords. There is a finality and danger to them, and for the first time, Smithy feels a twinge of fear down her spine, a new sensation that renders every position she sits in uncomfortable somehow.

“This lover of yours,” Johnny says. “How do you know he’s comin’ here?”

“He’ll come, because he knows I’ll come,” she says. “He has my crucible.”

“Beg your pardon?”

She tucks her knees close to herself again. “When he left that night, I stayed up to make sure he never came back, but sleep took me sometime before dawn. I woke up and thought the

whole thing was a dream. But then I found my crucible gone from my cupola, and the preacher's widow had a letter for me. It told me where to meet him, and when."

"And you're countin' on it?"

"I want that crucible back," she says. "My daddy gave it to me."

"You love your father?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"You never hated him?"

Smithy gazes over at him. "Why you asking?"

"I hated my father." Johnny speaks with ease, a long mulled conversation. "He is a bitter old stump, hard and rotted. When my mother died, he told me it was my fault. Told me my talk of siding with the south broke her heart in the end. I struck him in the face for that. Last time I saw him. I felt his nose break under my fist."

"Do you think he hates you?"

"I don't know. The last I spoke to him was a letter I sent, after I got married. He never wrote back. He never wrote back. Then everything happened the way it did and I am alone."

He never wrote back.

Smithy speaks with authority: "Then he's a damned fool. Damned old fool with too much pride to know any better. But if he knew what you've been through and where you're going, he'd wrap you up in a blanket and set you by a warm fire, and you'd find a home again, just as you left it. Not lost. Rediscovered. Seen with new eyes. Renewal can happen. It's true. Every fairytale says so."

Something like this she says, for Johnny is shaken to the bone. He gazes on the darkness beyond the mantle and considers Smithy. All she ever says seems whimsical, almost comical, but

then she can sound sad yet stern, like a storm in the night, whose thunder sounds strong but distant. He feels the weight of that sadness, and its beauty, of hope uncertain but still hopeful.

For an instant, the firelight becomes more vivid against the darkness outside, burning in brighter colors just as the blackness sharpens into deeper darks. He never felt such moral clarity before, and though it passes quickly as such things do, he will keep that image under Mantle Rock tucked away in his soul, for much of the road to come.

Smithy and Johnny sit and listen to the crackle of the fire and the hum of cicadas in the trees, the night animals crashing around through the underbrush, squirrels sounding as large as lions in the leaves.

She almost dozes off, but then catches sight of movement on the edge of the darkness, where the firelight passes the looming mantle.

She rouses herself awake and gets to her feet, holding the spear next to her like the lever to an enormous trap in the earth. Her other hand balls into a fist and perches on her hip, and in the firelight her chestnut skin looks copperish.

Johnny sees her stand and he rises as well, Dragoon in one hand, Navy in the other. Cocks the hammers. Gray uniform pale yellow in the firelight.

The movement comes closer, until it steps out of the dark and into the light. A ragged-looking man emerges, blond hair turned orange by the fire. In his outstretched hands he holds a chipped ceramic bowl, small enough to cup neatly in his palms. He holds it out like a communion chalice, but then drops it like it's a snake when he sees Johnny.

“Johnny boy,” he says, hoarse, seething.

In a flash Johnny unloads both pistols at the man. The echo redoubles under the mantle, crashing out like cannon fire.

The man lurches, but does not fall. He stands, bent over. Crooked.

Then Johnny hears the quick rush of air as Smithy thrusts her spear forward, and he feels the spearhead slide quickly and perfectly under his chin and press against his neck, sharp and clean against him, but without cutting. The precision of a blacksmith, of many hammer blows and patient tempering, and he is awestruck far more than he was afraid.

“The *hell* are you doing?” Smithy seethes.

“I know this man.”

“He’s got business with me. I’m honor bound to hear him. To get my crucible.”

“He killed my wife.”

Smithy waits. She eyes her crooked lover, who has not moved, as though dead where he stands. Still bent.

Johnny swallows, throat rolling against the spearhead. “I am a great sinner. I have run with great sinners. And they brought my past down on my head. They took my Anna away.” His teeth clench. Hissing. “I will not be denied.”

He strikes the spear away faster than Smithy can blink. He swings the butt of his Dragoon around, but she catches his arm, and her grip is vice-like.

“Don’t make me fight you, rebel!” she says, but it’s too late.

Johnny’s face roils. Bubbles and boil. Darkness falls upon him, and his shape looms larger than Smithy herself. Pale eyes. Claws. Wolf’s snout bearing jagged fangs. Man no more. He howls in her face, a shrill call that so shakes the world that the mantle threatens to collapse on them.

Smithy's met monsters before, but she's never known one. Her typical brass disarmed, she stands dumbstruck, gripping the jet-black forearm of the pale-eyed creature. It hoists her up and casts her down, and she tumbles away to avoid additional blows, recovering her spear.

The beast rages, tears up the ground, howls and snarls, but then silences, for another sound is stirring. The crooked lover is laughing. He rights himself like a bone being reset. Bloodless bullet holes torn in his shirt.

"Fancy seeing you here, Johnny boy," he says. "I should have figured the hound of hell would find me sooner or later."

Then long sharp limbs burst from his back like tree branches, and indeed he looks more tree than man, multi-limbed. Arachnid. Face contorted and split to make room for his mandible mouth.

The two creatures collided, one lunging in the air, the other scampering spider-like across the ground. They bite and claw and stab with pincers and go for eyes, for mouths, for limbs. The arachnid gets the worst of this, for the beast finds the stabbing limbs most enraging, and collecting them in his terrible hands, ripping them out like weeds. Screams light up the night. Shake rocks, chill souls.

Then Smithy steps in. Flying in. Crying again like giving birth. She slams the beast away with a solid, blacksmith fist to its snout, and it crumples away, howling in anger and pain.

When it regains its footing, it finds Smithy standing guard over the Arachnid, who is creature no more, but man again. Bleeding from his face, arms slashed, bloody, and broken.

The beast howls, but Smithy clacks the butt of her spear against the stone. The sharp crack sounds like a whip, and silence is restored.

The beast glares at her, pale eyes unreadable.

Smithy glares back, but her eyes tear up, anger, sadness. Love raging to the rim.

“I see now,” she says. “Even monsters can be sons. Lovers. In need of renewal. It’s so much harder than I thought, but why am I surprised? Isn’t that what I’ve read before? What fairyland was saying? I’ve been preparing my whole life for this moment, though I knew it not.”

The beast rages at her, but her spear points forward, straight to its face. “I know how to kill, Sir Rebel. But I don’t want to. Stand down. It’ll all be well if you stand down.”

Johnny stills. He sees the spearhead quiver, sees tears on her cheeks. He expected something fierce in her expression, and there is, but it’s the sweetest fierceness, a beautiful rage, fear and love boiling in her eyes. Sweat glistens against her copper-colored forehead, and in her face is a sadness born of joy, of having seen joy and knowing it is greater than evil, greater than darkness, greater than every sin.

He feels a longing pierce him through, the joy in her eyes weakening him like a wound, and bit-by-bit the beast fades away, from black to gray. Our man Johnny, guns in hands, face weary. Remembering clarity. The dark and the light. Darkness becoming light.

Can it be true? Oh, what if it was true?

With a hoarse, cracked voice, he speaks. “Thank ye, Smithy.” He tips his hat, and then: “I’d almost forgotten what heroism looks like. When my significant moment comes, I hope I remember it again.”

He says this last part with a sincere hope. It cracks his heart. It’d been a long time since he tasted hope.

He turns and passes back into the dark, until his frame fades from sight.

Smithy sinks to her knees, feeling a gasp of air race into her like the breath of life itself, and then she leaves her spear upon the ground and turns to where her crooked lover lies bleeding, weeping. She holds him up, kisses his head, and tends his wounds.

“I too am a great sinner,” he says, weeping.

“I knew what you were the moment I laid eyes on you,” she says, feeling possessed, speaking earnestly but clearly, like she’s remembering lines long rehearsed but forgotten.

And she washes and dresses his wounds all night, scooping water out of a nearby pond with the crucible, and boiling it clean. She kisses his face and makes him drink clean water till morning, and all the while they speak to each other, she soft but stern, he weary and with tears.

Entry 7

I sometimes wonder if Mallard ever had such a moment of clarity. I don't see how. When I think of him, if at all, he seems impossible to me. But then again, many things you only hear seem impossible, until they happen. Until they stare you in the face.

I'm sure there were days he wished he was still a judge. Nights too, camped in the woods, back to a tree, sitting in the crook of its roots, a fire burning in a small pit. A meager fire, to draw no attention.

In the courthouse, he was the center of the universe, a gravitational pull, pulling men, women, and their words and all the guilt and shame and excuses they had. All the pain. A strong courthouse, sitting like a citadel in the center of a town. Gallows built on the one hand, the cemetery on the other. Windows unshaded and unshuttered to let in the glaring light of day, falling in golden angular shafts along the wooden floor, floors whose wood had been shined and lacquered to a special golden sheen, so that they shimmered like bullion beneath his feet.

A fitting lair indeed.

Alone in the woods, though, fire burning low. Sitting arms crossed across his chest, hands tucked into his pits. His hat sat on his head to keep it warm. He glared into the fire as though daring it to break the boundary he dug for it, waiting. He reached out his hand towards it and felt the warmth press his palm like the palm of another hand, and he shuddered. Shivered up his arm, through his shoulders, and down his back, as though the very warmth was chill.

He coiled his arm back across his chest, like a snake in retreat to its nest, threatening to bite, fearing to be bitten.

He was afraid. He could feel it crawl into him. Feel it sit beside him like a dark companion, hooded and bent and faceless. He did not like it. He hunched down and pulled himself closer to himself and did not like being afraid.

But then, he cannot be humble, so what else is there for him but fear?

Missouri, Ozarks, October

Not a week since the fiddler's death, a sinkhole takes his house.

He had been the fiddler of Merchant's Mill, a small mill town some miles north of Springfield, and he was much missed at his death. He had been carried back into town on a mule cart, shot, stabbed, and scalped. He was not yet forty years old.

He had headed east across the Appalachians, headed to New York to hopefully study under a symphonic orchestra, carrying his own hickory-oak fiddle, a feather dangling from its scroll, and all the songs of the town with him.

Folks of the town still remember the day he left—sitting high on a muscular Morgan horse, bidding farewell as he trotted away by playing an upbeat rendition of “Judge Parker,” his deep green eyes sealed tightly behind pinched eyelids, his head cocked and pressing his blond-bearded jawline into his fiddle.

The Morgan had ridden itself out with him in tow, the high-spirited song trailing along behind him. As its echoes faded away into the hills, many felt that the very soul of the town had been taken away.

The last thing he had said to them before riding off was to look after his house, a two-story, wide shotgun with a porch. Fiddler's House, built by the town back when the mill was built and the town founded, home to three fiddlers prior going back fifty years. Each one died too young (the previous two of disease and the war), and folks took it as bad signs.

When the sinkhole took all of Fiddler's House, it did not bode well at all.

It had happened in the night, and not a soul heard it, for there had been a thunderstorm the night before.

Old Pickle, the millwright, finds it just past dawn, making his waddling way to the mill for early morning prep. Soon after around the gaping crater, smooth edged like a gunshot in the world, a large crowd gathers. Grizzled mill workers and coopers, calloused hands holding hats against their chests. Their hard-faced wives with arms crossed, bodies swaying, shaking their heads. Their children with dirty faces, holding rope dolls or sticks. The town reverend with his grown children. And Old Pickle, chewing a ginseng root and shaking his wrinkle-worn head.

They all stand in a circle around the symmetrical abyss, the pliable limestone eaten away by unseen currents. Some think it best to make a memorial of some sort, maybe even rebuild Fiddler's House, newer and better. Others hold a gloomier outlook—the thing is lost past all recovery. Move on and let it lie. And others still, more foreboding types with wide eyes, call the place cursed and demand it be plugged up, the whole town casting stones into it.

The reverend stands grave but certain in the midst of these concerns, a stone in a shallow but swift river. Given neither to indifference nor superstition, he thinks a memorializing would be best. They will dedicate the spot as a shrine to fiddlers lost, to all the songs and stories they embodied in their minds and fingers and fiddles, and there will be mourning and testimony, and a lovely polished wooden plaque set in the ground near the hole.

Then they'll throw a party up at the big mill, in surcease of their sorrows.

“And how the hell we supposed to have a party with no fiddler?”

“Georgian,” the reverend says, eyes narrow, “mind your words in my study.”

“Damn your words,” Georgian says, standing thick but looming in his tweed long coat and bowler hat. “I don't need to tell you that fiddlers are even more revered than your own person. To lose one is to lose all the morale in a town.”

“I am aware.”

“I didn’t throw good money into this mill to see it fail.”

“I am aware of that too.”

“Then what the hell kind of memorializing are you doing without a fiddler?”

“Rickter’s got a banjo,” the reverend says, shifting in his leather chair, thankful his mahogany desk sits between him and Georgian. “Miss Holly has a portable harpsichord.”

“Damn them to hell if they don’t have a fiddler!”

“Georgian—“

“It’s a metaphysical problem, reverend,” Georgian says, placing one hand on the desk, making it creak. “The presence of other musicians *without* a fiddler makes the fiddler’s absence that much more acute.” He places his other hand on the desk. “You do understand the metaphysical, do you not?”

The reverend frowns. “I understand the problem you’ve posed, yes.”

Georgian sighs and rubs the gray rim of beard across his chin, as though a child is taxing him. “This party can’t happen until we find a new fiddler.”

“It’s too soon for a new one, I think,” the reverend says. “People are still mourning for Cory.”

“Mourning and not *working*.”

“These things happen.”

“Well you’d better find a fiddler and make *that* happen.” Georgian reaches into his coat for something. “Or else this party will not happen.”

“De *hell* it won’t!” comes a croaking voice from behind.

Georgian turns round, hand still halfway in his jacket, and sees Old Pickle standing in the doorway. His limp-rimmed hat sags like a wet leaf on his head. His overhauls are almost as brown as his boots, so long encrusted with years of dirt. His bony chin is thrust up and out as if his wrinkled face is tightened into a scowl. He swaggers up to Georgian with an old man shuffle that resembles waddling. Stares up into the face of the taller Georgian, his eyes narrow.

Georgian stares down incredulous into that creased face. "Who are you?"

"Name's Pickle," he says, spitting out the P. "Call me Old Pickle, on account I'm old since the war and my wrinkly skin is tanned crisp by God's good sun."

Georgian removes his hand from his coat, forgetting to grab whatever he was reaching for. "I'm afraid these matters are over your head."

"Everythings over my head on account of my hunch." He thumbs over his back and then points to Georgian's face. "Including your snot-nosed shit head."

Georgian blinks.

Pickle leans around the larger man and looks at the reverend, who sits at his desk still, head in his hands. "I beg yer good pardon, reverend. You know my mouth ain't been sanctified yet. Prolly never will."

The reverend waves him off without looking up. Pickle looks back up at Georgian.

"You say this is metapie in the sky. I say it's a simple business. The reverend needs a fiddler, I'll find him a fiddler."

Georgian's massive frame shakes with a guffaw. "You're a bit old to travel about."

"I may be old, rat bastard, but I'm hale." He loops his thumbs into his overhauls and puffs them out. "As hale as God hisself."

“Be that as it may,” Georgian says, composing himself through clenched teeth and fists, “I’m quite certain other persons would be preferable.”

“And I’m quite certain of three things.” Pickle holds up three bony fingers and counts off. “Jesus Christ loves my soul. My wife’s still beautiful naked. And yer full of shit.”

Without waiting for reply, he waddles around the stunned Georgian and takes his hat off once he reaches the desk. “With yer blessin, reverend, I sure am gonna try.”

“Pickle,” the reverend says, looking about and trying to smile. “I can’t ask you to do that.”

“I ain’t asking for your permission,” Pickle says. “The town needs a fiddler, I get them a fiddler. I get this town whatever it needs. Always have for twenty years now. I’m going.” He leans over and presents his bald, blotchy scalp, the only smooth part of his head, to the reverend. “Will I go with or without bein benedicted?”

The reverend stares hard and uncertain into Pickle’s baldhead, like a fortuneteller gazing into a crystal ball, divining nothing. He glances at Georgian, who stands red-faced and ready to kill, a black anger glazing his eyes.

The reverend purses his lips. He doesn’t like Georgian. He isn’t sure if he believes in Pickle, but he knows he did not like Georgian.

If for no other reason than sheer defiance, all he can do given his station, the reverend places his hand on Pickle’s warm, rounded head.

“God bring you back to us,” he says and smiles. “Whatever you find.”

The reverend spends the rest of the early afternoon assuaging Georgian and promising he will send out a better, younger search party to locate a new fiddler. Georgian begrudgingly

accepts these assurances, and leaves in a huff that same day. The reverend sees him off, making sure he avoids seeing Pickle again.

Meanwhile, word spreads like fire throughout the town that Old Pickle is headed to find a new fiddler, one to make the mill party truly bonafide.

As Pickle waddles from the church and down the main street to his house, more and more people start shaking his hand and wishing him well and patting his back. Soon his waddle turns into a jig, his crooked legs strutting out, his body swaying like he's a metronome. The closer he gets to his house, more people stand out on the porches of their shops and houses and start clapping to his rhythm, whopping and hollering as he swings down the road.

The only one not clapping is Pickle's wife Beatrice, who stands outside their small cabin wrapped in a shawl, watching his approach. She's twenty years his junior, a handsome lady in her sixties, whose long blond hair has turned a wheatish silver. The closer he comes to her, the slower he goes, for her eyes show no pleasure.

"Bea honey," he says some thirty feet from the house. "Don't send me off with a scowl, now."

"What business you have making such plans without me?"

"Bea honey," he says. "I had a callin on me. Strong as God's right hand." He raises the offending hand.

She crosses her arms. "And how are you gonna handle yourself out there?"

"You's as sweet as your name, Bea honey."

"Don't you change the speech on me, Pick." She waves a thin finger in the air. "I will not have it."

“I got my draw knife,” he says, raising both hands to simulating holding the two-handled, bowed blade. “I’ll bring it with me. Sneak up on anybody real quiet like.” He bends his knees and crab-walks over until he stands squat in front of her. His toothy grin stretches his wrinkled skin.

Beatrice leans down to look him in the eye. “I believe in God’s callings. But I do believe I need to hear you say that you aren’t going to get into trouble. I need to hear you swear your safety.”

Pickle takes opportunity of his wife’s leaning posture to stare down her blouse to her sagging bosom.

Beatrice takes her same thin finger, as straight and sharp as a knife, and lifts his bony chin to stare her in the eyes.

“Do you swear your safety, Pick?”

“Bea honey,” he said. “You’s as sweet as your name.”

“Do. You. *Swear?*”

“Hell yes, I swear,” he says, and steals a kiss.

Pickle finds an empty gunny sack that still smells of potatoes and rice. He fills it with what essentials he can think of: some apples, a slab of bacon, some corn muffins, some money collected around town by the reverend, and his draw knife, its arched blade sitting perfectly atop the pile. He ties the sack off with a long strand of hemp rope, slings the whole thing over his shoulder, waddles over to his wife and kisses her again, and then waddles off down the main road.

His departure is full of fanfare. Folks line the streets to send him off, waving hats and kerchiefs. Rickter brings his banjo and Holly her harpsichord, and together they play some upbeat hymns. Folks dance on porches and rooftops, and Pickle jigs his way straight down through the midst of them, even after the town disappears from sight and the music fades in his ears, he still keeps jiggling, hoping to hear that music again once he comes back over the hills, fiddler in tow.

He heads south towards Springfield, the closest and biggest town he knows. Figures he'll find a fiddler easier down there, and that he'll get there by evening if he walks straight and without interruption.

He makes good time for a man of any age, waddling down roads and criss-crossing through woodland paths, wrapping around the lumpy Ozark hills. He'll swing his gunny sack around front and fetch an apple out and retie the bag and sling it back over and munch on the apple, all without stopping or even slowing his pace. He knows these lands, these roads and paths, too well.

"I am a child of hills," he says to the squirrels and songbirds rustling overhead.

Then he busts into a jig and song of his own devising.

I am a child of hills

Make my way around these rills

Don't need no thrills or bills

Oh I am a child of hills!

This he sings in endless repetition, without exhaustion, like a child never tiring of the same game.

He reaches Springfield by evening and waddles casually down the empty main street, the same street where Wild Bill Hickok had shot Davis Tutt in a gunfight not twenty-five years prior. Pickle knows this because he had been there. Saw the very pocketwatch Tutt had stolen that precipitated the fight in the first place.

Pickle stands still in the street and lets the dirt crunch under his boots. He glances up at the star-pricked sky and feels the evening breeze. He smiles, looks down the road, raising his forearm in front of him the way Hickok had done to rest his pistol across it and get a more accurate shot.

“Faster fighter never wins,” Pickle says triumphantly, as though reliving the fight as his own. “The calm and the patient will inherit the earth.”

A lone deputy, making an evening round, comes walking down the road and spies Pickle standing and talking to himself.

“You fit as a fiddle there, old timer?” he jokes.

“Sir,” Pickle says, lowering his forearm and waddling over, “I take you for a messenger from God hisself.”

“Is that so.”

“Damn right,” Pickle says and hoists his gunny higher up his hunched back. “I been sent to find a fiddler. Whereabouts might a good Christian find one?”

“The saloons a good bet for music, old timer,” the deputy says and then smirks. “Not exactly where good Christians would go, I suppose.”

“Damn yer ignorance, son!” Pickle says and waddles past him. “If Christ hisself can confabulate with whores and bastards, than any good Christian sure as shit can.”

He waddles on, leaving the deputy alone in the street, dumbfounded and frowning.

The saloon disappoints Pickle greatly. Not only is there a deficit of whores and bastards and good Christians, but the musicians claim to be “classically trained” out of Philadelphia. Their fiddler—a young lady with straight, long hair—calls herself a “violinist,” a word Pickle grimaces at, his wrinkled skin etching out like a spider web across his face.

“Too many damn syllabi,” he says accusatorily to the violinist, waving his bony hand in dismissal. She scowls at him, but she and her two male companions, a cellist and a pianist, soldier on and play their set.

Pickle sits to listen a while anyway and rest his feet. He orders meatloaf and buttered potatoes, two buttered biscuits, a slice of hot peach pie, and a pint of sarsaparilla. The saloon owner marvels at Pickle’s appetite, unencumbered by age as it is, and Pickle eats his plate clean.

The “classically trained” music isn’t as bad as he assumed it would be. He taps his foot listening to long dead folk with unpronounceable names. Afterwards, he apologizes to the violinist and brings each of her troupe a slice of hot peach pie before excusing himself for the evening.

Dreamless sleep, plus a grand breakfast of eggs, bacon, more buttered biscuits, and some hot coffee, all restore Pickle’s soul the following morning.

He meets the classical troupe again—who had stayed overnight as well—and compliments them once more on their strange but fine music. He buys them each a cup of coffee

and asks if they'd be interested in doing some music at a memorial service in a mill town. They say they'll consider it, though they plan to stay in Springfield a bit longer.

Pickle frowns but nods, taking another sip of coffee. He deems his journey unfinished yet, and after polite goodbyes he sets out again, headed east.

All morning he walks along, enjoying solitude and sunshine. An occasional mule cart or horseman passes on, and he waves his limp hat as he waddles. A fox scampers across the road, flying out from the underbrush of the woods on the left to the tall grass and fields on the right. The Ozarks roll all around him, walls of the world, green and kind.

Pickle is surprised how disappointed he is that the classical people were reluctant to accept his offer. For a moment, he doubts himself. He looks down at his dirty, worn overalls. Removes his limp hat and considers it.

Upon hearing gentle lapping of a nearby creek, he cuts through a field and some brush to find it, and stares down into the water to get a bead on his face. Wrinkled. Brown. Old and picklish. He grimaces. He wonders if he had looked too old, too weathered and dirty, for such fancy people. He furrows his brow and gazes out to the looming Ozarks.

He can't get a fix on an answer, and his countenance falls as he plops his limp hat back on his baldhead.

Once returned to the road, he walks a few paces but stops again. Our man Johnny is sitting against a tree alongside the road. His hat is propped on his knee, of course, his repeater leaning next to him against a tree. He just sat down, digging in his bag when Pickle approaches.

“What ya say there, young man?” Pickle says.

Johnny looks up from his bag. He looks grim at first, far too grim for someone so young, Pickle muses.

Then Johnny smiles, amused, but not in a mean way. “Afternoon, grandpa.”

“Is it afternoon, now?” Pickle gazes up and about, attempting to gauge the sun’s position.

“I reckon so. You care for some company?”

“You got any apples?”

Pickle blinks. “Why, I believe I do. What ya ask for?”

“I could make us some apple and ham biscuit sandwiches.”

Pickle’s eyes widen. “Why, you can have my apples sure as God made man.” Pickle waddles over and drops his gunny next to Johnny. “I got some bacon too. Slap some slices of that bastard on there.”

“Thank ye.”

They eat their biscuit sandwiches in silence, save for Pickle’s *emms* and *awws* at how good they taste. Once finished, they lean against the trunk under the shade of the tree and swap stories.

Pickle goes first, telling about Merchant Mill, the death of their fiddler, and his search for a new one. Johnny listens while staring straight ahead across the field, giving an occasional side-glance at Pickle.

“You say he was scalped,” Johnny says. “This fiddler of yours.”

Pickle runs his thumb across his wrinkled forehead. “Peeled like a potato.”

“Well.”

“That bother you?”

“I’m just sorry.” Johnny lowers his head. “I’m sorry such savagery has visited you.”

“Why, that’s a damn fine way to put it, son.” He stands up and stretches his bones. “But don’t you fret about it, now. Violence has a hold on all of us. Like the pull of the earth itself. Ain’t nothing to it but to dance right through it,” and he busts out into a waddling jig.

Johnny goes wide-eyed at this display, but then laughs. “You sure are a jolly old coot.”

“And you sure is a somber young one,” Pickle says, ending his jig and hooking his overhauls with his thumbs. “What’s got ya so dispirited?”

Johnny looks out at the sky, past the humps of the rolling Ozarks. He looks so long and intently that Pickle steals a quick glance in the same direction.

“It’s my turn to tell a story, yes?” Johnny says.

Pickle shrugs then nods.

“Well,” Johnny says, “I come from Pennsylvania, and I’m far from home. I left my father in a fit of rage and sided with the enemy just to spite him. Plunged as deep as I could go just to spite him. I’ve seen such evil, done such, until I could stand it no more. So I left. I found something better. Anna.”

Pickle waits. He knows something important is happening.

“It’s no exaggeration,” Johnny says, “that she saved me. Reached down into my world and pulled me right out of it. I had a whole year blessed with her, until she was ripped away from me all a sudden. Then it was like a mockery, this world. I saw the curtain ripped back. A carrot had been dangled in front of my face, and I knew for certain that evil is the fundamental thing in this world. Cruelty. Malice. Below it all, apathy. A dead indifference. There’s nothing rock bottom but tragedy, and yet—”

Pickle presses his wrinkled lips together. Fingers pat his overhauls. When Johnny stays silent, he whistles.

“You been up ta Springfield, son?”

“Not since the war,” Johnny mutters.

“You know Wild Bill shot Davis Tutt up there.”

“I have heard.”

“I was standing right behind Tutt when the ball went into him. He lurched over and then scrambled to the courthouse.” Pickle mimics the motions, scraping one foot across the ground behind him. “Now everybody wants to be a gunfighter. Seems like its changed the whole world. All cause two boys got in a squabble in the streets.” He then draws a circle in the air with his finger. “Like stones tossed in a river. Ripplin’ out. Who knows how one action can lead to another.”

“Do you think,” Johnny says, “do you think the good guys really win?”

“Win what?”

“In the end, I mean. Finally.”

Pickle looks down into this young man’s eyes, eyes gray but wet, pleading.

“Son,” Pickle says, “they’ll win, but not without pain. No good ever came without pain.”

“Is that so?”

“Sure, son. Even Christ hisself got gripped by pain. But it don’t know what it gripped, huh? Like bramble grabbing a live coal.”

“I’ve heard that before.”

“Well damn, son. If Christ can’t get a grip on violence like it had a grip on him, then what the hell’s he good for?”

“Is that so.”

“God’s truth, son.” Pickle grins.

Johnny stands up and places his hat on his head. “Mister, I think I need to get going.”

“I reckon I need to mosey on as well, son.”

They shook hands. “I do hope you find your fiddler.”

“Thank ya, son.”

Johnny recovers his repeater and pack and walks down the road a bit. Pickle watches him walk on in the bright afternoon, but then calls after him.

“Hey, son!” he says. Johnny turns around. “If you ever head into Springfield, tell them classical folks I’m sorry I’m so old and dirty.”

Johnny stands still for a moment, and Pickle fears he hadn’t heard him. But then Johnny raises his hand.

“I’ll tell them about a jolly old man,” he says. “With eyes of fire.”

He turns and is gone.

Pickle stands dumbstruck for a moment, but then whoops and hollers and walks east, dancing and singing as he goes.

You’ll ne’er forget this jolly old coot

His dirty clothes, his brown dry boots

With eyes o’ fire, he’s come to tell,

If you don’t like him, then go to hell!

Dusk creeps across the sky, and Pickle has yet to find another town. He walks on past exhaustion, but finds no place to rest. He figures he’ll have to make camp somewhere in the woods, so he eyes the treeline beside him, hoping to find a nice spot to set up and build a fire before dimness makes it impossible.

Then he spies a light in the woods and stops. The orange glow of a campfire is pulsing deep in the woods, painting nearby trees with light.

Pickle looks down the road both ways. With no sign of travelers, he sets his gunny down and retrieves his drawknife, holds it with both hands, the blade curved like a cantaloupe. He sets it back in the gunny on top of his supplies, ties the gunny loosely, and holds it to his chest like a pillow. Then he marches towards the light in the woods.

He tries to approach silently, but his bent legs and waddling gait limit any nuances of movement, and when he steps into the patch of ground where the campfire sits burning in a small pit, a man is already waiting for him, sitting on a log, a Schofield pistol aimed right at Pickle's face.

Pickle regards the man and his pistol. The barrel is dark toned and doesn't reflect the firelight. The man looks greasy, his beard frayed and unkempt, though his head is shaved to a fine fuzz. His shirt and trousers look mudstained, and Pickle can smell a powerful rot coming off of him.

"Landsakes, boy," Pickle says. "I bet every catamount in the county got scared off by that damn reek."

The man blinks and then narrows his eyes.

Pickle nods towards the Schofield. "That's a big gun to use on a little old man like me. I ain't looking for a fuss. I just need a quiet place to sleep till morning. That size up with you, or shall I go back into the dark?"

The man makes a low grumble and then lowers his pistol. "I tot yous anuther body."

"How ya figure, boy?"

"I been shadowed." He gestures meaninglessly to the dark woods. "Folks follow me."

“With that scent, ya ain’t hard to find.”

The man’s face screws up as though he’s about to vomit, but then he busts out laughing, a gurgling laugh that sounds pneumonic. He then spits and gestures for Pickle to sit, which he does, setting his gunny right next to him and resting his hand on top.

The man points at the gunny. “Got in der?”

“Some food,” Pickle says, goes to open it. “You want some, boy?”

“Easee,” the man says, raising his Schofield again.

Pickle pulls back and nods. The man lowers the pistol, his eyes wild and wide in his head. Then for a while, they both stare at the fire and say nothing.

“Mister,” Pickle finally says. “You wouldn’t happen to be a fiddler, would ya?”

The man eyes Pickle quickly. “Yous asking?”

“My town needs a fiddler. Ours up and died.” Pickle tries to smile but it doesn’t take. “How bout it?”

The man narrows his eyes at Pickle until they’re two orange-white slits across his greased face.

Then he sets his Schofield aside, reaches down into his own bag behind the log he sits on, and pulls out a fiddle. Its body is bright, perhaps hickory-oak. A lone feather dangles from the scroll. The neck has been earmarked with grooves, reminders for the fingers of common places along the fingerboard. Pickle knows this because the fiddler of Merchant Mill had showed him once, on the exact same fiddle, on a rainy day inside the mill, the fiddler looking for shelter and Pickle shaping staves for barrels.

Pickle eyes the fiddle up and down, and then he eyes the man, who holds the fiddle by the neck like it was a shot rabbit.

Pickle swallows hard. "You play that fiddle, boy?"

The man lays the fiddle in his lap. "I's supposed to meet da judge."

"Landsakes. Is that so?"

"Ta 'ell with him." The man spits viciously. "I already don keeled the one he worried bout." He raises his finger in the air. "Juss one. Time ago."

"That the truth?"

"He weren no good one, eeder. He pud up no fight."

"Well, I'm right sorry about that, boy." Pickle pats the top of his gunny. He can feel the solid bow of the draw knife. "You know how to play that thing?"

"Tryin."

"Well, go ahead and try. I ain't gonna stop ya." Pickle glances around to the darkness around them. "Hell, I need to take care of my necessities, and a bit of music might make things go smoother, if you catch my meaning."

"I only got but one." He raises a finger again, and then stares at it.

"You're a real dumbshit, ain't ya?"

The man grins. He's teeth are as greasy as his face. Pickle swallows hard again, and then stood up, slow and easy, like a harmless old man.

He gets to one knee and then looks at the greasy man. "You gonna play that thing or not?"

"Tryin."

"Well, try away. I ain't gonna stop ya."

"Yous got neckssities."

"That's right."

The man glares at Pickle, who stays kneeling next to his gunny. Then the man looks dumbly down at the fiddle, turns and fetches the bow from the hidden bag behind the log, awkwardly sets the fiddle on his shoulder, and starts to play.

Pickle is amazed any notes at all come forth, but there are a few, all wrapped in a screeching, hollow sound. A soulless sound. It makes his teeth buzz, but he keeps his eyes forward, watching the greasy man. Watching until the music, even this screeching music, takes him away, as all music can, and the greasy man closes his eyes and plays even harder and screechier.

Pickle fetches his drawknife out of his gunny, and then quickly steps into the shadows.

Once outside the firelight, Pickle waddles his way around the edge of the camp, keeping to the shadows. He still isn't very quiet, but the screeches from the fiddle cover his steps well enough. They also fuel his anger. Each wail scrawled out on that fiddle feels like an insult, like spitting right in Pickle's eye. In the whole town's eye. To hear the fiddle reduced to such noises is equal to seeing the fiddler himself reduced to a corpse. It's defilement, though Pickle doesn't have the word for it. He just understands it, feels it deep in his bones. Every step he takes, circling around the camp, is solidified deeper and deeper in resolve, until he stands in the shadows right behind the man, who keeps playing, lost in his own dissonance.

Without another thought, Pickle brings the drawknife under the man's throat, careful to avoid the fiddle. Then he yanks back hard. This is all one fluid motion for Pickle, who feels possessed of something greater than himself at the moment.

The man sits up involuntarily. His mind doesn't fully comprehend what is happening, so his body keeps playing, faster and screechier still. His legs start kicking, though, like they're dancing to his own music.

Pickle bows back as best he can, and then yanks back one more time, and the curved blade bites through muscle and throat and artery, and a gush of blood spills down the man's chest, and the playing and kicking stop all together.

They all fall backwards in a heap behind the log, and the fiddle almost busts Pickle in the mouth. He pushes the greasy man off of him, and for a moment he just lays there, breathing hard, his old heart clacking against his ribs like a rock rattling in a cage. He stares up at the darkness of the tree canopy, splashed here and there with flickering orange light, waiting for everything in him to slow down.

He sits up, kicking the greasy man with his heel for good measure. Then he fetches the fiddle from the dirt and brings it back into the circle of firelight. He walks over to his gunny and sits down with the fiddle in his lap, looking it over. Its bright body dully reflects the firelight, and the feather dangles free and still in the windless air.

He flips it over and inspects it, and here he finds the hole in its bottom. The size of an acorn, the wood around it sheered white, straight-line cracks where the slats buckled. Probably struck a rock in the dirt when the greasy man fell.

Pickle stares hard at that hole. Stares so hard he feels his eyes popping out of his skull. Instead, tears squeeze out and plunk on the body of the fiddle. A faint, wheezing resonance whispers out of the hole with each tear, and soon Pickle weeps like his own child is breathing its last in his lap. He weeps through the night. He doesn't sleep. He doesn't bother with the dead man, nor maintain the fire once it wisps out in the night. He lays on the ground and curls himself around the broken fiddle, and wonders what good, if any, he has done.

Just past lunchtime in Springfield, the classical troupe sits together at a table in the saloon. They have been discussing when and where their travels should take them next, but after a good meal of roast chicken and boiled potatoes they all sit staring off into the distance, enjoying the milling noises of other guests, the clinking of plates, the murmurs and laughs. They all sit in silence and smile and try thinking of nothing.

The young violinist has her long, straight hair up in a bun and her elbows on the table. She sits facing the open door, watching the people pass back and forth on the street, until her view is blocked by a figure standing in the doorway.

She blinks, as though coming out of sleep, and focuses on the figure. A familiar old man comes waddling in with a gunnysack over his shoulder. He looks ragged with walking, and his eyes are raw. No one else regards him except the violinist, who squints at such an odd sight, then widens her eyes in remembrance, and here her two fellows turn to see what has caught her attention so.

The old man approaches the table slowly and stands between the two men, who gawk up at him half amused, half concerned. He sets his gunny on the ground and removes his limp hat and holds it to his chest. He apologizes for being so old and so dirty. He apologizes for being so rude the day before, and he hopes they enjoyed their hot peach pie as much as he had in offering it.

The three stare at him, blinking, and before they could think of what to say, he stoops down and reaches into his gunny. When he stands back up, he holds a weathered violin in his hand, scratches along the neck, a dirty feather dangling from its scroll, and a cracked puncture at the bottom of its body. The poor thing looks broken beyond repair, and the old man sets it on the table gently like an offering on an altar.

The two men stare at each other, dumbfounded, but the violinist fixates upon the poor violin. She never felt such pity before, blossoming in her chest like water coming to a boil. She can hear the old man talking. Asking if anything can be done. Will they help him please. Can't anything be done. Something must be done.

Entry 8

Do the good guys win? That is the question. When all accounts are settled, will it be goodness that lands on top? If you say not, then what hope do you have? If you say yes, then how long can you wait for it before your soul cracks apart from pain?

There's a legend surrounding Tahlequah. After the horror of the relocation, the Cherokee chiefs decide to come together and determine what will be done. Three were meant to meet, but when the day came, only two showed. They waited for the third, but when he did not come, they decided that two is enough.

And that is what Tahlequah means in Cherokee. Two is enough.

Yet what would those two have been if the third had showed? How would the ripples have changed? What would have been lost? What gained?

I try to see them, in my mind's eyes. Two stood in a field. Two men. Two Indian men. Cherokee. Standing, facing each other.

One stood tall with hands behind him, staring into the west. One slouched, his hands clasped before him, watching the east.

The dead grass of the field was red in the failing light, red like blood, autumnal blood. Fields of red grass waving, shaking in the wind.

The wind shook the men. Shook their black hair, long and braided. Shook the dangling ivory and beads of their buckskins. The wind blew from the sun's direction, the sun setting slow and sleepy. A burning copper disc fading into cloudmurk.

The modest sun set and the wind blew and the two men stood, their necks burning, their eyes to the west and the east.

"We have walked far," said the slouched one.

“We have walked far enough,” said the tall one.

“Where is the third?” said the slouched one, scanning the east intently.

“Two is enough.”

“How can it be enough? Can we decide without a third?”

“We will decide. We will shape our world again.”

“We have walked far,” said the slouched one, nodding. The tall one nodded in return.

“Yes. We did. We have.”

The slouched one observed the grass that surrounded his legs. His feet have vanished into their shivering caress. He rubbed his hands and sighed.

“The past is so heavy,” he said. “It weighs on and over us like the sky. Like the rain sky with its deep clouds.”

“Our future will bear it. We will build it together.”

“With only two?”

“It is enough,” said the tall one, unmoved, willing the sun to set.

“What if it isn’t?” said the slouched one. His eyes hugged the east like a man in heat.

“Where is the third?”

“We will build our world again. We will have a future.”

“But the sky. How can we build against it? What hands can outrun it?”

“Our hands will try.”

“It is not enough.”

Just then they both turned to the east, the setting sun to their backs, making their shadows deep and tall. They saw a shape approaching, cussing the now glooming eastern horizon. The fading heat shook the air, and his figure was indiscernible at this time, but it was coming.

Moving slow like a wave, burdened and careful like a wave. Coming to crash. To break. To break open and break out.

Fayetteville, Arkansas, November

“Madam, I am the only guaran-damn-teed monster tracker this side of Appalachia.”

Andrew Burns stands lean and arch-backed before the counter. Sarah Jessie stands on the other side, eyeing him wearily. An open package sits on the counter between them.

“I don’t need a speech, Andy,” she says and pushes the package closer to him. “Just take your parcel.”

“Do you know what this means, madam?”

“Call me Miss Jessie or I’ll smack your teeth.”

Andrew shoots a finger in the air. “Vindication.”

The two stand in Sarah’s photography studio, on the second floor of the Mrs. Young Building, just off the Fayetteville town square. It’s afternoon, but getting close to closing, and Sarah can see the storefront shadows elongate across the square patch of dust that serves as town center.

She sighs and glares at Andrew, who smiles obliviously, a performer on stage.

“I suppose,” she says, “you plan to demonstrate it?”

Andrew blinks and lowers his hand. “Of course! You shall be my first inductee into the Andrew Burns images of glory.”

“Really, now—”

“Certainly you will not begrudge me a portrait?”

He gestures around the room at all the framed pictures along the walls, mostly uncollected purchases, their proprietors having moved on before the pictures were processed. Frontiersmen in buckskins, blank-faced and holding their guns upright. Families, parents sitting and children standing about, less than a day away from headed out on wagon trains to Texas or

even California. Random individuals—a lady in a dark dress with a vase of flowers next to her, a burly man with a ridiculous mustache blocking his mouth and a large brooch on his lapel. Why none of these people ever picked up their photos is unclear. Perhaps they knew they'd vanish, and wanted some evidence of their presence on earth.

Sarah doesn't follow Andrew's sweeping hand, however, and instead sighs and crosses her arms. Andrew, indefatigable in his pursuits, takes this as permission to continue. He digs greedily into the package and pulls out a wad of packing paper. He pushes the package aside, unwraps each piece of paper, until he has his prize.

"Voila!" he says and holds it forward. "The Kodak camera."

It's a rectangular box, so small that Andrew can hold it in one hand. The glass lens sits in the front, while the top has a pressbutton, a small tab near the front, and a turnkey like a windup toy.

Sarah leans in to take a closer look, but catches Andrew's growing grin from the corner of her eye. She stands back up and resumes her disinterestedness, her posture relaxing onto one leg.

"It's marvelously simple," Andrew says, bringing the camera to him. "You just pull this tab, which cocks the shutter. Then you press this button here to release the shutter. And then you turn the key to roll the film to the next frame."

He demonstrates, pulling the tab up—making a zipping noise before a *chick* sets the shutter—and then aiming it at Sarah. Before she can speak, he presses the button. There's a *click* and the lens blinks.

"That's it!" he says and turns the key. "I can take ninety-nine more if I wish."

"Not all of me, I'm afraid."

Andrew flinches like he's been stung, but maintains his smile. He holds the camera up near his head like a platter of food and points to it.

“Scientific evidence, madam,” he says. “That’s what people want. The old is passing away. No more credence to oral traditions. Now we need *hard* evidences. And I’m going to get mine.”

“Well good luck to you, Andrew.” Sarah steps away from the counter, towards the door that leads to her processing room. “You will need it again, I hear.”

“Sarah,” he says.

She stops at the doorway and looks back at him. He holds the camera with both hands now, level with his belt buckle. His smiles shrinks but seems less performative. His green eyes look hopeful.

“You’ll be the first one I show these pictures too,” he says. “The very first.”

“Andrew—”

He doesn’t wait. He steps back, takes a bow, and leaves down the stairs.

“Gentleman, I know what I’m about to say is incredible, but incredible does not equal impossible, if you will but give me the chance to explain.”

Andrew stands on the steps of University Hall, the centerpiece of the Arkansas Industrial College. A strange admixture of grizzled farmers learning new agricultural technologies, and well-dressed young men—beardless, learning what smattering of classical education they could—surround him. He calls them all to himself with both hands raised, and gesticulates grandly as he speaks.

“You may not know me, but I know you. You are the great mass of humanity, the practical and the abstract. The doers and learners.” He chops the air with his palm, forming an imaginary line amongst the crowd, and then gestures to each side with a sweep of his hands. “Normally at odds, here united, not only at this fine institution, but around me as well.

“And who am I? Gentleman, I am the only guaran-damn-teed monster tracker this country has. I know what you’re thinking, and I can tell you it’s false. I am aware of others like me, claiming to be like me, but they’re not. I’m not here to sell you anything. No strange herbal remedies purportedly from the ground bones of vampires and witches. No long expeditions for drafts in your houses or bed sheets on wires. I don’t need you’re money. I don’t even need your credulity. What I need is your time.”

As though sensing the moment, Andrew walks forward slowly, cutting a jagged crease through the parting crowd. “I’m looking for an adventurous soul. Someone with real grit in their teeth,” and here he clenches a fist, “and an open mind.”

He offers an open hand. No one takes it. “I’ve had my fair searches, gentlemen. My long expeditions. I’ve chased stories and signs of the tailypo up through Virginia, scouring the night for the dread red eyes and pointed ears and greedy claws of the beast, even setting up a bed in the middle of the woods and laying in it all night, wide awake, scattergun in hand, waiting for that critter to crawl up over the edge and across the covers.”

He stops in their midst and points sharply to the crowd, to the ground, to the sky. “I’ve tracked the Ozark Howler through this great state. Sometimes I turn up nothing—cuts along slopes that could be bears, small trees cracked and bent by possibly bears, and fast glimpses of wooly objects, large and hairy, lumbering back into the woods, looking like bears. But

sometimes there's something—inhuman cries in the night, shapes and shadows, titanic boulders shoved across open fields, leaving ruts as wide as wagons.”

He etches the distance in the dirt with his feet, and some in the crowd nearby gaze down at it. “And now I have come here, looking for something entirely different, something that could not possibly be mistaken for a bear. The Gowrow.”

The crowd shifts. The younger and beardless ones scoff and cross arms. The grizzled farmers sway from foot to foot and make an uneasy murmur.

Andrew raises his hands again. “You have heard of it, yes? Lizard-like, armed with tusks, and perhaps twenty-feet long, said to slither on its belly like a snake to mask its approach through the grass. That it has three or four eyes, blood red, and it hisses when it's close and moans when it's far. It lives in lakes, or caves near lakes where you can find eggs the size of casks.”

He senses movement throughout the crowd, can see the furthest faces turn and fall away. He shoots both hands up and shakes them.

“I need a witness, gentleman!” he says so sharp and shrill that even nearby birds silence. “Preferably one with a gun. I've done this thing alone for too long. A fool's mission. Nothing is good coming from one person. There needs to be more. Out of the mouth of two or three witnesses shall a thing be established, and I intend to establish me a damn monster.”

“You *are* a fool!” comes a voice from the back, and the crowd jeers.

“I'll take a fool,” Andrew says, undaunted, “if they're willing.”

Here the crowd fractures and to disperses. Some with eyes of scorn, waving him off. Others with eyes of fear, shuffling away.

Andrew raises his hands and shakes them again. "I'm not looking for anyone to believe me! I'm just need someone...not afraid...of the dark."

They're gone.

Andrew's shoulders drop. He walks over and sits back on the steps, head in his hands. The bell tower chimes out noon. *Perhaps they went to lunch*, he thinks, but cannot tell by the University Hall clock tower, which currently stands without a clock.

Once again, Andrew wanders alone into the woods, supplies on his back, fearless in his fixed gaze. The crowds at University Hall disappointed him, but he has one consolation: his Kodak. Dangling from his neck by a leather strap, it will be his lone witness, a lidless eye in a box.

Who needs people? he thinks. *Technology will suffice just as well.*

The land outside Fayetteville is the rolling hill country of the Boston Mountains, the southern most ridges of the Ozarks. Oak-hickory and juniper surround every trail and blanket every hill, and the land is rich with streams flowing down from the plateau further north. Andrew abandons the trails and sticks to the streams, green eyes peeled for a substantial pond or even small lake to materialize. There's no small number of caves in the land, but this one has to be near water.

Not many miles later, with the sun getting on to late afternoon, the stream he's followed ends in a swamp, dank and stinking of rotted wood and standing water. He smiles, standing on a wet rock near where the stream opens up to the swamp.

“Perfection,” he says, cocks his camera, and snaps a picture. Then he makes his way along the edge of the swamp—slow, painful going in the sucking mud of the banks—until he spies an outcrop of stone jutting out of a rise in the ground, the first ripple of a distant foothill.

Here he cuts back into the woods, moving as quietly as he can through the undergrowth, until he circles around and comes upon the outcrop from behind.

It stinks. Wretchedly. Andrew squats to his haunches and holds his hand over his mouth and nose. He can’t help but smile inwardly, though. The place reeks of rot, possibly meat. A predatory lair if ever he saw one.

Rather than investigate the cave—a no-no that would contaminate it with his smell, something he’s learned through trial and error—he cuts back along the muddy bank and sets himself up in a cluster of shrubs adjacent to the outcrop. He eyeballs the cave entrance and is satisfied. If anything tries to slither into it, he can snap a picture easily.

Now he waits, which often feels like the bulk of his adventures. He chuckles to himself about people who think his profession is somehow nail biting or spectacular in any way. Mostly it’s waiting, and more often waiting for nothing. Snuggling down into muddy swamp banks and hoping to see something horrible.

Only once did he truly see something horrible. The furthest his journeys took him was to the edge of New Jersey, where he spent five days and nights scouring the farms and foothills looking for the Jersey Devil. On the fourth night, he tracked something through the dark, following its crashing presence through the shrubbery. He chased that noise automatically, propelled as if by compulsion, the unseen thing pulling him along like he was tied to it with a chain. In the moment, this terrified him more than anything.

Breaking from the trees, stumbling into a field that edged a nearby farmstead, he saw it. Wings spread back, red eyes flaring, long neck arched full-throated to the starry sky, releasing a wail that seemed to crack his skull. He wasn't sure why, but for some reason, he felt that this thing was happy, crying in a maniacal joy, wings stretched back in ecstasy, reveling in its existence. It made no sense to him. Crouched down in that field, holding his head, pants wetted and face tear-stained, he could not understand it. It was like watching a bone rejoice in being out of socket.

He told no one this. The fifth day and night were perfunctory, half-hearted, done near towns, with trails close by. He told no one. Not even Sarah Jessie.

Andrew grumbles to himself and leans over to look at the cave. He's heard nothing, and he still sees nothing. He sits back and gazes up through the trees. Dark's coming soon. He tries to think of other things.

He turns onto his side, watching the woods fade into twilight, a chorus of crickets and frogs rising in unison, and as the dark falls further and faster his thoughts center on Sarah Jessie.

He remembers first meeting her, back when the Ozark Howler brought him to Fayetteville a year ago. She had recently divorced and was having her two-storey business building set up on a sunny afternoon when Andrew had rolled into town. He had hitched a ride in a farmer's seed wagon, who dropped him off in the town square. He had been enamored by seeing the oddity of a woman barking orders at carpenters, and odder still that those burly men took it in stride. She radiated fierceness and respect, hands planted into her hips, elbows at perfect points, wearing a bright flax sunhat.

"Can I ask you a serious question?" he had said, sidling up beside her.

"I'm preoccupied," she had said without looking at him.

“Do you believe in monsters?”

She had looked him up and down, eyebrow raised. “I may choose to start.”

“I’d be glad to help you in that regard.” He had stepped back and raised his hand. “I am the only guaran-damn-teed—”

“Sir,” she had said, turning her whole fierce body in his direction, “I’ll tell you what: bring me proof of these monsters of yours, *any* monster, and I’ll listen to your bluster all day. In the meantime, I beg your pardon.”

She had turned back to her building and stepped forward, abusing a carpenter who hadn’t leveled a window frame.

Andrew had stood with his arm still raised, head watching her walk away. She had not known who she was dealing with, for that challenge had been his mission for the past year. And now, if he could, if he only could.

Andrew turns over and takes one last look at the cave. With still no sign, he sits up and puts his back to a tree, needing to stay awake, listening, over the chorus of cricket and frogs, to hear anything—creaking trees, rippling water, a hiss, a slither, a deeper darkness than the night can make.

Staying alert is Andrew’s true art. He is sure of it. Over the droning swamp sounds and dull darkness that blind him, he concentrates his focus, learning the rhythms of the croaks and buzzes, patterning them against the dark in oscillating lines, and once the pattern is firmly fixed in his mind, he listens for any variant, any new thread or theme, however subtle, that may weave its way in.

He sits in the dark, back against the tree, straining out the swamp music, hands clasping his Kodak. His eyes adjust to the dark enough so that trees stand out as black sticks against a deep charcoal sheet. Moonlight comes in over the swamp, where there are fewer trees, yet it's still filtered sporadically through what trees are there. Andrew sits still, counting his breaths along to the other sounds, waiting.

His face muscles twitch. A new something adds itself to the pattern. Quiet at first, a small disturbance, something out of sync with the rest. Andrew leans out a bit and cocks his head. There's a pulsing *swish* sound, like something walking, careful and slow, through the leaves and underbrush.

Andrew strains his ears, contracting their attention. *Swish, swish*, One leg, next leg. *Swish* leg, *swish* leg. Coming from the woods, towards the swamp, and here Andrew notices the droning fade away.

He turns and lays down facing the cave, aiming the Kodak forward, and then remembers he had forgotten to set it. He pinches the pull-tab and waits. *Swish, swish*. He slowly pulls it up, hoping the drawn out zipping noise sounds like a frog. *Swish, swish*. The tab reaches its end, but there's no affirmative click sound. He presses his fingers together tighter and gives a slight yank and it clicks. *Swish*—

Andrew holds his breath, his body frozen, pressing into the ground. There are no sounds at all in the woods now. He waits, willing the swishing to start again.

When it doesn't, he wills himself instead to sit up and lean out to gaze towards the woods, and here he sees something he had not expected.

Into the woods, a faint orange light wavers across some of the trees.

Andrew narrows his eyes at it. Too small for a campfire. *Maybe a will-o'-the-wisp*, he thinks, and brings his camera up just in case.

Then the swishing returns, and the light seems to move forward, crawling across the trees as it approaches the swamp, and Andrew has a new and more terrible thought: what if the Gowrow breathes fire?

Swish, swish.

Andrew feels pulled by two impulses. One is a sincere excitement of seeing not just a Gowrow, but even one breathing fire, maintaining a tiny puff of it on its nightly excursions, lighting its way. *How whimsical*, he thinks.

The other impulse, however, is a deep dread, deeper than his bones, deeper than anything he'd ever felt before. Something incredible, perhaps wicked, is lumbering this way, and it wields fire. As the light and swishes draw near, Andrew has a flash of thought to Moses hiding in the rock when God walked by.

He holds the camera forward, aiming towards the approaching thing, his thumb cocked above the shutter button.

Steady, he thinks. *There's nothing for it but to keep steady.*

The light comes forward, out from the trees, and Andrew's expectations melt into disappointment.

Our man Johnny comes out, holding high a torch in one hand and his rifle by his side in the other. His hat hides his face. He walks effortlessly through the underbrush, head never lowering to watch where his steps fall, making his way to the outcrop of rock.

Andrew guesses Johnny's trajectory, and his hopes return. *Perhaps he will scare it out*, he thinks. *Like live bait.*

An uneasy mass settles into his stomach, and he half thinks to call out to Johnny, to warn him away. Yet he remains still, silent, camera poised and ready, the desire for proof growing greater than his fears.

Johnny makes it to the outcrop and edges his way across it. He isn't reckless in his approach, but he doesn't seem to be covering it either, and Andrew wonders if he has a death wish, or if he even knows where he is.

Johnny rounds the outcrop and disappears into the cave, his torchlight barreling out of it like the light of an open door.

Andrew waits, expectant, but nothing happens except Johnny exiting again, apparently unmolested, and making his way back around the edge he came from.

Disgusted, Andrew pulls back his camera and relaxes his thumb, which comes to rest on the shutter-button, which promptly fires. The quick *click* that follows sounds like thunder in Andrew's ears, and his heart stops.

The man stops as well, raising the torch and gazing in Andrew's direction.

The man's senses are inhuman, he thinks, too afraid to duck down, certain the torchlight cannot reach him, certain—

“Come on out, my friend,” Johnny says. “I've been expecting you.”

Fearful but also flabbergasted, Andrew stays put. Of all the oddities that have occurred, this compounds them all.

“I can come and get you, if you wish,” Johnny says, and then raises his rifle and lays it across his shoulder. “But I'd rather not.”

Andrew's heart sinks. He clutches the camera to his chest, stands up, and walks out from his hiding spot. Before he's made it five steps, he's blubbering. He'd always assumed he'd be

killed on one of these expeditions, but he figured it would be at the hands of some creature, and his remains would be the final testimony to unveil the truth, the proof at last.

To go this way, though, at the hands of a fellow man, like any other person in the world—it's enough to make him look a fool to anyone who happened to hear it.

But he comes nonetheless, tearstained and dispirited, Kodak in his hands, like a child sent to face his father, knowing punishment is unavoidable.

As he emerges blubbing from the darkness, Johnny doesn't stir, but keeps the torch high, lighting the area but still shadowing his face.

Andrew stops a few feet from him, humiliated at how he must look. He tries to stand straighter. He wants to wipe his eyes but is afraid to move his hands.

Johnny's head nods, looking Andrew up and down. Then he takes a step forward and lowers the torch, illuminating his face. It's not at all as cruel as Andrew feared.

"You," Johnny says, lowering his rifle back to his side, "are not who I was expecting."

The two men make camp not too far off from the swamp. Andrew agrees to this because he feels he has no choice. Unarmed and uncertain, he figures the Gowrow must have snuck away from them by now, and it will not return to that cave now that someone has walked into it, adding their stench.

So Andrew sits and sulks, his camera in his lap.

Johnny sits across from him, strolling the fire he's made from his torch. The droning of the swamp, though more distant, has resumed.

"What I can't figure," Johnny says, "is what's a blue jay like you doing out here at this time of night?"

Unsure whether or not he's been insulted, Andrew continues pouting. "Well, sir. I am a monster tracker. A guaran-damn-teed one, at that. And I am—*was*—on expedition."

Johnny strokes the fire a bit more and then sits back. "That a fact?"

"The God's truth, sir."

Johnny smiles and then chuckles, as though catching an inside joke.

Andrew frowns. "Does my profession amuse you?"

"Not at all," Johnny says, and then tips his hat. "Name's Johnny."

"Andrew Burns, sir."

Johnny tips his hat again. Then he points to Andrew's lap. "And what kind of contraption is that?"

Andrew actually smiles, and his spirits rise, as he holds up the camera. "This, sir, is a Kodak camera. An all in one photograph studio. Shall I demonstrate?"

Johnny nods, and Andrew holds the camera out.

"What you do is you wind this key here to scroll the film. Then you pull the tab till it clicks. That sets the shutter. And then you press the button." Andrew does each step, and the lens blinks at Johnny, who narrows his eyes. "And there you have it! You just turn the key some more, and do it all over again. You can take up to a hundred shots."

"In the dark?"

"I assume so," Andrew says, brow furrowed. "Why wouldn't it?"

"You track monsters with that thing?"

Andrew sets the camera in his lap and rests his hands atop it. "My father was a trapper from Canada. He taught me tracking. I taught myself monsters."

"Ah. You seen any?"

“Plenty! But no proof.” He pats the camera. “Not yet.”

“Well,” Johnny says, and then leans back, gazing into the fire. “Stick around. You may still catch something worth seeing. Not exactly monster. Not exactly.”

“Oh?” Andrew says. “Ah, you were expecting someone.”

“In a manner. I’ve been after him for many miles, spending months cuttin’ across the mountains.”

“Really. You some kind of law?”

Johnny shakes his head, and Andrew’s face scrunches in concern.

“Well, sir,” Andrew says, “as the man sitting across from you in the deep and dark of the woods, I have to ask what it is you mean.”

Johnny looks out to the dark beyond the firelight. He sits with such statuesque repose, that Andrew figures he’s frozen in place, except he can hear Johnny breathing, even over the noise of the bog. It’s a steady, strong breath, consistent. Andrew counts the beats, and has a strange image of a singular force, curved and coiling like a bed spring, wrapping itself around Johnny, stretching further with each breath, weaving a cocoon of such ease and poise that Andrew isn’t sure if he’s sitting across from a man at all. Not a mere man at least.

“I’ve wandered these lands,” Johnny says, “to kill this man. This judge, so he calls himself. That has been my sole drive. I have haunted his steps. I have taken almost every comrade he’s made and brought them low, even to death. I have let him taste the hot fire of vengeance licking at his heels, drawing closer. And now he’s here, I know he is. I followed him in, and though I’ve lost him in the dark, I think he’s tired of running.”

Andrew isn’t sure why, but the only thing he can think to do is to cock the camera again. It’s a hairs-on-the-back-of-his-head instinct. Other than that, he stays still.

Johnny continues. “He’s tired. He’s not a man to flee forever. Eventually, he’ll come back around, and that time is now. He’s out there. He knows I’m here. I can feel it, in my bones.”

Andrew swallows. “And...you plan to...*kill* this man?”

Johnny turns back to look at the fire. “That’s the trouble. I’ve come all this way, and he’s here at last, and now I don’t think I can do it. I don’t think I can kill him just out of hate.” He lays his hand across his chest. “It’s dried up. Dried up and burned out. That’s the trouble with wrath. It can’t sustain itself. It’s got nothing eternal in it. No wonder they call it a sin—”

“I am confused,” Andrew says and then blinks, surprised at his own voice. “What do you plan to do?”

Johnny looks up at Andrew, then passes him to the dark again, eyes focusing like he’s looking dead-on at something. “You’re going to git, I know that for sure.” He points towards the dark. “Find a hole and hide in it. That cave back there should do fine.”

“Hide?”

“You don’t need to be tangled in this.”

“Sir,” Andrew says, sitting up straighter, “as a guaran-damn-teed monster tracker, I’m not hiding when something significant is about to take place. Someone should bear witness to it.”

Andrew sees Johnny’s fist tighten around the barrel of his repeater, so he swallows and stands up. “I’ll make myself scare, then. But I’m not burying my head in the bog. I’ll find a spot and watch.” He raises his Kodak. “It’s what I’m good at.”

Johnny sighs and then nods. “Very well.”

“You still haven’t said, sir, what it is you plan to do.”

Johnny gazes of at the dark again, staring so sharp and intently that Andrew can't help but stare along. Outside the firelight, the world is void and without form, a primeval canvas, awaiting meaning to speak into it.

Johnny sighs again and sits up, hand holding his rifle next to him, buttend on the ground.

"We'll see what happens," he says.

Andrew steps out of the firelight and squats down, back facing the fire. He lets his eyes adjust to the dark as best they can, then fumbles ahead until he finds some shrubbery he can lie down behind. It blurs out his body mass and gives him a clear view of Johnny not twenty feet away, sitting by the fire, still holding his rifle, orange as dusk in the firelight.

Andrew aims his camera towards this sight and then waits, settling himself into the wet, leafy ground.

Minutes pass, and the bog noises roll on. Andrew stays alert, forming the pattern again, listening for variations. He adds Johnny's breathing. Though Andrew is too far to hear it, it's too regular to need much guesswork, even at a distance. He takes everything into account, absorbing every detail into his being. He hadn't thought of it before, but he now imagines himself like an ultimate camera, a living, breathing eye that seeks to see all it can, leave nothing out.

His focus fixes even tighter, points of the pattern sharpening. He wonders if this is what contemplatives, hermiting in desert lands, must feel like. Everything becomes sacred, valuable in and of itself and for what it is a part of. The particular and general elements of existence all seem to come into some sort of harmony, and Andrew almost puts his hand over his mouth.

Then a disruption, and the harmony fractures. It's so jarring that Andrew nearly loses all focus, and wants to lash out at the dark in anger. Instead, he gathers himself and listens.

A cricking and cracking in the dark. A body mass moving through the underbrush. Large, uncaring of stealth. It drives all the bog noise away, and what remains of the pattern collapses into nothingness, fades out.

Johnny sits still, though, impervious, undaunted. Though Andrew is still too far to hear it, he imagines Johnny's breathing continues steady and sure. He has to believe this. The encroaching presence feels too terrible to leave him without a ballast of some kind.

Then the judge-thing emerges from the dark, a massive man with a large, flat-rimmed hat. Bushy mustache. Eyes ablaze in the firelight. Though Andrew cannot hear his breathing either, he can see it. Feel it. The mammoth frame expands and retracts, shuddering, as though unable to control something, either his lungs or rage.

Andrew cannot focus anything from the man. Every sound and sense that comes off of him spews out like sparks from an anvil, and dissipates just as quickly.

The large man removes a colossal gun from his belt, holds it in his hand, and then sits down across from Johnny, exactly where Andrew had been sitting.

From where Andrew lies hidden, both men sit cheated out towards him, the fire in between. They stare hard into each other with some kind of long dreaded yet understood recognition.

The bog has so silenced itself now that Andrew can make out the smallest crackles of the fire, and if he strains harder, he can actually make out the shuddered breathing of Judge Mal, who sounds pneumonic, as though having run a great distance to no purpose.

"You done hiding from me?" Johnny says.

"I have eluded you," the judge says, words strained. "I do not hide."

“We all hide,” Johnny says. “Whether in a deep hole or running on the road. We’re all hiding.”

“I never hide.”

Johnny breathes in and out, then looks down into the fire. “I’ve been hiding too. Running towards anger, wearing violence like a garment. Thought I was moving towards something real, hard as bone. But here I am and all I’ve run into is you again. And I’m very tired.”

The judge-thing stands up, and Andrew can just make out the bulging knuckles on the hand holding the gun.

“If you thought,” the judge says, “I came here to mince words with you, then you are mistaken.”

“You shouldn’t have killed her,” Johnny says.

“I told you before, when I first met you. There are no heroes and villains. There’s only choices.” He raises the gun. “And consequences.”

“I’m grateful to you.”

Andrew blinks, expecting a deafening report, but the judge-thing stands there, gun leveled at Johnny, who raises his eyes to look the large man in the face.

“I’m grateful,” Johnny says. “Not that she’s gone. How could I be? There’s a wound there that won’t ever close again. Can’t do nothing but cauterize it, and that’s what I’m grateful for. This road has been a cauterizer to the soul. Hate sent me out, but hope burned it out. Like infection. I thought there was nothing but killing, evil. Now I know better. I’ve seen otherwise.”

Johnny smiles. Actually looks up and smiles at the judge. “I’m ready to be a good man again.”

The judge shudders. “You mean to say that you have no intention of stopping me?”

“I won’t kill ye,” Johnny says. “Not for myself, anyhow.”

“You’re a fool.”

“That’s all right.”

“A God damned coward!”

“Not anymore.”

The judge shudders again, then stills like he’s frozen solid. He and Johnny just stare, linger, two fixed points.

Andrew, wide-eyed and stiff-backed, leans forward in expectation, his hands gripping his Kodak. As his fingers press against it, he depresses the button, and in the silence of the bog, the shutter snaps.

Judge Mal anticipated interlopers, outside agitators. He’s grown accustomed to interruptions in his plans, the unexpected intersection, and his recourse is simple. Rage. Violence. Lashing out without pity. Nothing that exists deserves pity. He’s sure of that now. He swings his gun around, aiming into the dark, towards where he heard the sound, a twig snap or brush rustle. It matters not. All that matters is retribution against every element of the world.

But he’s interrupted again. Johnny draws the Dragoon and fires into Mal’s shoulder, sending him spinning back around to face him.

Mal, all rage and instinct, unleashes his tail straight into Johnny’s chest, just as Johnny lets the Dragoon fall, not taking another shot.

Blood is in the air. Pain. Mal holds his shoulder, lifting Johnny’s skewered body.

Mal’s face is snarled beyond recognition, hatred chiseled into his features. Then his jaw unhinges, ready to open, ready to drink.

Then out of the dark, another presence emerges, Andrew's hard sought prize made present. The Gowrow comes. Five red eyes. A shapeless fear, denizen of the bog, drawn near by lesser evils and suffering. Great hands and teeth that take hold of Judge Mal from behind and snatch him from the ground, pulling him back into a darkness that is all open mouth, and before Mal can say another word or cry out, the dark closes in on him, crunching his bones, tearing muscle and sinew clean apart. His lower half, tail and all, goes limp, and Johnny's body hits the dirt.

Mal is dragged away by the unseen beast gurgling through the dark, and as it fades away with its prey, the tail slides out of Johnny and disappears into the dark. Somewhere, a great splashing sound emerges from the swamp, then fades, then is gone.

Poor Andrew sees none of this. At the moment the Judge draws down on him, he buries his head in the dirt, winching as the gunshot stabs the air. He tries to ballast his mind, but all he thinks is darkness, and the Devil howling on the hill.

Then silence returns to the bog, deeper than ever he's heard before, and he thinks of Sarah Jessie, standing tall and clear like a beam of sunlight in the dark, furious and bright, her face bemused or disdainful, he cannot tell. Her presence, phantasmal or actual, welcoming or agitated, is to him a calm like a glassy sea.

Andrew opens his eyes and looks up. Johnny is on the ground, holding his chest, his shoulders heaving. The large man is gone.

Andrew springs up and comes crashing through the underbrush. Returning to the light of the fire, he glances about for the judge but sees nothing except shimmering blood and the dark.

"Finally," Johnny says, gurgling. "It's done. I'm done."

“Sir—” Andrew swallows, his throat dry as dirt. “What has happened here? What do I do? Tell me what to do for you.”

“I’m dead, my friend.” Johnny gazes up. His face and eyes are tired but happy, like a man come home from long work and ready to collapse into bed. “Don’t burden yourself with my life, only my body. If you will.”

“What...? What do you want me to do?”

“Send my body to Tahlequah. Send it to the ranch of the great General. Tell him to bury me in a church of his choosing. Tell him to come and visit my grave. Tell him I never forgot him. Tell him he’s forgiven. Ask him to forgive me. I was a child, and I did not see. I was blind, but now....”

Gone.

Not long past dawn, many an early riser in Fayetteville pauses in their morning business and observes a filthy Andrew shamle into town with a dead body draped over his shoulder. He’s slick with mud and blood, and his face looks weary beyond death. He carries his burden without complaint, however, depositing it in the town square, where he and it both collapse into the dirt in front of Sarah Jessie’s photo studio.

It takes a few days nursing for Andrew to come around talking, but he cannot identify the man he has carried, claiming he found him at death’s door in the woods, that he’s requested to be taken to Oklahoma Indian Territory and buried in Tahlequah, and that Andrew feels bound to oblige once his strength returns.

He doesn’t mention the other man, though. He thinks it proper to leave him for the beasts and monsters in the dark.

The day he leaves, he secures a coffin for the body and a wagon to carry it all in. Paid with his own money, and some help from Sarah Jessie, whom he pleads with outside the stoop of her studio, hat in hand, looking desperate yet somehow firm, eyes resolute. If she doesn't help him, then he'll find someone else.

She's never seen him so sure, so firmly fixed, like he's been nailed to something larger than himself, and against her better judgment, she helps defray the cost of the trip.

He leaves his camera with her, which she mails off to the Kodak headquarters for processing, at his request. He tells her to keep what pictures she deems worthy, and discard the rest.

Weeks later, with no word yet from Andrew and winter starting to bite the air, a new, freshly loaded Kodak camera arrives at Ms. Sarah Jessie's photo studio in the afternoon, complete with an envelope containing two photos and a letter from the Kodak Company.

The letter apologizes for the quality of the photos, but reminds the customer that the camera only works in daylight with relatively still objects. The letter is also pleased to not charge the customer for the new roll of film, since the old one was barely used.

Sarah, standing at the counter in her studio, looks at the two photos. One is indecipherable—black all around except for a bright blur of gray and white near the center, like Andrew had somehow taken a close-up of a star burning in the midst of the night.

The other is of her, and rather clear for all its grainy edges. She's behind the counter, arms crossed, face disinterested, but eyes just beginning to widen in surprise.

She's forgotten the context of this candid portrait, but she has confidence that Andrew will be back any day now, and when he comes she will show him those photos and demand an explanation. They lit a fire in her chest, and she needs to know what they mean.

Entry 9

I owe much to dear Andrew. He brought my boy home to me. Body and journal both. From him I received what all I could work with, and now I am at an end. What more can I say?

My dear son, how long and winding your road was coming home. What darkness you must have suffered. What pains. I tear my heart out at the thought of them, but then you were not alone in the end. If I could find them again—Smithy, Pickle, Andrew—I would give them my whole life in payment. If they were alive—Mallard, Septimus, Nix, Patricio, all the others—I would have gouged their eyes out, or at least have died with you.

But then I don't think now that's what you would have wanted. How you changed, I was not there to see it! All I have is your journal, and my wandering mind, pulling hope together out of whole cloth.

The last entry in your journal stays me. It spurred on this creation. It assured me that, whatever came of you, it brought you the right way round. I read it often, reread it.

It is my only comfort in life and in death.

Across the inky black—once so sovereign, so sure—infinite color streaks the night, cascading the sky as a foot stepping in water ripples the surface. Dancing and sparkling, shooting forth little sparks like leaves. Fire roars through the hollow, dead woods. The rumble through the mountains is deep like a drum, rolling like thunder. Bones shake, rattle across the ground.

I believe again. Now we see darkly, but one day the empty hands will be filled. The seeds that perished will blossom into a garden of roses and corn, a sweet savor without end. All that is crooked shall be made clean. All that is dirty shall be made straight. My eyes shall see it. Not now, but then, when the night finally falls and the day finally breaks and the sensuous curtain of this world pulls back, there it will be. Sailing towards me with all speed and intention. This bottle rocket. This arrow. This let-loose thing.

I know now. Goodness is not an accident, nor is it weak and frail. It is the fundamental thing, the deep comedy deeper than all tragedy. I know it knows no bounds. An infinite void cannot contain it. Its fists break iron and bone. Its teeth tear the very dark itself. Its arms open to enfold you—a mother’s embrace, a lover’s kiss, a father’s forgiveness.

I believe. I know. You have never seen it like I have. Tasted the goodness. The terror. The love. The terrible love of ravenous light.

(Johnny’s final entry, marked “November, 1888”)