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The Golden Flake: An Historical Fable

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The Golden Flake

an historical fable

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Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages & Literature
of Bard College

by
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Preface

Hydraulic gold mining was formally conceived in the late 1850's and had developed to industrial maturity and demise by the early 1880's. The intensive practice utilized the force of pressurized water to scour out the deeply buried gold particles that had been left untouched by the rush to California of 1849. Over the course of its use, the method is estimated to have involved the construction of 6,000 miles' worth of canals and water ditches, mountain reservoirs containing at any time a cumulative 7 billion cubic feet of water, to have washed 1.6 billion cubic yards of soil out of the Sierra Nevada and into San Joaquin Valley, and to have recovered 11 million ounces' worth of gold.

Contents

I.....	1
II.....	54
III.....	99

I

The thread was dyed deep red but nearly disappeared against the pine duff on the ground. Its angle changed where it stretched between tree trunks, passing obscured into the forest up and down the slope. From where he stood, Wilcox noticed a double-column of black ants crossing the thread, and when it moved suddenly, up the slope an inch, their trail momentarily frayed. It repaired itself, and then the thread moved again and Wilcox looked down to see some of the ants milling over his cracked boots and up onto his pantlegs. He stepped back and brushed them off with his right hand. In his other hand was a spool of the same cotton thread, and a matching red trail disappeared down the slope behind him as well.

Damn, Wilcox said, to himself, not the forest. The thread in front of him moved another inch up the slope. He did not curse again, but turned and began winding his thread back onto its spool. He moved back down the slope, through the pines. His right arm reeled quick circles from the elbow and his left hand lifted and fed the thread from the ground. His lungs whined as those of someone who had slept close to a fire for too many nights and his hair and face had the same appearance. Skin was white and oily and around him a human and an animal smell, heavy enough that the sweet odor of the sugar pines was lost to him. He noticed the rush of wind in the boughs above him though, and as he neared the camp and his spool was nearly full again, a sense of something happy grew in him.

That was what the captain thought as Wilcox approached. Happy, as clear as it is clear when a dog is young. He is invigorated by the mountains.

You beat me back, Wilcox said to the captain, who knelt at the center of their campsite by the dead fire. Things were tidy, and Wilcox noticed the smell of the mule, even though the animal was tethered elsewhere.

The captain asked. Did you make it to the stream?

No, he said. I ran into your line.

There were five of the same red threads tied to an iron stake near the upper edge of their camp, disappearing into the forest. Wilcox had wound his spool all the way back to the stake and set it down. He asked if he should lay another.

No, the captain said. We have the right one already. Otherwise you wouldn't have run across my line.

Captain? Wilcox asked. How are we going to measure the lines without moving them?

The captain thought for a moment in silence before Wilcox continued. We could lay a second thread along each one, and then pull that one. And then measure it.

Yes, the captain said. I think we'll have to. It's all this information collecting that takes the most time. It's not wasted time, but it is very slow. Although, soon enough you'll be wishing we were still at this kind of work.

Well it's very beautiful here, Wilcox said.

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The partners spent the afternoon laying second threads along each of the red lines, from their camp to the stream on the slope above it. They met at the stream, as each finished their second line, breaching the forest some fifty yards apart. Wilcox waved and stepped heavily along the cobbled shoulder of the stream to where the captain stood.

It's a lively stream, Wilcox said.

It's lively enough. It's a mountain stream though, so it's more lively than strong.

The mountains make me feel both, Wilcox said.

The captain said. These aren't the mountains.

Well I know it, Wilcox said. But it is a stream from the mountain.

The men looked at it for a while. From a tree, a Stellar's jay with a chalk blue body and dark head cried a few times like a hawk.

No fish in this stream. There's a little cress in some pools. That is cress, no? Wilcox asked.

That's cress. Duckweed. Cress, the captain said, and ate some.

Wilcox thought perhaps what he had said was too obvious. The stream was shallow and ran flat over stones at some points. But, he thought, you can say obvious things in strange places. It had been a week but it still felt strange. But perhaps not to the captain. The captain watched the jay for a while, continuing its mimicry. Wilcox looked at him. His clothes were shabby but still sturdy. The workingman's clothes outlast their fashion, Wilcox thought. This was not particular to the mountains. The mountain fashion was the workingman's fashion, because all mountain people work. They had formless felt hats at the camp, which they wore to town, and their clothes were cotton and had been indigo blue, but were pale now and brown from soil. They both had beards. Wilcox's face was strikingly handsome but his beard was patchy and tended down his neck rather than up his cheeks. The captain's face was wide and sun-cured. It drew together at the brows in a failed effort to guard his cracked, blue eyes from the sun. And the kink in the captain's old chest, which made it like a pigeon's, was outstanding, and famous in the mountains.

Let's find the last thread, he said. We can walk down together.

The thread was tied around a granite cobble from the stream, still dark with water, and they found it quickly. Having tied the new thread to the same rock they started down toward camp. Wilcox held the spool with both hands to his left side as if, he thought, he was dancing with some elderly partner.

I'm glad you like the mountains, Willie, the captain said.

These aren't the mountains, Captain.

Well I'm glad you like the foothills. But remember, this work with the strings, it's foothills to mountains, as far as work goes.

I know it. It's thinking work. I'm ready to work harder. Dawn to dusk of body work. I told you, that's how I've always worked.

It's different here though. At the edge. This thread, this thread is the first green tendril of civilization.

It's red.

Oh, well my eyes don't see colors so well, the captain said. The first blood vein then. Civilization is just a bunch of roads, bridges, and veins. It's just connections between places. Quickening the route between demand and supply. Wagon roads and railroads. The same as blood circulating.

We're connected to the federal bank.

Wilcox's reply seemed to echo through the forest and fall down the slope into silence. Another obvious observation, Wilcox thought. Or perhaps just incorrect.

Yes, the heart. It doesn't feel like we're part of it out here. We're like a little toe. That circulation remain adequate is critical. Capital, support. Capital works at the edges of civilization, battling. Nature gnaws at civilization, but it feeds it at the same time. Capital turns a thread into a railroad or an aqueduct.

That center could be a parasite too though. Those lawmakers, what can they grow if they're given a plot of land? Or how do they solve problems like measurement? I, for one, am not convinced that we need them. Not up here.

Iron, Willie, the captain said. It comes from somewhere and then it gets here. We've got a barrel but we need a bung hammer. We can't take it all for granted. It's not just the federal bank, also. It's Mr. Juleson.

I don't know, said Wilcox, on principle.

The two men pushed through the coppiced maple that covered the shaded ledge, which broke the slope above their camp. Wilcox followed the captain, keeping the parted brush away from the thread with his elbows. Certain branches the captain bent did not snap and they struck Wilcox on the shoulders and face. He laughed and held back a little.

*

Up the slope from the patch of maple, and below it, were old red fir, yellow pine and sugar pine, and tan oak, which grew tall and straight among them. Elsewhere, with no such example, the oaks grew tangled and low. Wilcox was learning the trees fast, although thoughts of field breaks of poplar and elm often interrupted his acquaintance with the forest.

This is what he saw. On the domed tops of the ridges, pine grew and in the watered folds between them were other trees. Oak, maple, and buckeye drank from the heavy clay on slopes near the streams, leaving the soil each century more red or more yellow. In the stream, dark-scented river willow and huge, junk wooded sycamore grew. These were some of the trees. The South Fork of the Yuba was a few hours' walk down the Ridge. It was the deepest of the canyons around and in it trees grew almost horizontal, and sprouted heavy buttress roots into the soil of the plunging slopes. Wild grape, and ivy, working its way west, clung to these shaded trees. Dogwood persisted year round to bloom for a few weeks in April.

The granite of the foothills was buried by red and yellow clay, and gravel from the sloughed skin of the high mountains. In the canyon, all the clay was washed away. Beaten water laid the bedrock clean, in a long ribbon, dropped accidentally, it seemed, by an absent-minded surveyor. Only recently, Wilcox knew, had the bridge been built across the river in the canyon, or did a road labor up its banks.

Higher up, near their camp, yellow pines drew water out of the clay. In this dry season many of the rivers were subterranean. The water plumped the rushing needles and the streams spoke only this way for several months. Leaves of scrub manzanita blued the ground between the pines. Where there was shade, the bush grew a little higher and became thick, gnarled, and waxy red. These were words that Wilcox used in thought to describe the features of the foothills, but if he had said them out loud, they would have sounded foreign.

*

The fire that Wilcox had built was too large. It felt chemical from burning different woods, bright from pine and sending a thick, fast stream of smoke out the top. It was too high to cook on. The men and their mule and the trees were lit bright orange. The pine limbs above the camp were momentarily wreathed by the smoke and then reappeared. Wilcox was reminded of the steam from a locomotive, running at station in winter, enveloping brick walls and its own train, so it seemed that all there was in the world was fog. That the world was perhaps very small, and then the wind sweeping the station clean and showing that the train and the station had not uninvented themselves, after all. He glanced up and saw the captain was looking out into the dark.

Fire's a little high, Wilcox apologized. He was working on a letter, writing slowly, in a large hand.

That's alright, said the captain.

After a time the captain found their frying pan by the fire and set it on the ground, and retrieved four potatoes from their food sack. He put them in the pan and with their good round shovel scraped the pine duff back to soil and took a scoop of clay. He buried the potatoes in the pan and put the pan right in the fire.

That's the same way the hillers in Missouri cook 'em, Wilcox said. The ones who camped to work.

After a time the captain asked. How many does it take to tend a potato field?

Depends on the size, Wilcox said. But generally it takes a few paid good and a lot paid mostly in food and seed potatoes.

And you camped with those ones? The hillers?

Sometimes I did, Wilcox said. When I was farther away. But mostly worked my parents' field. I think—no—I know for fact, that I lifted that whole field at least once, hilling potatoes.

You've got a strong back.

Sometimes I have to rub knots out of it, but it's saved for the most part. Only gets sore when I eat potatoes.

The captain laughed and Wilcox folded the single sheet of his letter and put it away. In that moment, a figure slipped out of the forest and into the ring of orange light. The captain's hand closed on the shovel, which was still beside him. Then he recognized the man.

Hallo Jennings, the man said, in an odd British accent.

Hallo Grover, the Captain said. How are you? You've surprised us.

Well. Well. I'm doing well, the man said.

Slowly, he moved close to the fire, watching the captain and glancing at Wilcox. He squatted, and began rocking back and forth slightly, between his heels and toes. Wilcox saw that he had the long tails of his mustache pulled into his mouth, which worked muscularly and produced a faint sucking noise. When he spoke, the hair was visible, covering the upper tooth-line.

This is your claim? Grover asked.

Yep, the captain said and paused. We're doing what we can with it. You know, you oughtn't to stumble into people's camps so late at night.

The man sniffed. Yeah, you've no water it seems. What are you going to do?

There's a stream up the hill, said Wilcox.

Part of the claim?

No, said the captain. We pay an easement.

Then what? The man seemed to quiver as well as rock, and his hands, like his mouth, worked incessantly in the thick duff. Divert some? Pan it? Sluice? I like to pan.

We were planning to lay a hose, the captain said. And to get one of those little monitors. You know, a water cannon. Blast away at the slope that way.

No. No, the man said. You don't want to do that. You—um, don't want to get into hydraulicking. You really don't.

How did you find your way up here, Grover? asked the captain.

Oh, I asked around, told some people I wanted to say hi. I looked for the path. I've a talent for looking.

A talent for finding, moreover, the captain said, and then. Grover, this is my partner Wilcox. Wilcox is a hard and nasty man, like you, but much crueler. Came out of the potato fields along the Missouri.

There was a short silence before Grover said. Oh. Well let's try not to fight, huh? I, um, have a real nasty knife. It's not sharp.

Wilcox was silent but kept his eyes level on the newcomer.

The captain said. Yes, we're going into hydraulic mining.

Grover said. You've got some money then? Takes some to start up a hydraulic operation. You need the monitor, the hose, and the sluices to run your tailings over.

Oh, we've got some money saved. What didn't transfigure to whiskey, or the ladies of the night.

I don't whore, said Grover.

Well you ought to, the captain said. If you want to be like Wilcox here, which you ought to want to. If they are ladies of the night, then Wilcox is the night himself.

Good lookin' fellow, said Grover. Up on a horse in armor? You pimp?

He doesn't pimp. But he's not asked to pay very often either.

I don't believe that.

Wilcox felt himself blushing, but did not move. It was silent for a while. The men looked around without moving their heads.

We don't have that much saved though, said the captain. And it's in a bank in town.

That's clever.

Do you want a potato? the captain asked their visitor, after a very long period of silence, and the man nodded.

Wrapping his hand, the captain pulled the pan from the fire, which was lower now and had taken on a flicker. He spilled the contents on the ground and pulled a steaming potato from the baked clay. He gave the potato to Grover and then took one for himself, and rose to get the bag of salt and jar of fat from their food sack, which lay limp on the ground, its bear-cord coiled loosely beside it and running slack up into the trees. With affected stiffness, Wilcox rose. Grover was making the captain nervous, he thought. Lunacy could spoil business, perhaps. There was pale moonlight falling through the trees on all of them now, cut into the geometry of the branches it fell through. Eating overcame their weak conversation, and only the noise of their low munching and popping embers occupied their vague pool now. Both noises vegetable being consumed, Wilcox thought. Once the potatoes were gone though, the captain spoke, heavily, conveying the intention of sleeping soon.

Do you have any work now? he asked Grover.

Grover made no reply, but sucked on his filthy thumbnail.

Where do you stay these days?

Grover's eyes lifted from the embers and he said. There're cabins near town. I've bunked there a few nights.

Have you been working any claim?

Panning some off the creek in town.

The conversation had the feeling of two men facing each other at some distance, dropping boulders at their own feet.

Is there much to pan out?

At times. At times I pan out a good pinch.

And then they were silent again until the captain offered Grover a place to sleep but no bedroll and Grover said he would go back to town, and he left and they tied the mule up closer to where they were sleeping.

*

The light in the morning came in pollen colored shafts. A breeze stirred the treetops but did not reach into their campsite. The shadows were gray but already solid. In the foothills, the sun rose late, because of the mountains to the east. It took time for the forest to brighten. Still Wilcox could tell when he opened his eyes that the captain had only been awake for a moment. The season was dry and the only perceptible dew was in the damp smell from the dead fire. Their bedrolls were dry and they rolled them up again and lowered the food sack from the tree. They stirred the fire and lit it again.

Damn! the captain exclaimed.

What is it? asked his partner, who was facing into a bush, his yellow, morning urine streaming through the twigs.

The pusillanimous scum took our frying pan.

He can't have! Wilcox exclaimed, but the captain did not reply. Should we follow him?

Do you want to apprehend him?

How are we going to cook? I—I think we should follow him.

How about tomorrow? When we go to town, the captain said. I can do our errands and you can track him down and get the pan back.

Yes, said Wilcox, suddenly nervous at the thought of confronting the lunatic.

The captain gave him an odd look and then moved to make the coffee. He made it over the fire, in a kettle, their only other dish. They fed the mule some hay and then Wilcox led her off to a clearing where there was some thin grass and some leafy shrubs. Her big eyes were gummy at the corners from sleeping, and Wilcox cleaned them off and patted her. He tethered her to an oak and watched her start browsing.

Is it the same fire every day or is it a new one each time? The captain asked when Wilcox returned. He's disturbed by the thief, Wilcox thought. He was in a bad mood. The mountains have enough to space to absorb his mood though, he thought.

He said. Well it depends on if there's coals still hot, I suppose.

It's a beating heart, the captain said. A mother's blood, umbilical heat. The heart of civilization.

In the kettle, froth spread, and when the entire dark surface was covered, the captain removed the kettle from the fire and poured a metal cup full of coffee. Wilcox poured some too and took a gulp that burnt his mouth. The coffee grounds were mostly charred corn, he could tell. More even than he was used to. They ate dry oats from the sack.

The captain said. We should get rolled oats next time. These hurt my teeth.

The sun was brighter, and the chilly pockets of air that remained were slowly lifting out of the trees. Soft cracking noises came from all the branches as the sun warmed them.

Is that the stream? Wilcox asked.

No. It's the trees, the captain said, after a moment, and then asked. Do you think about Missouri while you sleep?

Do I dream about it?

Sure.

A little. I think about flatness. But I think I prefer the mountains. I sweat less.

Sweat less and smell worse. And we haven't really started the work yet.

Well I think it was also—that I was tired of the unnecessary customs. There weren't two ways to walk down the street in Missouri.

How many ways can you do it here?

More ways.

Grover picked a way.

What?

Tired of customs. There's a custom against stealing. East of here.

*

Despite having laid the second lines, there was no straightforward way to measure the distance to the stream. In the end, they used the five-foot cotton tape they had. They walked each line again to coil them. By now each thread had the suggestion of a path beside it. They measured the thread by folding it into a pile, from end to end of the tape and pressed flat so that little material was lost with the fold. They counted three-hundred twelve folds and had a tail of a foot and a half left.

One-thousand five-hundred sixty-one feet and a half. The captain wrote it in the green leather book he kept. The others varied no more than ninety feet and, in the end, the middle line was the shortest.

That one then, said Wilcox, and the captain said that they could get sixteen-hundred feet of the crinoline hose and then working the claim back up through the hill would shorten it, with some luck, in keeping with whatever breaks and repairs reduced the length of the hose.

*

There was still most of a day left. They spent some time making preparations for their trip to Nevada City and then took their axes to the middle path. The forest near their camp was spaced widely and there was little to clear there. So the men approached the dark green ledge, the captain in front, with his ax over his shoulder and his chest pitched forward. The men began to hack the slender maple and buckeye close to the ground, but were careful not to dull their axes.

It's funny to make a path. Paths should make themselves, the captain said. A path exists out of a need to exist alone.

What's that?

A path is not a thing, it's the mark of other things. Of walking. You can cut space, like we're doing now, but it isn't a path yet. A path is the walking. Then it's a path, until people stop taking it.

There are a lot of people these days. It seems that more traffic is coming, Wilcox quickly responded. He was learning the captain's patterns, he thought.

It is the beginning of this path's lifespan.

They tossed the brush they made away from the red line, which was being trodden into the duff by now. Sweat shone on both their foreheads and Wilcox wheezed. It was slow to cut the brush on the steep ledge, and the opening they made was only as wide as they could reach with their axes while standing on the thread.

It will close back up if no one walks here. That's what makes it a path. The forest resists. If things go well a sawmill would be the next thing to build.

The captain said all this in pace with his work. They moved a little farther up the slope.

Could we run a Pelton wheel in the stream? One of the little ones perhaps?

More likely in our runoff, the captain replied. We'll have that boxed up better. It takes a lot of lumber. We'll manage until then, but it would make it easier.

The pine splits up pretty easy, Wilcox said.

And the sluices use up wood fast, the captain said, as he hacked at a springy sucker from a maple root. It was thin and just bent under the ax. If we can split the pine easily, so can rocks coming down the sluice.

How big of rocks? Wilcox asked.

Head sized. Body sized. Five-hundred pounds

Wilcox chopped at the limit of the captain's work, widening his path.

I don't recall boulders like that at the Malakoff Diggins.

They were there. You certainly heard them. You mentioned the clatter they were making, remember?

I do. They must have seemed smaller than they were.

The incline of the slope changed and the deeper green leaves once again became tall pine and oak. The manzanita scrub was knee high here but not dense, and few of the bushes were in the way of the thread. They took longer steps.

We'll get very familiar with this walk, no doubt, Wilcox said.

We'll change it. That's how we'll make it familiar.

From their vantage point they could see across the trapezoidal valley which was formed by the confluence of two seasonal streams, whose names were born away where they flowed into the South Fork. The far slope and down toward the stream was forested, but where the ground was flatter, at the

streams' small delta, patches of forest were gone. Mangy woodcutting, taken where the trees tended to be straight and easy to move. The men arrived at the stream. There were still hours of daylight left, and they sat on rocks by the water.

We're going to town tomorrow, we should wash our clothes, the captain said. And then we can bathe ourselves in the South Fork tomorrow on the way out. Although it is a little late for the clothes to dry.

He stripped naked and Wilcox looked away modestly, but followed suit. Squatting, they worked their faded clothes between stones in the cold water.

I'm going back for the soap, said Wilcox suddenly, and took off, naked through the forest. He was flushed when he returned, as if he had run part of the way, and he set to scrubbing his clothes with a bar of soap. The fast water pulled clouds of milky residue from the sudsed clothing and they took a long time to rinse. The captain used the bar of soap too, more sparingly, and then they lay their clothes out to dry on rocks, which were still warm, moving them frequently. The men did not look at each other, but lay stretched out on different rocks. They both closed their eyes for a while. When Wilcox opened his, he was a little chilled and the yellow sunlight was finally tinged with some lateness. They were both hungry, but they made practice of thinking little about food, so they stayed longer.

Imagine what California would be like if the Mexicans had found the gold before it was annexed. What San Francisco would look like. And Los Angeles. They would be Spanish cities. They would speak Spanish up here in the mountains.

In the Sierras? the captain asked.

Yes, said Wilcox. Just something I was thinking about.

I think it still would have been Americans who dug it. Perhaps you've never met a Sonoran, but they're very lazy people. And pusillanimous.

Evening wind came down the slopes cold. Over the high peaks of the mountains, clouds had been piling all day and now the great rosy columns scattered and smeared into the atmosphere. Pine resins were not cooling quite yet and they escaped in scent, going everywhere. After a time, the two men dressed, and lifting their axes again, took the path back down to their camp, where they relit the fire to finish drying their clothes and to dispel the chill that the walk back had given them.

*

The next morning they woke early. Although the season was shortening, it was a warmer day. They packed their bedrolls into their travel sacks before making coffee and eating their oats. Then the captain put everything from camp in their food sack and walked off into the trees with the rope coiled over his shoulder, until Wilcox could not see him. He heard the rope rasping against bark, and he knew the sack was stowed up in a tree. Then they buried their tools under the pine duff away from camp in the opposite direction and loaded the mule and left.

The trail went down the slope, keeping to the ridge of a wide finger, which ended in a gully where the new road was. The drainage had no stream in the summer and the road followed it for a while before curving out onto the south slope again. Already there were fewer pines and the chaparral was thicker and the men were glad for the road. They could see out against the opposite slope, closer now and less blue. The mule walked along behind, sniffing the air as it changed.

Several hours passed before they reached the canyon of the South Fork. The new road switched back only twice in its descent, following the stream west a long ways instead, and then east again on the other side. Deep foliage had already closed over above the road and Wilcox said something to reflect back on the path they had cut the day before. Green light settled through the wide leaves, the sun high behind them. When they were most of the way down, the men met a cart headed for the Ridge. The horses' breathe was audible before the animals appeared, and the men slowed a little as they approached. The cart was new, with wheels of iron strap on many spokes. It creaked as they passed it, overloaded with wooden

boxes, the wheels hardly moving. The solitary driver nodded at the men but kept his eyes on the straining horses. They took short steps, their caulkins digging the road, and Wilcox saw the driver's hand rested lightly on a brake.

That wagon belongs to the North Bloomfield Company, said the captain, once they were away. We could have had them deliver the monitor to the Ridge, but I prefer, and Mr. Juleson prefers, that for now they don't know of our little operation.

Wilcox nodded. And the outing is pleasant.

At the river, where the new timber bridge crossed the gorge, the men left the road and followed a trail that the bridge crew had made down to the pilings, the mule quietly picking its way behind. They tied her to a willow snag with her bags still on, and they stripped again to their pale skin. Like the other stream, it was a mountain stream and did not have the solid body of a river in the valley. They lowered themselves into cold a pool that barely came over their brown members. The captain used the bar of soap to scrub himself, his hair and beard first and then his armpits and then under the water at his groin and between his buttocks. His pigeon's chest was sharp, protruding on the left side of his sternum. Wilcox let himself look at it this time.

The captain gave the soap to him, and said. It's good to have a bathing spot between us and town.

Wilcox asked if he thought they had time to dry off before putting their clothes back on. The captain thought they did, because it would likely be dark by the time they got to Nevada City anyway, and after getting out of the river they laid on separate rocks. The sun was strong and dried their skin quickly. Wilcox moved out of the wet mark he had made on the rock, and led the mule to the water to drink. He glanced at the captain, whose eyes were closed, and then he lay down again, on his stomach this time, to dry his back. Someone crossing the bridge whistled at them, but did not pause.

After a while, they dressed and let the mule drink one more time. Wilcox had a letter in his pocket, and he checked that it was not damaged, and then they moved back up to the bridge and on toward town again. Their hair was still damp but their beards were dry. The other side of the canyon was shadier, and if they had not been walking uphill, they would have been chilled after their swim. New ivy shagged the trees on this side, and springs along the way kept the road and the air damp.

It's later than I hoped, the captain said, once they were out of the canyon.

The road still climbed, but the slope was gentler and the forest spread out again. Although they were trying to keep the mule fresh for the way back the next day, they each took a turn riding her.

It's not really more comfortable, Wilcox said after getting down.

The sun was once more low and already lit the pines a soft yellow.

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It was nearly dark when they reached Nevada City. They planned to pick up the monitor and supplies the next day. The road came out at the bottom of Broad St., which went steeply up into town. The last streak of certain light was fading, like a patch of skin succumbing to a bruise. It disappeared down the opening toward Grass Valley. Figures up the street were all dark and the two men paused for moment before walking toward the lit up businesses. The lights filled Wilcox with a feeling of immense separation. Men materialized out of the shadows, moving the opposite way, down the hill towards their miners' barracks or the stream.

Hallo, the captain said to each. Some greeted him in return, but it was impossible to tell if they recognized him. One man greeted the captain by name, but his face was invisible, and the man did not linger to talk. The saloon was well-lit though, and through its uncracked glass windows a crowd was visible. A low spill of voices made it out onto the street while they tied up the mule and unloaded her. When they pushed the door open the noise enveloped them. It was strange to Wilcox after so many days

in the stirring pines. Some sets of eyes lingered on them as they walked to the bar, coming from six or seven full tables, and several saloon girls mounted on stools here and there, laughing. Men from different tables called out as they noticed the captain. A very drunk man sitting at the bar, with an open and completely empty mouth, cried. Captain Jennings!

To the saloon keeper, the captain said. Hallo John.

The man greeted him back with his name, smiling widely.

Hey! cried the toothless man again. This time the captain turned toward him, and the man laughed, a double bark, and said. You remember me? Captain Jennings remembers me! The bull pigeon himself!

We'd like some beer, the captain said to John. You remember Wilcox?

Of course I remember you, said John. You two were here just last week.

It feels like longer than a week, said Wilcox, and they shook hands.

John drew them two beers and the captain turned and surveyed the room. Wilcox followed him to a mostly full table, where several men greeted them. The captain nodded to the men and Wilcox said hello, and they stowed their travel sacks under the table. A Midwesterner was speaking and did not pause as the two joined the group. His face was clean-shaven and deeply sanguine, but seemed covered entirely by a strange, translucent callus.

Bert Wanko also got in sinfully deep with someone's wife down in Marysville, he said.

Wanko did, or you did? asked another man, and said laughing. Married-ville, more like!

The other man did not laugh, but said. Oh no, it was Bert Wanko. I got the details. I know the details. It was the wife of a bankteller. And—

Is this the same as what happened with that Lionel fellow you were talking about last night?
another man asked.

No. Oh, no. But it happens so frequently! *It's the pattern that sickens us. Immorality. Infidelity.*

And in this case—

Bank tellers always have a gun! Always! Dead to rights! Dead to rights.

The ruddy man's words did not seem eager but simply tumbled out, like stones washed loose. He began to tear up.

An Irish man now said that he had never met a Bert Wanko in the area, and with a cruel light in his eyes asked. Is it ever that the wife gets killed, and the scoundrel lives? Wouldn't that really be a misburden of justice?

Shouts exploded from some men playing cards at a table where a saloon girl was perched. She slipped off her seat, but John shouted from the bar, a percussive command at the card players, and the table settled, a few of the men leaving.

The red Midwesterner answered as if nothing had happened. No, no. No. It's the scoundrel who dies in every case. It's the scoundrel, every single—

He began to weep in earnest now, and another man, his friend it seemed, got up and embraced him from behind, and petted his hair.

He said. No, Jim. It's alright. You're not a scoundrel.

The Irish man laughed and turned to the captain and asked after the claim. The captain nodded and said that it was going well.

You've tested the luck up there? the man asked.

Yes, we dug a deep hole, the captain said, and the other men laughed.

The Irish man did not laugh though, and said. No! It's not that funny! Let me tell you about luck. Tell me there is no such thing as it. Please!

Very well, said the captain. I don't believe in luck. You can figure it all out with math.

The Irish man laughed and drank. Of course you can't! Luck—luck is a present with no strings attached to it. There can be no real presents from other men, just blasted economic deals. You don't have to be grateful for luck, or pay it back. That's why I thought I would like gold mining. Never need to pay anything back. But it turns out—the luck here is shit!

Do you mean, a second Midwesterner asked. That luck is gift from God?

God!? No! Well, maybe. It really doesn't matter though.

What about thievery then? asked Wilcox. How does that relate to luck?

Thievery is a *perversion* of luck, said the Irish man. You can't make luck! Although I suppose there are lucky thieves and unlucky ones.

You can't make luck, but you can pray! said the second Midwesterner.

The same explosion of noise came from the same table. This time John was down from the bar, with his dishrag and a short Colt .30 held together in both hands. He made the remaining men shuffle their tabs out onto the table and then pointed them out the door.

Cards are about luck, said the Irish man. The best card games are half luck and half some sort of cleverness. What you just witnessed at that table was an attempt to overcome luck with cleverness.

I like that, said Jim, who was back, his eyes dry once more. Stealing is a perversion of luck.

Stealing a man's wife? the Irish man asked.

The man began to cry again, and his friend led him away from the table.

In the army, the captain said. There is luck.

Well if war isn't a gamble it's murder! But mining is the real gamble. Slow painful gambling! Any business is. And taxpayers, politicians, soldiers. They're all *gambling* like tomorrow isn't real! And the trick is that if you ever stop gambling you'll bust!

Wilcox had finished his beer and went to get another. He returned with a bowl of stew as well, in a wide, pewter dish.

What's in that? asked the Irish man.

Beef and potatoes. Celery, he said, tasting it. Onions, I believe, and black pepper.

The same as every night, Wyatt.

But it's Saturday. Sometimes it's pork with beans. I like that.

I've had fish chowder here too, said another man. If that's not luck, I don't know what is.

*

The second Midwesterner went to get some of the stew and a saloon girl came back with him and introduced herself as Merriam. Someone asked her what she thought about luck.

I know men who've got lucky with you! a third Midwesterner cried out, before she could answer. Tom Pinecole Johnson did!

There was laughter and everyone turned to a man sitting against the wall, who blushed beneath his handsome beard.

I know what you mean, said Merriam. I *could* make ten times what any of you do if I wanted to. If I practiced my *ingénue* the way some do. But, although the conversation this crowd makes is often dull and repulsive, it is less so than sleeping with you would be.

Ingénue? asked the Irish man, his face skeptical.

Ingénue, she said, shaping the word with an ironic voluptuousness.

That's the word I've been trying to remember! cried Tom Pinecole Johnson. *Ingénue!*

What's it mean? asked Wilcox.

It sort of means ingenuity, Tom Pinecole Johnson said. But it also has a connotation of *persistence*, and industriousness. It's the opposite of luck, I would say. It's just the right word to describe how to succeed in mining.

There used to be real whores in this town! a whiny voice called out. It was Jim, who onced more had come to stand by the table, and seemed upset by Merriam's presence.

Hey! said Wilcox.

No. Everyone is losing it! If you could make so much why don't you sell it? Here's two more words for you. Practice some *entrepreneurship*, *bitch*.

Hey! cried Wilcox again. Shut up.

It's alright, said Merriam. Jealousy is fine. I'll explain it to you, Jim. I like the smoothness of a day like this. I've never been beat up in my life. I earn three dollars making conversation, and go home to my own bed and rest well. I never have to get too close to foul smelling men. But, here. It's alright. I can tell you all something. I can tell you who at this table possesses—*real ingénue*. I'm able to discern it. It's a talent of mine. I can tell you all right now.

Very well, said Wyatt, the Irish man. Go ahead then.

There was a silence, and then she said. You've nothing to worry about, none of you. You all have *ingénue*. Except for Wyatt, but he's got luck. And except for Jim, who unfortunately has neither.

Jim, shaking with poisonous rage, said. Will you be angry then when your age goes sour?

Beer goes sour too, if you don't use it up! someone diplomatically called out.

Don't be stupid, said Jim. It's not the same. I asked her a question.

It's true though, said Wyatt. The luck of the whole town, the luck in mining at least, has perhaps lost its effervescence.

What?

It's flat! cried the Irish man.

Yes! The golden beer's gone flat and the wort is turning sour.

The town is here though.

And hydraulicking, added Wilcox. Is a fresh start.

For a few San Francisco financiers! For us it just means wages.

Wages aren't so bad. It's how the world works.

And it's not so much capital, Wilcox continued. To start up a small operation.

It's too much for me.

There are investors who would back you.

Perhaps who would back you and your captain.

I'm not his captain.

Then why do you decide his luck? asked Jim.

I'm just lending him some, the captain said. Have a beer on me.

The captain palmed the man a coin. He left, but instead of going to the bar, they watched him disappear through the front door, out in to the night.

Have you seen the monitors at the Ridge? Tom Pinecole Johnson asked. I agree with the young man. I think mining is entering a new golden age. You're right about the capital, but the luck is gone from it. Sorry Wyatt. From here on it is just in determination. *Ingénue*.

There was a pause, then the captain said, winking at Merriam. In that case we're fine. Because we all have it.

*

The men awoke where they had laid their rolls down, in a stand of willows with no path going through it. The sound of bubbling water from the stream, and the damp, woke them. The mule sat with her feet underneath her, head up and eyes squinted. A high, thick mist hung in the air and the captain, who was up first, said they would have to wait to dry their bedrolls until they got back.

It might burn off yet, said Wilcox, peering through the tangled, leafy switches above their heads.

But they packed up and broke through the thicket to a path. The stream was right there and the bridge was visible ahead, already busy with some walking traffic. Others who sleep and wake with the sun, perhaps, thought Wilcox. His head was a little fuzzy from the beer the night before, and the mist.

You can go from the pocket of wilderness to the pocket of civilization quickly, said the captain, once they were again at the bottom of Broad St.. The town in the morning had none of the eeriness of dark now. The timbers it was built of were wood. Some of the brick houses alone gave Wilcox the feeling

of distance he had experienced the night before, when they had arrived. The people seemed stranger in the daylight though, for the night before they had just been ghosts, and now men glanced up at the sky and the windows of establishments, clearly busy with their individual thoughts and considerations. There were women too, and these quick, skirted figures filled Wilcox with a nervous desire to be held and whispered to. It felt like a can of fat cooking over a fire. He thought of a swaddled baby, and quite suddenly, a hanging. Civilization is strange, he said to himself, but was unable to go further with the thought. Most of the pedestrians were headed for St. Mary's.

As they passed the church, Wilcox said. I might like to dip my head in there. It's been a long time and there was always something I liked about services.

The captain was annoyed and said. Well, it'll be going for a time. We've errands to run.

And we need to find Grover, Wilcox said, his heart quickening. I was thinking I could ask around at the stores and see if he's been in the vicinity.

The captain took some time to answer. Finally he said that Wilcox could do whatever he saw fit but to meet him at noon, in front of John's saloon, and certainly not in it. Wilcox hesitated but the captain said they were both men and they parted ways, the mule going with the captain. Wilcox made his way to the general store, but when he arrived it was closed. Unsure of what to do, or where the captain had gone, he walked farther up the street. Wilcox stopped at the corner, where a slack, mustached man sat.

Do you know a Cornish fellow by the name of Grover? he asked.

The man looked up bitterly and said. *Suis-je la bonne créature à demander?*

Wilcox looked at the man with some disgust and said. Beg pardon.

The man did not say anything else but he looked at his feet and then up again, his face even looser now, seeming to demand something. Just at that moment though, as Wilcox turned back towards

the street to avoid the man's eyes, a figure slipped between two buildings. The man on the corner made a choked noise and jerked his hand to point at the figure. Wilcox paused only for a second and then was running. He sprinted down the clapboard alley to a lot full of mining refuse, where he saw Grover disappearing down another street. Wilcox's pack was cumbersome but the man was loaded down as well, and as the two flew together down the hill, Wilcox thought of the frying pan.

By the time he threw the church doors open in pursuit his wheeze was excruciating. Luckily there was a second set of doors and he opened these more gently, entering the cavern of the building. The congregation was quiet and the priest had paused in his sermon, Wilcox was not sure if naturally, or from his interruption. The air was thick inside and Wilcox felt as if he were stirring up a great eddy. He saw Grover take a seat near the front though, and most of the disapproving eyes fell on him. Wilcox sat in the last empty pew as the priest spoke again.

The importance of bringing the Divine to every place. Whether you are hiking in the mountains or baking bread. Whether you are in the deepest pit of a hard rock tunnel—near perhaps to Satan's Hell—or at home with your children. There is no time where it is less critical or more critical. God, is *omnipresent*. With you, watching you, every moment. So be with him as well. The church is a place you can comfortably re-introduce yourself, but it is...and you may be shocked—no more important to be with God here than when you are on the outhouse!

This statement only created a slight stir though, and he continued. The mountains which are wild and new to us, have always been familiar to God. He has brought his flock to new pastures.

*

Grover kept glancing back. As the priest went on though, he relaxed in the pew. Wilcox relaxed as well, breathing slowly in the thick air. The censer burned a cypress resin and it recalled their campfire. Wilcox realized he was very hungry and that he had not had coffee. The priest went on, the soporific waves of his voice seeming to pile on top of each other, like blankets. He watched his quarry. Pheasant in

the thicket. Hunter and prey both regaining their breath. The priest spoke of God as both a light within and a guiding star. The need to align the two being great. He went on and Wilcox grew hungrier. Anxiety faded into boredom. The rest of the congregation seemed bored as well, but he could not tell for certain. Only the priest's face was visible, and that was animated. He went on and Wilcox wondered the time.

Then suddenly, the congregation rose to take communion and his quarry disappeared. A flash of dusty light leaped up as a door opened behind the cloisters. Wilcox was up and out the front doors, into the blinding late morning, and he sprinted around the church. He saw Grover disappearing behind a brick house, into an alley toward the street, and he ran back along the church to the street, and near the mouth of the alley he apprehended the thief.

Wilcox's well-muscled bulk alone kept Grover from slipping past. He struck him once and then held on, but the man was like a cat in a snare, twisting and biting relentlessly to escape. Wilcox's bag was on the ground, tossed as he met the man, but presently bag Grover's tore open, and crushed bread and mining tools spilled out. As they grappled on the packed dirt of the alley, Wilcox spotted the frying pan, sitting right side up, covered in bread crumbs and sand. Grover's legs kept kicking up in an attempt to push Wilcox away from him, and for a second the man withdrew his right hand from the fray. Wilcox pushed away, but the knife still touched him through his shirt, across the ribs. With a great force, Wilcox threw the man into the base of the brick wall, and kicked him. His strong, right leg swung out far and landed hard against the thief. He kept kicking and some blood started and wet his boot. The man curled up. A high squeak came with each blow and Wilcox could tell the man knew not to scream, even as his mouth darkened with the last kick. White headed and nauseous, Wilcox took the pan and left the shaded alley. In the full sunshine, some of the congregation was leaving the church. Wilcox went to the saloon to meet the captain.

It was the better part of an hour before the captain arrived, and Wilcox sat to wait. Men and women passed him, but no one knew him, and there were many men other men sitting on that street. He

thought about Grover. If it was a bird that I'd injured, I'd kill him, he thought. When the captain walked up the mule was loaded already, under a single heavy package wrapped in canvas.

The monitor? Wilcox asked.

Yes. I haven't got the food yet though, the captain said. We'll get that. And lunch too, although I'm not sure where. We probably should not have come on a Sunday.

I got the pan.

The captain looked at him, a little surprised. He noticed the blood on his boots and his friend's pale face and he helped him up.

*

On the road back they talked about how it felt good to leave town again. The road climbed, under the dappled oak, and there was a hanging dust in the air that reminded Wilcox of the church.

I've been thinking about how you may have been disturbed by what the saloon girl and Tom and Jim and Wyatt were saying last night. About wage work.

Wilcox remained quiet, but looked at the captain to go on.

It's true. The trend that they were describing is accurate. But there is, under the wing of the most terrible eagle, always some downy space. We've got—and he patted the mule. An opportunity. Wrapped up here is the power of an incorporated body's research. But as individuals we can use the same technology. We've got enough support from our partner, Mr. Juleson, and the dirt's good. I just want to say this because you're putting a lot of trust in me, and I know that.

They walked on peacefully. People, citizens and miners and employees, passed, going the other way. It would certainly be dark by the time they reached their camp again. Suddenly, Wilcox realized he had not posted his letter.

He said so and captain said. Well, you can wait or you can give it to someone going that way.

So Wilcox hailed a well-dressed man, who skeptically took the envelope, and money for postage, and a little extra, and promised to send it sometime Monday.

*

Up the far bank of the South Fork's gorge, the mule climbed steadily and without any quiver in her knees, despite the heavy load. She looked back periodically, with longing, at a small bale of hay they had tied on top of the monitor. The men rested her at a spring and the three of them drank.

I think, Wilcox said. I would like to name the mule.

Name the mule? Sal?

I think we should name her *Ingénue*. To encourage our continued ingenuity and industriousness.

After a moment the captain said. *Ingénue*. What about Engine for short? That puts the force in it.

Engine?

Ingénue. Engine U. Engine Ursula. If we get another, Engine Undine.

Engine for short?

Yes. *Ingénue* for long.

They christened *Ingénue* with the spring water, darkening a thread down her hide. She drank from it too and her front feet muddied the water before the men could fill their skins.

Ingénue!

She turned and tossed her head, under the load, as if laughing.

*

The sun was strong again in the morning. The mule's load had been left by the fire, along with their retrieved food sack. Their bedrolls hung from the snags of branches on the big sugar pine, steaming. Both men smelled musty from sleeping in the damp bedding. They had gotten in very late but neither had slept at all past sunrise. Wilcox made the coffee and, in the pan, he toasted their oats. Once more there had been no rolled oats in Nevada City, but he parched them over the fire, and then moistened them with the water skin until they were soft. The captain had gone to unbury their tools, and he came back. Then the men ate the oats out of the pan with spoons and drank their hot coffee. *Ingénue* was tethered to a yellow pine and they fed her some of her fresh hay, and a handful of their oats.

Covered with layers of canvas padding by the fire, was the monitor. They unwrapped it after eating. It looked like a military cannon, but bent with a gooseneck in the middle, so that the ends were parallel but the top was elevated by several feet. The nickel steel was dark and very fresh, and had been oiled before delivery. The whole cylinder tapered from five inches at the intake to one and a half at the nozzle. They stood it up, both men grasping the heavy apparatus firmly.

The captain said. Once the hose is connected, there will be enough force from the nozzle to cut a man up. The stream is too strong to swing a crowbar though.

I heard, Wilcox said. That rose gold is gold mixed with blood. From accidents like that. And that it's more expensive that way.

You don't believe that, do you, Willie? the captain said. Rose gold is impure with copper. It goes for less, not more.

I didn't believe it. I just said it because I had heard so, said Wilcox.

They had set the great steel thing back down on its side. Wilcox said. Sometimes you just say something to say it.

Oh, do you? the captain said, abruptly.

Captain?

No. I'm sorry. I suppose you're right.

You were feeling something, though.

The captain said. Not everything deserves to be spoken of.

So for a moment they were in silence. Then Wilcox said. It makes sense perhaps though, in a business relationship, to speak openly about how you feel.

You notice differences in my mood, the captain said.

Forgive me. It's only for my own sake that I ask. Don't you think it would be wise for me to know the patterns that my partner operates with? Or else it could be that you'll give up on the enterprise unexpectedly, and that I'll be strapped with debt.

Then yes, little woman, the captain said, obdurately. Sometimes I feel angry without any obvious cause. A kind of dark emanation, like a fire that makes you cold. But it has always been that way, and you don't have to worry. It passes quickly. I'm in control of myself.

I did not mean to offend.

The captain said he was not upset by it.

Through the morning they worked on the monitor, and Wilcox felt good for having talked to the captain. Although they were not even close to ready to use the monitor, they decided it would be well to erect it, for it was the figurehead and center of their project. So Wilcox went with their single-handed whipsaw and found a small straight fir with only a few top branches. He cut a wedge from the downhill side. Almost from the moment the saw touched its bark a shiver seemed to move rapidly up and down the length of the trunk. The sawdust was very wet and built a gummy tar in the teeth, but it still cut. Wilcox cut from the back after the wedge was loose, and before he was halfway through the fibers started

popping. He made a few more passes and the undulation in the tree sped up, until the whole thing was quaking. He pushed on the trunk as high as he could and it began to fall. Stepping back, he saw the top branches pull a great snarl of foliage from the canopy, and then the tree landed with a thump, sprang once, and was still. He cut the four sections he needed from the trunk end of the log, the saw beginning to stick worse with the gum now. Each section was a little shorter than he, and heavy with water. He bound them together with some cord and with significant effort dragged them back, holding the saw by one finger.

When he got back the fire was going. The men worked together, and with a hatchet notched three of the pieces into the shape of a capital letter A, but with a flattened point, and then used the back of the hatchet and iron nails to spike them together. Then they notched and spiked the fourth piece to brace the crossbar, creating a kind of uneven tripod. By cutting a notch into the round side of a half-piece of firewood, they made a cradle, which they set on the flat top of the frame for a moment, but did not nail it on yet.

The captain loaded lumps of black coal onto the fire and Wilcox brought out their small bellows. They had no good anvil to use, but around one of the thick laps in the monitor, they bent a piece of strap into a ring and riveted the shape shut. They checked the shape of the ring with the half circle of the cradle block and it did not fit perfectly. So they heated it again and hammered it straight into the block of wood until it was snug, and then punched several holes in the ring, across from the rivets. Instead of tempering the iron they let it lose its color and then gently cooled it with water. Then they spiked the ring into the cradle and notched and spiked the cradle onto the tripod. Then, right there in camp, and with some ceremony, they stood the monitor up and slid it through the holding ring and onto the strong, new frame. Standing, it looked like the severed front half of a giant, black snake.

*

They talked more about the fire, and about the difference between the fire in a house stove and a campfire. After their coal fire earlier, and with the shortening season, it was on both of their minds. They

had the canvas that the monitor had been wrapped in, and they considered building a tent. A fire, without the insulation of a structure around it, provides just enough of a radius of comfort. It is only if you have so many things that they cannot all be close to the fire that you need a whole house to be warm, and this probably means you have an overly complicated life, they agreed.

A fire, the captain said. Puts out a pleasant ring, where it is not too cold and not too hot, and with a good fire, this ring is quite wide enough.

I wonder about the sun, Wilcox said. If there is some kind of insulation that warms all the space between us and the sun, or if we are in a similar ring of comfort.

I believe it is the second, the captain said.

It got them to talking about all the comforts that they enjoyed by chance and never considered.

By luck, perhaps, said Wilcox.

We are, the captain said. Closer to the cool extreme of the spectrum of heat. I've heard of temperatures as low as 50 below zero. But the fire of a foundry reaches into the thousands.

Hmm, Wilcox said. Do you suppose things can always keep getting colder and hotter with the right conditions?

I think if there is a limit, people haven't reached it yet. I've never heard of such a thing.

Perhaps the sun is the limit, for heat. And that is why it does not fluctuate.

If the sun is one great fire then it should depend on the material it is burning. The flame of the sun is yellow. Like coal or wood.

You think the sun might be coal?

Might be. Could just be very large and not all that hot, said the captain.

But what fire can you imagine that looks so small and that still warms you? It must be burning many times hotter than coal, said Wilcox.

I don't know, except that it's yellow. I might not see color well, but I know the sun is yellow.

Copper burns green, Wilcox said absently. Imagine a green sun.

Then they talked about whether rusting was nothing but a cold and slow kind of chemical fire, and whether or not it produced any heat. And later the captain slipped into one of his stories, about a farrier he had camped with once. He had spotted a fire that was clearly a white man's, on the ridge. The farrier had a horse with him.

Unlike the cobbler's children, who go unshod, the captain said. This horse had fine shoes and carefully trimmed hooves. The children of fellers and farmers also get good shoes, but it is not for enviable reasons. This farrier's horse though, who was used to having his hooves burned, would approach the fire, until he singed his nose. Horses don't get cold easily and the night wasn't chilly, and they usually stay away from the fire, but this horse was transfixed, almost stupefied. The farrier said any time he was by a fire he acted the same way.

Sounds like a strange horse.

I think it was. But it is worth it to see what horse the farrier chooses for himself, I think. He said the horse also took shoes without flinching and was not gun shy in the slightest.

If you have a horse, Wilcox said. It is often better than a fire, for keeping warm.

Is that how you do it in Missouri?

A horse and a blanket.

The captain told another story. It was a couple years before I met this farrier that I spent a few days near Mendocino, on the beach. Collecting agates. It was when I first got to this territory. I was

looking up creeks in all the wrong places, but where there weren't other people around, looking for gold. There weren't many people in Mendocino then. Anyway I was hungry and I met a Spanish girl who had lived with her family near the shore. They had all died recently and she was living on her own. She fed me.

How had they died?

She didn't say. She spoke Spanish. We did speak, what little we could. But she didn't tell me what happened to her family. I was ready for a rest and I was hungry, I didn't really ask. I butchered one of her family's pigs for her. Anyway, she had this sad demeanor, as if she had given up just about all her hope, like her people were all being driven out, which they were. They had been. So basically neither of us felt like there was anything pressing to do, and we had pork to eat. She took me down to beach below the bluffs and she showed me how to find agates. You walk up the beach, into the sun, and the light hits them. They glow a little. They're gold colored.

They worth anything, agates?

No. But I thought maybe they were. We picked up a good sackfull over the course of a few days. I took them to town and tried to sell them at the general store. The storekeeper laughed and called his friends in from outside, and they laughed too. So I took them back to the girl and I left. She asked if I would stay, one time, and I said I could not. I thought about hitting her, for wasting my time with the agates, but instead I left them in a jar on her windowsill, where the sun lit them up just slightly in the afternoon. Then I left and came inland. There was no gold near the coast.

Hmm. said Wilcox. And then you panned gold?

Yes. It was no different from finding the agates though. Except the agates were more beautiful.

If people had decided that agates should be valuable and gold not be—

The world would not be different at all.

Ingénue was sleeping away from the fire, her feet tucked underneath herself, and Wilcox had the urge to go rest on her. He looked at the captain, who stared into the fire. Strange that even that stony character has a warm body. The exact same warmth as a woman, maybe less than the mule, though. He thought of moving his bedroll each night, when they laid them out, a little closer to the older man's. But he banished the thought as the man looked up, his bearded face suddenly very wide and dangerous in the firelight.

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It was two weeks later, during the middle of the day and a little colder, and the clouds were piling over the mountains and becoming violet. Wilcox and the captain came down from the stream, their pants and shirttails wet and boots over their shoulders. The fence posts for the dam were driven and half of the lower posts were braced. The men had left their mallets on the bank and taken some tobacco, which they had acquired recently in North Bloomfield, to chew after lunch. They ate some of the bread, which was quickly staling, with cold beans from the pan. The air chilled them both but they did not have time to light a fire. Instead, they ate quietly, a sense of unsure companionship accompanying their discomfort. Suddenly Wilcox saw that the captain had stopped chewing, and had cocked his head like a bird. Then he heard the sound too, the gentle thumping of hooves on the ground.

Coming up the path was Mr. Juleson, riding a small, freshly-brushed palomino. The captain stood and told Wilcox to help the investor with his horse. Wilcox rose quickly, setting his plate on the ground. As he approached Mr. Juleson, he felt cold and clumsy and was not sure if he should shake the man's hand before taking the horse.

Mr. Juleson called out though. Do I look so out of place in the mountains, Jennings? On a horse?

No, the captain said. You look perfectly suited for the mountains. Beautifully and exceptionally so.

The investor shook Wilcox's hand, and then gave him the palomino's reins, and said. You are too kind, Jennings! I think it's the wildness of the mountains that inspires new beauty in men. I say so just from looking at you two. I'm sorry for not announcing myself, but I was not sure how to reach you, and wished to look at our claim.

Mr. Juleson's words were quick, and all of equal length and they took a moment for Wilcox to understand.

Well this is the site. Fifteen years you've had a claim and you've never visited? the captain said. You're lucky no one ever squatted it, it's such a good spot. See the bank there, with the blue gravel? That's a good sign, it means gold for sure. And the monitor there—all set up.

The captain's tone was a little different than Wilcox had ever heard it, and he thought he saw a trace of annoyance in his face.

But it's not operating yet? asked Mr. Juleson.

No. Not quite yet. We need the hose still, and to finish the dam up at the penstock, so we can collect our water. Very soon though.

The investor looked around the site as if it were a sitting room and asked. Is this somewhat behind the schedule we made?

That was a rough schedule, I recall, the captain said. I remember I made sure to write as much on the document when I gave it to you.

Oh, well I had it recopied. For legibility. I'm not worried, though. I didn't mean to imply that, the investor said. And you've not overdrawn your monies, which I appreciate.

Thank you. We try to be frugal, the captain said.

Yes, I know you do. In fact, it was you two I mostly wished to check up on, to make sure you were well and comfortable enough. Are you camping here?

Yes, said the captain. It's the only thing really feasible, in terms of budget and travel. Wouldn't make any sense really to stay in North Bloomfield.

Mr. Juleson nodded, and peered down at the pan on the fire. What's that you're eating there? It looks good.

Oh, those are beans. We find them to be a good staple. Beans, oats, sow-belly.

I see, said the man, and paused. Actually, I'm reminded of one more question.

The men waited, a little tensely, and Mr. Juleson asked. Do you eat butter?

The captain smiled and said. It's somewhat difficult to find reasonably priced butter up here. Not that we don't appreciate those finer things. I love a little buttered coffee in the morning, but haven't had it for some time.

Good then! I brought you some!

Oh! the captain exclaimed. You shouldn't have!

Thank you. That's very generous, said Wilcox.

The man waved off the thank you and walked to his horse. He took a wrapped block of butter from one of the saddlebags, looking *Ingénue* up and down as he turned back around.

He said. I want to tell you, men, that what you have done so far looks very good. I am nothing of a mountain man, so I don't know the specifics, but it feels good here.

Thank you, said Wilcox. That is very kind.

You're very handsome, he said to Wilcox, and then asked the captain what he thought the largest step left was before mining could begin.

Building the sluices, the captain said. We'll need lumber for that.

There was a pause, while Mr. Juleson looked around. Do you need it delivered? Do you think you could just use the timber that's here?

It would be difficult without a sawmill.

Could a sawmill be built? Could you build it?

I could, the captain said. But I couldn't necessarily build a sawmill and mine for gold at the same time. I think to deliver lumber here would expedite the process very much. Or perhaps to hire someone to build one, on an isolated contract.

Mr. Juleson continued looking around and finally he nodded and said. Very well. I will look into the options. We'll get you your lumber.

They showed him the penstock, with the wooden cistern and its flumes, and the nearly completed dam. He walked up the stream a way. They waited for him and he came back with a small rock, which he showed to the captain. One corner of the rock glittered brightly.

Is that gold? he asked.

No. That's mica, said the captain.

Fool's gold, said Wilcox, and the captain gave him a sour look, which made him cringe inwardly.

Mr. Juleson did not seem to hear though, and he put the rock in his pocket. Then he asked if he could eat with them. So the men started preparing their meal much earlier than usual. Wilcox worried

about the impression this might give their investor, and worried similarly when the captain suggested to cook up a whole lean cut of the sow-belly, and the rest of their potatoes, mashed with the butter. But Mr. Juleson sat on the ground by the fire, happily dirtying his clean pants with ash, and the heat lifted the smell of bay rum off of him. The sun was still white and the piling clouds above the mountain had not broken up.

The captain gave the investor a tin cup of whiskey, and the man asked Wilcox. You come out here for change?

For spare change, said the captain.

Mr. Juleson laughed at the joke, but said. You could get rich if you keep on a good working track.

I work hard, Wilcox said. I grew up digging. I thought gold would be better than potatoes.

The captain nodded vigorously in agreement and Wilcox felt a blush of annoyance at what seemed like a slight condescension. He worried for a moment that the blush would be noticed, and taken as embarrassment.

Work is an interesting word, the captain said. It means that a thing is working out, functioning, but it is also the word for the attempt on its own. Working *at* something and something working *out* are different.

That's true. And things work by chance sometimes, Wilcox said.

Rarely, said Mr. Juleson, absently. I'm glad that you are putting the work into the operation.

And you hope it works, Wilcox said, once more feeling foolish.

I sincerely do, Mr. Juleson said. I'm sure it would be satisfying for you two, and I would like to finally get something out of this claim. Until this hydraulicking technology it has seemed impossible. But I bided my time, and now it might work out.

Well we are working at it, said the captain. And within a few months we will know whether it *works out*.

Yes! That's perfect. I'm happy with it. And it could be that it takes a bigger operation, but I'm happy to be trying this, and for you two to be trying it with me.

They sat in silence and ate.

I'll figure out the best way to get the wood up here, said Mr. Juleson. I'll figure that out.

Okay, said the captain.

They talked about Boston for a time, and about New York, and Wilcox had a little more whiskey and the sun lowered some.

As he left, Mr. Juleson asked if there was anything else, and said once more that he was pleased with their progress. After a still moment Wilcox suddenly said that if he didn't mind, there was something else. He moved quickly and retrieved a letter from his bag, and a pencil, and scrawled the address across the front. The investor looked at the letter and said. Pittsburg. Yes, I can mail it. Of course.

Then he waved, and rode his palomino back down the trail towards his hotel. The captain decided that they should quit for the day, but went to the penstock to collect their tools and look things over. Wilcox stayed, sitting and thinking. He was sitting when new footsteps arrived. For a moment he thought it was Mr. Juleson returning, but this man was on foot, walking fast, and out of breath. Wilcox felt a small sense of shock, upon seeing another unfamiliar face in the same day. The sun was nearly down, staining the trees above the newcomer's head.

Hallo! the man called before he entered the site. His head was blond, and he waved. Wilcox called a greeting in return and thought to perhaps pick up a shovel.

Who are you? he asked.

I'm Samuel from the North Bloomfield. Sorry for barging in, but I keep meaning to visit. Jennings and I talked about it once.

The man was walking around already, and the strange sense that he was the ghost of Mr. Juleson, or vice-versa, overcame Wilcox. His voice filled the space of the camp completely.

I'm busy all day most days, but today I had the night man start early so I could come down.

You work through the night up there? Wilcox asked.

Yep. We've got shifts around the clock. We keep it lit up with pitch torches. This is a good spot, he added, his hand on the still unused monitor. How soon will you be running it?

Wilcox said. Within a couple weeks, we hope.

The man looked around. Have you not built a penstock yet?

The penstock is done. The dam is under way, Wilcox said. We were working on it earlier but our investor came by.

The man looked around and said again. Well it looks like a good place. Blue gravel. It'll drain easy too, I think. I hope that the two of you are able to take full advantage of it. For the mining economy as a whole, and the state. For the sake of California, we ought to do it well and completely.

For the sake of California?

Yep. You don't know how long anything will be around for out here. Things change hands quickly. The west seems to shed people like a duck's back. The Spanish, the Sonorans. The Mongolians before that. You need to get what you can, fast.

The man had clearly taken in the whole of the operation while he spoke. Wilcox thought about offering him whiskey but something told him it would make a bad impression. He wondered for a moment if he himself smelled of liquor and if the blond newcomer had noticed.

Your position at the Bloomfield is what again? Wilcox asked.

North Bloomfield. I'm a foreman. Day foreman. Will you be hiring a couple more people?

Yes, said Wilcox. We plan on having at least one other man.

The chilly evening breeze was dropping from the mountains and Wilcox wondered where the captain was. He felt uncomfortable and thought to do something to make himself seem busy.

Did you run into someone on the way in? he asked Samuel.

Yep. Rich Juleson. He's the owner.

Yes. We're partners. You know him very well?

Actually, the man said, with a touch of condescension, Wilcox thought. We talked a while back about this very claim. I was very busy at the time though, and didn't have the time to spare. I respect the man though. I respect Jennings too. There's something about a man who's seen war that demands respect. You're sure he's not around?

He should be back in a moment, said Wilcox, tersely.

Well, I do need to be going, the man said. I should have tried to get here earlier.

Oh? Said Wilcox.

I want to get back before it's fully dark. Dangerous.

Hm, Wilcox said. It's an hour walk?

Or so, said Samuel. I'm glad to have gotten a good look at this though. Good to know what's here.

Yes. Nice to meet you.

I'll see you soon.

He left then, and Wilcox piled wood on the fire, attempting to dispel the impression that the man was a ghost. He tried to comfort himself with thoughts of other coincidences he had experienced, but it felt as if something had changed in the site itself. It was getting dark finally. That was all the change, perhaps, the nighttime. Whatever has changed was already here, thought Wilcox. Just evening and whiskey. The fire grew with the wood he gave it and soon it lit the site more brightly than what was left of the daylight did, and then he said out loud. No. Nothing has changed.

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The shadow of a twig passed over the captain's eye. He paused mid-stride and stepped back a little so the shadow fell over his eye again. He closed his other eye and the sun was blocked entirely. It felt like retrieving a memory that had been left undisturbed for long time. For a moment there were no words to what he was thinking. Then he flinched and the words filled his thoughts again. He thought, history is like that. Words painting over vast swaths of time, over reality. It is easier to remember that way. In the back of his skull was an unapproachable slop. So the man, the captain, walked forward and looked up, instead of at the path, the sun flashing through the branches, striking his face again and again, as if trying to pound its way in.

The mess of my own brain matters more than all the history I've read, he said out loud, and then thought, Roman empire, Byzantium, Christ, British empire, America. They're nothing to me. I would sacrifice nothing for you, not one precious finger. The thoughts of losing a finger made him cry. He cried silently. The tears were pitiful and dirty, and, he thought, of all the death and torture in the world only I, I am enough to bring myself to tears.

The sun shone steady for a moment, through a larger gap in the trees above, and he remembered he was walking past the entirety of the present. He had all his fingers and he rubbed his chest with them. He cast a solid shadow on the light-daubed pine duff. He distracted his mind for a moment to gold. He conjured pictures of gleaming, yellow powder behind the riffles in a sluice, pinched wet and messy between his fingers. He thought of a tall house in Boston to buy. For a second the past cut him again. No. No. The future and the past are not it. I am here for this alone. To be happy right now.

*

Wilcox eyed the captain, several days after Mr. Juleson's visit. The early afternoon light was hard, but at its late autumn angle was not too hot.

I have a theory about fathers, Wilcox said.

About fathers?

Well about society. I think society is marked off into father-tiers. It is a big mass of people but it's organized by fathers. Everyone has some kind of father to look up to.

Is Mr. Juleson our father in this world?

Yes. But his father is the governor.

Or a senator maybe. Or maybe he's a senator's father.

Yes! The senator is important because of his power and his power's relationship to accountability. It creates a protective structure, each father a floor in a many storied house. And the less powerful people being the walls, holding it up but also being protected. That's my theory.

All the way up to God?

I don't think it matters. Not to us. Perhaps for us it matters up to the president. We know of him. And maybe God. But we're far enough below, under so many floors that it doesn't really effect us.

And all the way down to us. To you. Are we brothers?

No! You're my father.

Wilcox reddened and but the captain shook his head, and pulled him into an embrace. The captain's pigeon chest pressed firmly into Wilcox's and he felt the old man's hard fingers stroke the back of his head gently, and his human breath close to his ear.

*

At the penstock, Wilcox opened the valve. The hose suddenly took on all the muscle that the mountain stream had only ever dispersed over its boulders. Now it was contained, and the crinoline hose became turgid and was forced to bend itself between tree trunks, and it pushed the manzanita scrub over where it straightened. The hose filled rapidly, down the slope, and the head of water reached the captain, braced against the monitor with his feet apart. It coughed up a single bullet of water, recoiled, and released another short burst. Then the metal began to hum, ringing the bones in the captain's wrists, and the massive, white arc appeared, as if in the blink of an eye. It seemed for a moment as if it was not moving at all, but simply hung there between the steel nozzle and the bank. The water did not sparkle. Something propelled drifting clouds through it. These clouds were the only motion the captain could follow, and they moved much slower than the stream itself. The thought that it was not strong after all

crossed his mind, and then a gushing, brown river appeared from under the spray. The sound of stones clattering from the melted clay reached him. Applause.

And then like patrons leaving a theater, one early, and then two by two, then in a great mass, more stones slid out, and a dark trench appeared in the soft slope where the water was landing. It was long and narrow and the captain braced himself against the surging machine. He watched the water penetrate deeper into the slit, the forest all around it stubble, where they had shorn it expose the rich blue bank. Water tumbled uncontrollably from the bottom of the cut, stained with the richness of the soil.

The captain flinched and pushed the monitor to the side. It tore the hole wider. And then, panicking and wishing to banish the thought, the man pulled the implement back and forth across the bank. Curtains of water undid the feminine illusion and more rocks clattered down in a fresh wave, relieving him. The monitor did not shut off yet and the captain kept the water sweeping evenly across the slope. The slurry of muddied water had found a course down the slope already. The captain thought, water has no question where it should go. The great stack of sluice boxes was uselessly to the captain's left. Gold careened invisibly, in particles, through the water.

Then the valve was shut. For the moment it took the stream to die, the captain stopped moving the monitor, and when the jet fell away he saw that the same crevice had reappeared faintly in the bank. The clattering stream still ran down the slope. When Wilcox got back to the site the captain was walking on the blue bank. A trickle still moved quickly in the new waterway, already clear again over the new silty bed. A great scoop of the bank had fled in a muddy streak through the trees below.

It's as if it has been waiting to go, the captain said. As if it wanted all along to succumb to the force of gravity.

Wilcox nodded understandingly but just said. It seems so different from the Malakoff pits. I did not realize how much earth was being moved.

A great deal of earth. It's like it was restless all along.

They just stood for a while, the sky wide and gray above them. After a time, the captain asked Wilcox if he wanted to have a chance at running the monitor. He nodded and the captain walked the length of the hose to the stream. The hose had retained a bulb of water near the base, but just up the slope was slack and flattened again.

At the penstock he paused. Their little plank dam subdued the stream and diverted most of it into the great, wooden cistern. The tank was full to the overspill and the clean water rushed back out of it and through the overspill trough, running flat over the artificial surfaces, and then bounding and lively again on the stones in its old bed. Watching the cistern, which remained level, just above the overspill's glassy shoulder, and the solid flow in the troughs, and the dammed stream, it was impossible to tell how much water moved through their system. It seemed to all be standing still. The captain opened the knife valve at the bottom of the tank. The hose, flattened with suction, expanded again immediately. The level in the cistern did not seem to drop, and water still flowed out of the overspill, which was good, the captain thought, because it meant that the hose would not drain the tank. He left the hose on for minute and then shut it off. It flattened again and he saw that the water passing out of the overspill did actually increase a little with the valve shut. He went back to the site of the mine. Water was still flowing down the bank from where it had landed. Wilcox stood on the bank too. The same tall slit had been left in the center of the bank and Wilcox stood by it, water flowing around his darkened boots. The look on his face was jarred and guilty. He placed his hand on the lip of the crevice.

You need to sweep it from side to side, the captain said.

I see, said Wilcox, blushing. I thought it would be on for longer.

*

That evening was brought early by the clouds. Weak light from the hidden sun diminished quickly and a light rain began to fall. There was no wind and the rain fell vertically, drops strengthening, and it began to wet the hills. The pine duff was moistened and let up a sweet, dirty smell, and this release settled the needles closer to the ground. Toads and red worms who had remained deeper in the soil for the summer came to the surface, and the toads ate many of the worms. All evergreen leaves in the forest were bent slightly down by the rain, but as it went on they lifted slowly on their petioles, vacuous cells taking on water. Broad leaves, yellow or brown already, were knocked to the floor. Here the worms waited, quenched but still hungry, and under the litter-shelter began to eat. Mycelium swelled to be as thick as a thread of silk and prepared to bloom. Spiders and beetles also took shelter under the leaves, or under the tight shell of tree bark, and birds shook and puffed their feathers. The two men, under their canvas tarpaulin, tried to sleep early, but a trickle of water came under and dampened their bedrolls. They moved so that it flowed between them, and they rolled over again, trying to sleep. The forest was soggy, and then heavy, as water was drawn up into trees and soaked into the ground. It was not a real storm though and the rain slackened before long and then mostly ceased, leaving the forest full of the tiny percussion of leaves springing back up, and heavy, shed drops landing.

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Having had some whiskey with lunch, the men relaxed in the pit. The captain walked over the sluices, poking at the caught sediment. Wilcox sat back against a rock by the bank and wrote a letter. The white page blinded him. The bank behind him was a lovely blue and the trees at the forest's new rim swayed at their tops. He could see out now, but unlike any other time he could remember, it made him glad to be where he was. He did not want to fly away toward the mountains. He wrote that down. At the center of this great work he felt heavy and glad. The rock itself was loose underneath him. Lumber was strewn everywhere as if by a flood. Crows scattered out of the forest up the slope from the pit, and passed right over. Strange creatures, people are. We don't scavenge. We draw the world toward ourselves. Other creatures peck and poke their way through the forest, the world.

The captain strode, confident and tall, in full sun. He floated over the wooden riffles. As if the impure, soft elements of the man had been washed away with all the clay, perhaps by the mist that reached the men while they worked with the monitor. He was animal without stupidity and human without laws. Wilcox looked up, into the sun, sucking his pencil. Then he wrote again, aware of his straight leg and his other bent, strong knee that the paper was on. The lead scratched across the page and when he looked up the world seemed gray. His hands, skinned and scarred, looked dim and he touched them to his face to feel that they were warm, but instead they felt cold. The captain had moved closer to him again. Wilcox thought of his hands of stone and how he preferred them that way. He squeezed a rock and went back to writing. Behind the riffles must be gallons and gallons of sediment, the pale grid, laden with gold. He had heard once of lighting striking a sluice box and melting all the gold into a webbed ingot under the sand. The sun was warm, even though the world looked gray. The captain was standing at some distance, looking away. Some of the crows flew back across the open sky above the pit. Bird shaped windows past the pale sky into nighttime. Wilcox heard more passing over as he wrote, their feathers scraping.

It felt good to be left alone! When you know you can accomplish a task and you are given the space and time to do it in peace. This way you know exactly what makes you happy or unhappy. Wilcox wrote. The captain was crouching, in a different place, and then he was walking, and then he stopped again, knelt. Purified brain. Toughened body. *We hone* ourselves against this landscape. We learn to grind it down without using ourselves up. We become stronger. Not like a banker getting rich and piggy. Hand men. Brain men. He and the captain walked through Nevada City— no, Sacramento, or maybe San Francisco—rich and rough.

Wilcox sat for a long time, writing. He filled the front of a page and half of its other side. The captain watched the tedious work and wondered how well he spelled. The captain was tipsy and pinched up some of the material from behind a riffle, peering at it for gold. He knew it was there, but the fine, wet sand did not reveal its wealth. It was the same color as Samuel's hair. He carefully wiped it off, back into

the bed, and dried what remained stuck to his hand by blowing. Then he brushed that off like sugar, back into the sluice.

*

Wilcox said how it would make him happy to keep working. His letter was put away. The captain nodded in consent and left Wilcox at the ready with the cantilevered monitor. The water came on slowly, as if the captain was really easing the valve. When he got back, Wilcox was deftly cutting away at the bank, the solid, muddy stream rushing through the sluices. Some boulders had already been cut loose and the captain went to the boxes and watchfully rolled them off of the wood. As he pulled one of the rocks away another came leaping out of the slope. It struck the sluice once with a cracking sound and then bounced out of the channel, toward the captain. He sidestepped the rock and it continued down the slope, disappearing all the way into the forest. He looked up at Wilcox, who had not noticed.

As the day was finishing and the water was shut off they talked. The sluice stream was fully drained, and they ate, dreamily.

It is strange how separate two people can feel. Though they are sharing everything, the captain said.

II

The river moved slowly around the bend where Eddie stood. It was brown. The fall grass was papery and white. Big, spreading trees with leaves that looked like holly cast dark shade. From of the thick bed of foliage beneath them tall thistles had grown, but they were dry now. Eddie's footsteps through the leaves seemed to disturb the scene, although there did not seem to be anything alive there, besides the trees. He urinated into the lattice of some of the holly leaves that came close to the ground, and while he did, noticed that they had a kind of acorn. The sky above the drab landscape was clear and deep, and the contrast made the colors at the riverbank feel even duller. As he walked back to the road, Eddie touched all the dry plants and some that were gray, but still alive. At the road he smelled his hand, and he was overwhelmed by a sweet, resinous perfume. The other passengers were coming back to the wooden cart and Eddie went to the driver, standing with his horses.

Are these some kind of oak? Eddie asked him, indicating the holly-leaved trees.

Live oak, the smooth-faced man replied, and spat.

Do the leaves ever change? It seems late in the season already.

They don't change, the driver replied. Live oak's an evergreen oak. They lose leaves one at a time, like a pine.

The idea was strange to Eddie, but less strange than most of the things he has seen over the past week. He went back to the cart though and sat with his things. He sniffed his perfumed hand again and was filled with an intense joy, and then a distant melancholy, which was equally strong. The driver got into his seat and surveyed the cart, then took off again.

For the next hour, the landscape changed more dramatically, and seemed to regain some color. Pine trees started to appear on the hilltops and, as the elevation rose, began to fill the canyons and swales as well. Much of the pine forest was cut, but the sap-beaded stumps were distinctive, and seedlings grew among them. Gullies had cut through many of these bare patches, and the thick soil slumped from the bank and into the road in many places. The traffic on the road was light. A sign said that Grass Valley was three more miles and that Nevada City was seven.

As he sat, listening to other passengers speak quietly, the apprehension that had battled Eddie's excitement since before his train left, welled up again. He knew they came from the same source, though. His cousin's letters had answered very little, except to say that he and his partner continued to need help, and to describe his sustained sense of awe. What Wilcox referred to changed a little, and his spelling and grammar were very poor, but Eddie's intuition had told him to trust the man. He was less sure now, but knew also that he was disoriented. The Californians thought different thoughts. He could tell from the landscape, and from the conversations he had overheard, and the reflections between the two. It seemed now, upon being there, that the language of the new state had quickly sunk into his cousin. Wilcox. Wilcox and work. Those would be his tying points, for now. A good point to start from.

They got to Nevada City early in the evening, when the edges of buildings were losing definition. Except for the main street, at the bottom of which the cart had left him and the other passengers, the buildings were all of wood and canvas. They created a geometry in the dim light like feathers on a dog-killed bird. A distant, rapid pounding had accompanied them the whole way, fading and growing as they moved. The noise was still loud in the town, and did not stop with the nightfall. Eddie made his way up the street, his boots sounding loudly on the boardwalk. Other people passed by, walking quietly in the dirt. The boardwalk led up the hill to a brick hotel, which Eddie entered.

In the common room there were tables, a few of which were being used by solitary patrons. A woman approached him and introduced herself as Merriam. She lit an oil lamp and took him up a set of

unlit stairs to a long hallway with a single light. In the dimness Eddie saw that the walls here were wood, but as they continued walking they became canvas. He stopped the woman.

Can I stay in one of the rooms in the front? he asked. Are they all full?

You're set to work at the mine?

Yes. But I think I have enough money.

She looked at him. This is where miners typically stay. The rooms aren't bad.

She opened a door to a room. It was very dark, but she entered and her lamp lit all four walls. Through the door he saw the uncurtained glass window, opaque with the reflected light. He followed her in and she lit another lamp that was on the table. There was a bed and a chair as well, against the same wall. After a moment he set his things down.

You don't think I'll be making much of a living up there do you?

I don't know. This is just where miner's usually stay.

Yes, Eddie said, feeling apprehension again, and touching the canvas wall. It seems...pleasantly maritime. Not what I would have expected in the mountains.

She nodded and told him there was a hot meal downstairs for him and left him in the room. He touched the fabric walls one more time and put his face to the window. It was fully dark outside now and there were few lights in the town. Most of them came muddied, from windows of rawhide or oilcloth, Eddie guessed. He sat on the bed, still and in silence for a long time. It was the first bed he had been on for many days. Eventually he stood and took the lamp with him downstairs and ate. Afterward he left the hotel to walk down the main street, taking the boardwalk to its end and then back on the other side. He slept and in the morning ate breakfast and started walking, into the hills, toward the town of North Bloomfield, closer to his cousin's mine.

Now that he carried it, his pack seemed very heavy. Nearly all the trees around Nevada City and the road had been cut. The shape of the landscape was visible. Not like shed clothing but like torn skin, he thought. Patches of earth were turned over, yellow and red clay and gravel. The colors were brighter than in the valley, as if it rained more, but the scenery was bleaker. Something about the landscape filled him with more complex emotions than the picturesque might have, though, he thought. Small shacks and people were scattered about in patternless arrangements. The percussive noise had gone through the night and still sounded, from many sources, all of which were invisible. Eventually though, one pounding became louder, until he saw, not far from the road, a huge, metal wheel being spun by water. Attached to it were long, cammed arms, which drove a set of massive pistons. Men loaded granite rubble under them, and the stones were crushed. He watched this operation for a while, walking a little closer. He realized, as a metal cart came out of it, that there was a narrow mouthed hole in the ground next to the machine. The cart was full of rubble and the men dumped it and then the cart disappeared back into the ground.

Eddie kept walking. The sound of the stamp mills—for he realized he did know what the machines were called after all—came and went. He saw another one, at a great distance. The spinning wheel and the stamps, lifting and dropping, impressed him with an unfamiliar feeling. Clumsy, inorganic muscle. Eddie thought of a lopsided arm-wrestler he had seen once, slamming men's arms to the table with a huge right arm and sweeping money toward himself with the left. In the distance there was a deep boom.

The road continued steeply upwards. The forest around it was a little thicker, and parts of it seemed untouched altogether. A smell like butterscotch sometimes drifted inexplicably by. Then ahead, Eddie heard a clamor of voices, and shortly came upon a group of people. He was surprised to see they were not just miners. Women and children stood among them. A little girl ran suddenly out of the group and was snatched up by a woman in blue skirts. The group held picnic baskets. Eddie paused at the edge of the group and a man turned toward him after a moment.

He said. We've got five minutes left.

Really, said Eddie. What happens then?

The man looked surprised and asked. You're not here for the blasting? You should stay until it goes off. Really, I would. It's going to be good! The fuse is almost done, and there're eight-hundred kegs of powder, under that slope.

Eddie decided to watch, even if it would make him a little late, and he moved off with the crowd down a wide path. The path ended in a clearing, where a tunnel disappeared into the hillside. Other families were there, sitting on blankets and eating, some ways from the tunnel. Below the mouth was a huge mound of gray gravel, which buried trees as it disappeared down the slope into the forest.

The charge is being set off in there? Eddie asked the man, who was still nearby.

Yep. They used a three-hour fuse, he said, and checked a watch. It's been two hours and just about fifty-six minutes. Young man, your timing is very good.

Miners stood around the far sides of the mouth, nervously checking their own watches.

Some people can't take the suspense, the man said. Anyone invested in the mine. They're afraid it won't go off.

What would they do then?

Someone would go in there.

Two minutes! someone shouted from nearer to the mouth. Two minutes!

More people were standing up now and began to fidget, and it gave Eddie a vicarious anxiety, but he felt their excitement too, and began counting seconds in his head.

One minute! the man called, as Eddie said the same thing to himself. All were silent now, except for the one man calling out the seconds. He counted down from thirty, his voice becoming hoarser and hoarser, until he came, almost inaudible, to zero, and nothing happened. For another full minute no one said anything. Then the miners near the mouth started talking in low voices.

They're deciding who to send into—

And then, from what sounded like a great distance away, came an incredibly deep thud, which shook the ground and Eddie's body. Everyone became very still and some lifted their arms, as if to balance themselves. After a moment a cheer burst out, and then an enormous plume of dust blossomed from the mouth of the tunnel and around Eddie, and everyone else. He could see nothing and it took a while before the dust began to settle. Eddie coughed and saw many whitened families and picnic blankets.

Eddie left, after getting dusted off by an older gentleman, whose hat seemed to be ruined. Most of the others in the crowd walked back towards Nevada City, and he went the opposite direction. After several minutes of walking, the ground shook again, and there was another concussion, which seemed to come through his legs more than his ears, as if it were directly underneath him. He paused for a moment and kept walking.

He descended the canyon, which he thought must be that of the south Fork of the Yuba River, and crossed the river and started up the other side. His pack weighed heavily on him and he rested twice on his way up, and drank from springs both times. Here the slopes were refreshingly covered in thick, cantilevered forests. He did not recognize many trees, except that some were pines and the others were live oaks, and that there was dark green ivy climbing over all of it, as well as a kind of grape.

The day was drawing on and he was getting tired. There were fewer people and they were dirtier and clothed worse. Even out of the gorge of the South Fork the road continued to climb. He hoped that Wilcox would be there to meet him. It was the right day, but knew there were many possibilities to miss each other. He thought that if he needed to he could ask around until he found where their camp was.

Wilcox had written about civilization. This was not civilization, he thought. The land was dug up and buildings had been crudely erected and the tangled forest was cleared. But nothing was built. It was as if gesso had been applied to a canvas, and was still drying. He did not feel altogether safe, but was not afraid either. A Chinese man, carrying a great load of strange cabbages, passed by him, his pointed straw hat hiding his eyes and only a thin whiskered chin poking out. There were big mud slicks along the edge of the road, and coming down drainages and off the slopes in many places. There were no more springs that seemed fit to drink from, so Eddie drank from his water-skin. The rocks, where they were clean of mud, were still granite.

He came to a town on the ridge. A small canal fed into a dammed pond that the town was built around. There were seedling apples planted and people coming in and out of the buildings. The sign said the settlement was called Lake City and that North Bloomfield was three miles on. Eddie ate some bread at the crossroads and no one talked to him. He walked on, the forest slopes drabbing with dusk, and he quickened his steps. But not too quick. Too quick, and holding a traveler's bag, would say something, and was not wise in any place, so he relaxed.

It was nearly dark but he recognized Wilcox. His cousin had a beard now, patchy but long, and his shoulders had broadened. In the dim light, Eddie saw that his smile was partial and nervous.

Hallo, cousin! Eddie said, with a small laugh. How strange it is to see you.

He leaned in to embrace him at the same moment that Wilcox reached to take his bag, and for a flashing second Eddie doubted it was really him, but did not recoil. Wilcox laughed momentarily and embraced him, and then relieved him of his bag.

Hallo Eddie, said Wilcox. How was your trip?

It was long. It was very long. And got stranger the longer it went. Beautiful though. I think that someday I would like to try walking the whole way back to Pennsylvania.

You saw the buffalo?

No, my train didn't go through Buffalo, he said, smiling. No. I didn't see any buffalo on this trip.

That's what I remember. Big brown herds. The whole train taking shots on the way by. Little old women with rifles. I imagine the desert was still there though.

Yep, the desert was there. It was magnificent. And this.

Yes?

It feels like a desert. More like a desert even. It's all torn up.

The same as tilling a field, his cousin said.

It's not how I pictured it.

Well it's changed since I started writing.

There's still work for me though? I won't be creating a drag?

Wilcox nodded. Yes, there's work for you, Eddie. Lots. Let's go to the camp. I'm glad to see you.

They walked for an hour through the liquid darkness. As they climbed, Eddie saw moonlight on the slopes above them, and soon they entered the great milk splash of it and he turned to see the bright, full globe rising through the jagged ridge trees. The path became more open, following a gentle finger, where big stumps were left. Then they came over a crest to the pit, filled with firelight from huge torches and with an incredible noise of water and men. The scene stretched out for a long ways in front of them, jets of water fire-lit yellow, and moon-lit white. Wilcox did not stop though, ignoring his cousin's pause. He moved off along the rim of the pit and after a moment, with no thoughts, Eddie followed him to an untouched spot where there were many small buildings situated together, oilcloth windows dimly lit up.

Plumes of pale smoke rose straight from their chimney-pipes, and there were none of the bright torches around them. The air was very still. He did not smell the wood-smoke. Now a strong feeling of anger passed briefly over him, replaced with a deeper feeling of disappointment. He followed Wilcox, who still did not turn, to the door of one of the cabins. Wilcox stooped and opened it the door. The yellow chamber inside was very small, with a tiny metal stove and a white man and a black man next to it. They both had glowing cigarettes and there was no other light except the open stove. Wilcox stepped in, and Eddie came in after.

Here he is, Wilcox said. Eddie, this is Captain Jennings. And Pitchboy.

Joseph, the one Wilcox had called Pitchboy said.

Pitchboy Joseph, said Wilcox.

Hallo, said Eddie quietly. He closed the door, with the thought that these three men had built the shack themselves, and with the idea of making only enough shelter for themselves. He set his bag down.

Pitchboy said. You're the metal man? You make the metal work?

His accent was Caribbean, like that of a maid that Eddie's uncle and aunt kept.

Yes. I worked in a foundry in Pittsburgh.

You made cannons for the war? It was the captain. He was curled in the shape of a comma around the stove, his head resting in one hand. His voice was thin and high.

Yes. That's what we worked on when I first started. Our family was always abolitionists, me and Wilcox's, he said, glancing at Pitchboy. But mostly train tracks since then.

I followed the war's goings-on, said the captain. From a distance. But not many out here did. It's a big mixed bag of mixed sand out here. People won't kill each other so quickly on terms of difference. Otherwise we'd all be laying in blood. Just on terms of money. Don't steal. California is a city.

A city?

Yes. A city.

After a silence Wilcox asked. Are you hungry?

Yes, said Eddie. I am hungry.

There was a stew of potatoes and beef tendon on the stove and Wilcox leaned over the captain to ladle out a bowl for his cousin. Eddie settled back against the door and ate. The food was numbingly salty.

Don't you work at night? he asked.

After a while Wilcox said. Well, we're on the day shift.

Oh, said Eddie. So what time do we get up?

Five o'clock, said Pitchboy Joseph. There will be a bell.

*

The captain seemed to be asleep and the Jamaican smoked more cigarettes slowly. Eddie set his bowl down. Wilcox was lying back now too and pulled his boots off. After a time, Eddie went outside to urinate. Then he came back in and closed the door. The floor seemed full with the three bodies, but he took his boots off and laid down in his clothes, pillowing his jacket. The fire died slowly and he slept, but woke once in the night and it was dancing again.

*

In the morning, as it lightened, the sky was overcast. Eddie had woken to the bell with a distinct feeling of despair. Now he was outside. Water and people flowed all around him. The ground was trodden into a pavement of clay and gravel and he followed the captain and the blond foreman, Samuel, between

piles of wood and metal, up the slope. Wilcox had disappeared early, where to, Eddie did not know. The three men passed on a ledge above one of the huge monitor jets, its noise like tearing fabric, and its shifting, muddy spray keeping the ground wet where they walked. They came to a place where a pipe had been leaking and was shut off, and they stopped. Blacksmithing tools were there already and a cinder box to make a fire in.

This is the spot, Samuel said. There are more spots up the slope too. You can move the tools around in this pail. If you want to watch how the other metal men do it, you can go find someone. And then find someone to check your work here after you finish this one. I'll ask you who you found and then I'll ask them too, so you've got to do it.

The captain nodded at him and then they left Eddie to do it. He knelt beside the pipe for a while and touched the implements, then got up and looked down into the gray morning mining camp. He could not tell what jobs many of the men were doing. Some stood behind the monitors, sweeping the water around, and some men picked up boulders from the sluices, but there seemed to be too many for the mine. As he watched, the soil beneath a tall pine at the top of the near bank was eaten away, and the tree toppled and fell into the thrashing steam of the water. Its trunk, with mangled branches, reappeared and slipped down the pit slope with the stream of water and stuck at the top of the sluice. Several figures hurried toward it and moved it into a drift with other logs.

Eddie looked down at the cold cinder box and the damaged pipe. There was a piece of flat sheet metal beside it. He looked up again and realized that through the noise of water he could make out a hammer on metal, and eventually he spotted the swinging arm of one of the distant figures, and descended towards him. The man, he could tell when he reached him, was a real blacksmith. There was a boy kneeling on a bellows into the cinder box, where the end of the pipe was moved periodically to soften. He was not repairing it here, but making a new pipe from flat sheet metal, set out in piles ahead of him. The freshly rolled pipe behind the blacksmith and the boy was still blue and fresh, the rivets rounded as evenly

as if by a machine. Eddie watched him for a moment, the muscled arms dancing. When the blacksmith finished the lap of pipe Eddie called out. The man turned to him with watering eyes, wide and small, like a baby's.

Hallo, Eddie said. I've just been hired to mend broken pipes.

The blacksmith seemed to be not altogether out of his reverie of hammering, but asked. Do you know how do it?

I worked for a long time in a foundry, Eddie said.

The blacksmith was silent and then said. What did they hire to mend pipes for then?

I don't know. I think they were somehow misinformed.

You want me to show you how to do it?

Yes, if you could. I'm sorry to absorb your time though.

No. No. While they keep me here my time is worth the same every day. Your name?

Edward.

I'm Michael Phelan and this is my son, and apprentice. Also named Michael.

Eddie looked down at the child and was momentarily startled. It was not a boy, but a little girl. She did not look up at him but still he was sure he was not mistaken. The child extended her hand, still looking down, and Eddie shook it and then, looking away, shook the blacksmith's. The man seemed to linger on him for a moment. Then he lifted a very heavy hammer and a bar and moved to a finished section of pipe. He gestured at his child to bring the hot cinder box over. The child complied, sliding it along the ground with a pair of tongs.

Sometimes a stray rock will crush a section of pipe, the blacksmith said and hit the pipe with his hammer several times until it caved. Then you have to patch it. When you do a new section it's easy, you can put this disk inside the pipe to support the rivets when you round them down, and then you can pull it out the end. But there's no end to pull it out of up here, so you can't use rivets.

The father and child proceeded to heat the section, cut the heads off the rivets, and punch a hole to pry the pipe back to shape from. Then they hammered a strip of sheet metal around the pipe and clamped it with another strip, which had two flanges and a screw to tighten it with.

*

Over the course of three hours, Eddie was able to patch the section that had been leaking. He was frustrated, and thought about going to find his cousin before finding the blacksmith, but decided it was not worth it. He went back to where Michael Phelan and his child had completed four more sections of the new pipe. The blacksmith followed him to the patch he had made.

That's not very round, the blacksmith said, when he saw the bent sheet metal.

Do you think it will hold water? Eddie asked.

The man was quiet and then said. No, it won't. You'll have to do it again. But the lunch bell rang a minute back, so maybe you ought to eat something, and then work on it.

Michael smiled and shrugged. He left and Eddie did not follow the man directly, but watched the whole operation again from his vantage point. The sun was out now. He thought about the gold hidden in the mud under the water in the sluices, and the mud-caked men. He sighed and walked back to the cabin. There were three unfamiliar men sleeping on the floor of the cabin, and the room was dark inside. Quietly, he collected a bowl of the stew, which he noticed was warm, and sat outside to eat. Then he rinsed the bowl in a nearby sluice and went back up to the patch he had made, and started it over.

It was becoming evening by the time he finished again and his arms were sore from hammering and pumping the bellows. He found the blacksmith and his child again. They had added three more sections to the pipe and they both came with him this time.

When he saw it, the man said. It's not tight. You'll have to do it again in the morning.

Eddie nodded, his body filled with a deep, aching frustration. The father nodded and walked with his child back down the slope. He ordered the tools and began walking back to the cabin. On the way, he met the blond foreman, who stopped him.

Bell hasn't rung yet, he said. Did you get some patches done?

No, he said. Not done yet.

How many?

None, sir, Eddie said. I'm still getting the technique of it down. I was working with Michael and his son.

The foreman looked him up and down and said. I want you to be patching pipes by tomorrow, or we don't need you. We have plenty of unskilled hands already. Now, the bell hasn't rung yet so please return to your post and see if you can get anything done.

Samuel moved up the slope and Eddie walked back after him to the broken pipe. When he arrived Wilcox was there.

Patched it? Wilcox asked, and then the bell rang.

No, said Eddie. It's too loose.

But haven't you done this before?

No. I worked in a foundry, Willie.

Wilcox was quiet, and then said. Come with me. I want you to see it light up.

Eddie followed his cousin to the upper rim of the pit, where a path retained by fresh logs went up the bank. The sun was still falling reddish above the bank, on the trees. There several paths wound near the lip, some eaten away from below and ending abruptly. The pit was as busy as before, and standing beside a sweet smelling sugar pine they looked down. Eddie still could not make a pattern out of the movements. He stopped watching the people after a time though, and watched the water and then in the iron sconces the pitch lights were lit, casting flaming orange light over the ground and the night shift, and even lighting up the cold, spraying water. The firelight below seemed to make the sky darken more quickly.

It's not what I expected from your letters, Eddie said.

Well, I suppose things have grown since I started writing, Wilcox said. It doesn't feel the same to me either anymore. Not quite. But maybe that's what maturing is. The industry is producing more now.

Eddie looked at him, to see if there was any shame in his face. No, you tricked me, Willie. This is not what you described.

You'd best forget it Eddie. Maybe I was dazzled. I never lied though.

I have a strong intuition, Wilcox. You didn't give me much information, but what you did say was not the truth. I still have a little money. I could leave.

Wilcox laughed briefly. Stay here

Why?

Because you're here already. You can't have all that much money anyway. I didn't mean to paint a picture. You've always been very imaginative. Filling in the details.

I think you did paint a picture.

Eventually, in the full, inky dark they walked back into the mine, making their way through debris and materials lit by the burning pitch, back to the cabin where the three sleeping men were gone and the captain and Pitchboy Joseph had not waited to eat.

*

Down in Sacramento a short man named Tournier stood up, face shining with moisture, from behind a table covered in papers.

I've found it! he said. The Cubhold deed. 1852.

Bartimous' head lifted. He said, Oh? before swiftly bringing the paper cutter's arm down. Careful not to stir the papers on the floor with his sock feet, he straightened up and looked at the two pieces of the map.

Yes, damn you! I've been searching for two days. The least you could do is show some excitement. It was your commission anyhow.

Bartimous did not respond, but squared off one half of the map and brought the arm down again, lifting it quickly back up. Yuba, Nevada, and other counties lay in fragments all across the floor, along with copies of deeds and claims and complaints. Tournier, now in a fit of rage, opened the window into the tropical cell. A refreshing breeze immediately passed through, cooling his face and fluttering all the papers on the floor and tables.

Close the window, said Bartimous, still not looking at his colleague. My maps are being moved.

Damn your maps, cried Tournier, and he leaned down and picked his boots up from the stool where they had been set.

Don't walk on the papers with your shoes on, said Bartimous.

Damn you, said Tournier again, his boots half laced. He leaped to the center of the room.

Bartimous rose, exasperated, and met him there in his sock-feet, and the two men grappled. Papers crumpling under them. Then, suddenly tripping on his undone laces, Tournier fell backwards toward Bartimous's station. He reached out to catch himself, and grasped the raised lever of the paper cutter. As he fell it closed with a loud *snick*. He found himself sitting, very still, with blood running out everywhere onto the papers. Four of his fingers, starting at the second knuckle, adorned the table of the paper cutter, all facing in different directions on the map of San Juan Ridge.

Bartimous helped the man up and walked him into the hall. He left him there and shut the door. Then, carefully walking across the papers in his socks, he closed the window. He sat down again, brushing the partial fingers onto the floor, and finished squaring the map.

*

Have you saved any money? Eddie asked Wilcox in the morning as they ate. The captain was there too, loudly sucking up oatmeal and drinking coffee.

I've saved some, said Wilcox. If I'm promoted within a year or two, I'd like to buy a house on the edge of Nevada City. While it's still cheap.

Yes? said Eddie. A faint drizzle sounded on the metal roof and this annoyed him further. He realized he had never worked outside before. They were about to go out in the rain. Joseph had left already to check in with the dayman. He asked. How do you get a promotion?

The captain, who had said very little since Eddie arrived, said. By bringing other workers on.

Oh, said Eddie, a real anger blossoming in his chest. And if they quit?

That's bad for whoever brought them on. Probably no promotion.

No, Wilcox protested. That's not why I brought you out here, Eddie. I know you've wanted to see new things, as you said in your letters, and I was not sure you would come out if there was not a good prospect waiting for you.

Eddie said nothing.

Don't be angry, the captain said. You're here. Here you are.

Eddie wrapped himself up in his wool jacket, found the dayman in his office, and then went back to the broken pipe. The rain was actually fairly light, and he was able to kindle the fire in the cinder box easily and start over with the repair. Below him, some of the pitch torches still smoked in the rain and the monitors worked unrelentingly against the bank. He realized how loud the pit was, glancing out beyond it. Industry, cities, he thought. Noise is a kind of exhaust for spent energy. He thought about the insignificance of his energy in comparison, and conversely, how much saving it for himself could mean.

The cinder box steamed with rain and the handles of the bellows and hammers were slippery. His frustration grew, and he began in earnest to try to control it. It was seldom that he felt this way. The place was desolate, in spite of any romantic notion of its raw edges. He looked beyond the edge of the pit again, at the forest, cut in patches. At some distance it was apparently still intact. There was a sawmill near the bottom of the pit, by the drainage tunnel, and he watched it for a while, even though it was very far off. He redid the patch, and this time it seemed tight. He left the tools leaning up against the pipe and went to find the blacksmith. When he reached the pair, the man set his tools down and beckoned his child to come with them.

This is a horrible, muddy place when it rains, the blacksmith said, looking around.

He kept close to his child as they walked, and Eddie wondered again at their circumstances.

How long have you worked here? he asked. Do you know if the winter gets worse?

We came last winter and it was a little worse. But then the summer was very pleasant. I don't know, he said. It might get worse. There may be some big rains soon.

I've heard it's dry in the summer, Eddie said.

I think it's dry, generally.

Eddie said he would look forward to that and then they reached the patch, and the blacksmith looked at his child and said. Well, Michael. What do you think?

The child bent, examined the patch, and hit it once with the hammer, then unapologetically said. No.

Eddie tried to catch, with the single word, the child's sex, but it was too brief. For a moment though, he forgot to be upset that his work had failed again.

The blacksmith seemed to feel badly for Eddie and he said. We can show you how to do it again. It's much harder to do without an assistant. Running the bellows, and who knows what else.

That's true, said Eddie. I don't think I should have been given this job. But I don't think there are any other openings at the moment.

Quiet now, said the blacksmith. Take that patch off.

The three of them worked on the patch together, Eddie and the child taking turns with the bellows. Eddie glanced at the child while they worked and decided she was certainly female. There was something disturbing and lovely about her face in the mine. Her skin was a soft brown, and her eyes and short hair were dark. She seemed afraid and he realized that the blacksmith did too. The blacksmith's bare forearms and the child's hands were marked with burns and burn-scars. Eddie glanced again at the child and she saw him and he wondered whether he could really be the only one to have noticed her sex. He

made sure not to look again, focusing on the glowing sheet metal patch instead. He asked between hammer falls where they were from, and the blacksmith said Sacramento.

It's just you two? he asked.

Yes, the man said, his clear, infant eyes turning Eddie. It's been just us for a few years now. I'd like to have a regular shop. It would make more sense for us, but it takes a lot of money to get started. We try to take care of each other up here, instead. Don't we Michael?

We do, the child said.

Michael's going to be a fine blacksmith in just a few years. Hasn't had a proper apprenticeship, because there's no shop, but a fine blacksmith.

Versatile, said Eddie. You've wrought him out well, no doubt.

I don't know about that, I think he's learned out of wanting to learn. But versatile, yes.

I think it's good. I never really was *made* into anything, said Eddie. Working in a foundry you don't learn all that much.

The man nodded. Craft is good. I don't know what's happening to it though. The monitors, Pelton wheels. All cast. All nickel steel. Good luck fixing *them* if they break.

The dayman came by as they finished and he asked why all three were in one spot, and the blacksmith said. This man was getting the last few tips on how to do the patches faster.

The dayman moved on and the blacksmith and his child went back to their work. Eddie successfully patched two more sections of pipe over the course of the afternoon, and the rain slackened into nothing. He felt a deep sense of emptiness with his completed work, and still a dull anger at his cousin, and for the position of the blacksmith and his child.

*

The pit was visible from as high as the hawks were able to fly. Their eyes were very sharp and they could pick out the individual trees and movement of furtive animals, as well as the inconspicuous scenes of people building roads and digging. The pit became a landmark for the birds of prey. The older hawks remembered an unbroken mountainside in the same place, and still fluttered with slight confusion on their old thermals above it. The winds had not changed with the land beneath it. The smells had though, and the vultures noticed. Smoke and disturbed ground, the minerals here less fragrant than the turned farmland in the valley. The town of North Bloomfield grew; the road became busier.

Some of the hawks flew across the valley and some flew up and down it. On the far side they saw the soil harden with the heavy footsteps of cattle, the hill-slopes beaten into the terraces of their grazing paths. The seedling oaks in the grasslands were trodden, and the older trees matured and began to drop branches. At the northern end, they could not tell the difference between the building clusters of ranches and those of Nome Cult, in Mendocino County, and at Round Valley. Names that some animals had heard spoken into the air of forests and grassland, but which meant nothing, except that people were around, and to move in the other direction. The high-flying birds also could not tell the difference between people from above, as they were hidden by the tops of their heads.

On the mountain side of the valley, the hawks watched the rivers. Each day that it rained, the color of the South Fork changed, murking and frothing brown up onto its banks. The fish that the eagles took were filled with mud, and as the rivers passed into the valley they watched paddle boats run aground and be pushed and floated back into the stream at strange angles. The banks of the river spilled over in low places, marking fields with off-colored yellow sediment. Deer had forgotten entirely about the people who could hide themselves, and about flint tipped arrows. Old does were more nervous of coyotes and pumas than the young does were. The vultures ate the carrion of these shot predators, which they found at the edges of cattle ranches, often along with the bodies of dogs, as they had eaten, some generations

before, the carrion of sickened people along the bank of the Sacramento and in the shade outside of Sutter's Fort.

*

Hundreds of thousands of years before, old streams had washed gold out of the mountain granite, before becoming choked with soil and ceasing to flow, the water moving elsewhere. Now, the rushing hoses washed the same material out of these fossil stream beds, moving it through younger watercourses, into the valley, where people had begun farming. The dark, silty emulsion quickly colored the rivers and then the great bay. The stain bloomed out into the ocean and was pulled south by the current, the Farallon Islands, already famous for their filth of bird and seal droppings, becoming anthers out in front of the blossom, and the bay creating the jagged shape of a lily. The stalk being the Sacramento River, and the roots the American, Feather, and Yuba, down which gravel and clay quickly worked their way west. This crushing material following the silty water, through the stalk, a slowly swelling brown fruit that filled the bank-form ahead of it, and spilled out onto the flat land too.

*

The next day was Sunday and half the men had the day off to go to church or town. Many of the men stayed at the mine though, because on Sundays there was a kind of celebration in the afternoon, and into the night, which they called Sunday school. It was a chance to drink and they made a bonfire out of the drift of trees they had pulled from the sluices throughout the week.

In the morning, before breakfast, Eddie and Wilcox went to walk in the forest nearby. Throughout the week, Eddie had become resigned to speaking with his cousin. From talking to other employees he had become aware of a troubling, paradoxical feeling, which seemed to exist throughout the pit, of being simultaneous unsettled and trapped. He thought perhaps it came from the act of digging itself, although he

was not sure, but in his mind he began to understand, perhaps a little better his cousin's motivations. Still, he watched the mine and the surrounding landscape for opportunities to shift his work, and planned to visit Nevada City again as soon as he could.

The forests are much different here, Eddie said. They're more spare than in the east. It seems like if the medium there is water, then here it's oil.

The trees are stickier. That's true, Wilcox said. Less pleasant to cut, in my mind.

It seems they have tougher leaves, too.

Yes. Same way as you sweat less out here, the trees lose less water into the air. Just wait for the summer, and you'll see why.

I might, Eddie said. I might wait. The mountains have some kind of energy. I don't know if it's draining me or refreshing me though. Not yet. And it is hard to separate the feeling of the mine from the feeling of the mountains. I can't help but perceive the mine as bleak, and in conjunction with the mountains, it makes me dizzy sometimes.

You can't be so sensitive, Wilcox said, with a touch of annoyance. I can understand it, but I don't dwell there. You shouldn't either if you want anything to come of your journey here. It's a sort of harvest you're taking part in.

It's a harvest we didn't plant or tend. Does it feel strange at all to you? You're a farmer.

Exactly. I'm a farmer. It feels incredible. California has created opportunities for me. Ones that I don't need to break my back for.

Is there not talk of these mines closing, though? Asked Eddie.

They went back, through the padded forest, into the pit of the mine with all its noise, and Eddie realized he felt that Wilcox was still hiding something, because he had not answered him, but he could not imagine what.

*

That evening the fire was lit and Samuel, the blond dayman, cooked a great pot of chili and Eddie was surprised to see him friendly with the men. Eddie sat with the blacksmith and his child. The two were huddled up close to each other and ate quietly. Men were talking loudly and circulating several bottles of whiskey. The captain, who spoke very little at their cabin, and then said mostly cryptic things, was up and his nasal, belly-driven voice was cheery and seemingly drunk. The weather had warmed somewhat, and though it was overcast there was no rain.

How is the work? Eddie asked the blacksmith.

It's fine, the man replied. Tires you out. There's been a lot of blasting recently and they've been asking us to help set the charges. I don't much like working in the tunnels. For a blacksmith I might have too much of a taste for fresh air.

Well, maybe that's why you're in the mountains.

The blacksmith laughed. You can't be in the pit and in the mountains at once. I like the mountains, but I hate the pit. It's for the pay, and that's all. You don't really know what working feels like you are until you've got someone to look out for. Until you can't just quit.

Eddie nodded, and watched the blacksmith's child. He was sure now, that she was a girl. She leaned against her father's side, dark eyes gleaming with the fire, and he felt he understood what the blacksmith said.

The captain was walking up and down in between the men sitting and the fire. He shouted. You're rats! You're rats gnawing at the edge of the big bread. You! Turner, you're a big beautiful fucking rat! Oh, look at all of you! If only it were the good days again, you well-fed, strong-backed rodents. You're a vole, you're a rat, gopher. Beaver. Mouse!

Yeah, and you're just an old pigeon, called someone from the group.

The captain turned and waved his arms and made a garbled bird noise.

Hey! Settle yourself, the man named Turner said, as the whiskey bottle was passed to him.

Yes! It's *settled*. Just look around, you people are filth. I love the filth you are! The captain looked at Eddie, meeting his eye momentarily. Then he knelt and gently took the bottle of whiskey from Turner's hands and came to where Eddie was sitting. But instead of Eddie, he gave the bottle to the blacksmith's child, whose hands received it unsurely.

For your boy?! he said, but the child gave the bottle to her father and the captain said. For you then!

The blacksmith took a small sip and nodded. For me.

He passed the bottle to Eddie, who took a hot mouthful. The captain crouched in front of him, watching for a moment, but when Eddie offered him the bottle, he did not take it. Instead he stood up quickly and addressed the group again.

Let me tell you some history, he said. It's Sunday school after all, and we good Christians should be learning! The heathen group we will study today are the Mongols, who have a strange and rich history, related to us more than you might imagine. A cruel people!

It seemed that only about half the group paid any attention to him, but to Eddie's surprise, the blacksmith was fixed up at the captain, his face set and his small eyes very sharp.

It all began with Emperor Genghis Khan, the captain said. One of the greatest conquerors ever to live, perhaps more prolific than Alexander the Great, and infinitely bloodier. He lived a thousand years ago, when this territory we stand on now was occupied by bears and lions alone. He stretched his empire all over the Orient, and when he died his children took power.

Eddie watched the captain closely, because he was glancing occasionally at the blacksmith, and the blacksmith seemed perturbed. The man's voice, he realized had lost some of its drunken slur.

Kublai Khan was Genghis' grandson. One fateful season he had a fleet of junks out at sea, and a great storm came and blew the whole fleet across the ocean, to California. Some of these junks have been unearthed from the mud of the Columbia River, and cleaned up. At any rate, once they were here, with no leader, the Mongols forgot nearly everything they knew. Some relics that came on their ships remained in circulation. When Cortes found Montezuma, he was wearing armor that belonged to Kublai Khan, and had in his hoard crosses made from Jasper, which matched some that Marco Polo described. But in general the Mongols became savage again, and lazy from the overabundance of acorns. These are the same people some of you may have met, begging or whoring themselves around town, or hiding out in the woods.

When Eddie glanced again at the blacksmith, the man had lowered his gaze. His child looked straight out, into the fire. The captain stood silent for a moment. Eddie saw him look toward the father and child one more time, and then someone else called out for the captain to give up with his lesson. The captain did not reply for a moment, and then made a noise like a dog's bark, and walked off, out of the ring of light. Eddie did not ask the blacksmith if something was the matter. The man stroked his daughter's short hair.

Yes, the man said finally, looking at Eddie. It is hard to know the safest place. But if you're lucky, and you pay attention, you can at least tell who the safe people are.

Eddie nodded, confused and by the man's words. For a moment though, with other men's voices around them, and the warm firelight, Eddie did not wish to disturb the blacksmith for an explanation, and the feeling that if he were to ask, he himself would suddenly be bound by an unknown responsibility, kept him silent. Eventually, the two bid him goodnight and Eddie was left looking into the fire and wondering if he was very close to whatever else was going on at the mine.

Before he too went to bed, Wilcox came and told him a story about a day that he had been walking to North Bloomfield, and having left the road to urinate, had stumbled upon a Chinawoman's vegetable plot, and about how she had insisted he lie down with her amongst the cabbages. Wilcox's alcohol-sweet breath, and dirty, loose face made Eddie queasy. He went to the cabin, where Pitchboy Joseph was asleep and the captain was lying down, but breathing as if he were awake. After a time, Wilcox also came in, stepping over Eddie, and he farted as he took his boots off. The cabin filled with the odor of his feet, and Eddie thought to himself that it was amazing how the philosophical and the physical could so quickly become the same.

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Throughout the week, Eddie had become used to waking just before the morning bell, which rang while it was still dark in the cabin, and barely light outside. This time though, the first moments of the morning felt different. He waited and the bell did not ring. Waking more fully, Eddie heard a commotion outside. He left his bedding and opened the door. Men ran here and there, and Eddie realized the monitors were turned off. He closed the door again and lit the oil lamp, thinking to wake the other men. The flame overwhelmed his eyes and he looked away from it, at his cousin's bed, and realized it was empty. He checked and found the captain's bed, and Joseph's, were empty as well.

Eddie dressed quickly and went out, taking the lamp with him. Samuel ran by and he tried to ask him what was happening, but the man did not stop. Another man, whose face was vaguely familiar passed near him, and Eddie called out. What's happened?

The man stopped, and Eddie saw in the torchlight that his moustache tails were pulled into his smiling mouth, covering his upper lip and teeth completely. He said, with slightly muffled speech. Well, a charge went off early, and some men are under the bank.

Under the bank, Eddie said. Trapped?

The man laughed, taking Eddie aback, and then said. Yes, they're trapped. But perhaps more importantly, they're dead. I knew this would happen, sooner or later—uh—since the day I began work. They'll need the monitors to work them out, most likely. Will you come look at it with me?

Eddie began following him and then asked. What is there to see?

Uh, it's just a bunch of rocks, I suppose, he said, and Eddie realized that the man was shaking. But I've got a friend here, and I want to make sure he wasn't down the hole when it happened.

Eddie followed the strange man, who moved quickly up the terraces of the pit, to the collapsed bank, where many men stood. There was no digging, and a few men stood on the rubble. Eddie did not see Wilcox or the captain. Samuel was there though, speaking to quickly to someone, and Eddie went to him and interrupted. How many people were in there?

Samuel toward him briefly, and turned away, saying. Several people. Several men.

My cousin, and Captain Jennings?

Samuel looked back at Eddie, his brows furrowed, and said. Oh. Yes.

They don't work this shift though, said Eddie, after a pause. How did they end up down there?

They changed shifts, said Saumel, losing his voice. I think—I suspect it was that man Wilcox who bungled the charge. They were new to it, their first shift. I think that's why it happened. They didn't have the training.

Was Michael Phelan, the blacksmith, working this shift as well?

Samuel nodded, choking a little. Yes. He and his little boy.

With that, Eddie left. He returned to the cabin and set his lamp down again and sat on the floor of the dim space. The cabin smelled strongly of the men. Next to Wilcox's messed up bed was a bag and Eddie started to go through it. He recognized a sheaf of Wilcox's letter-writing paper, and there were several lead pencils. He did not find the letters he had written Wilcox, but there were some rocks, a razor, and a wood carving of a bear, which he wondered vaguely if Wilcox had made. The only clothing in the bag was a pair of Levi's with the crotch torn out. He looked at the bag again and realized it was not Wilcox's. His was leather and this was canvas.

Eddie sat still for a second and then found the bag the captain had left, and searched through it. There were several books. One was a new, expensive copy of Thompson and West's History of Nevada County. There was a tattered Holy Bible and a book of John Muir. He looked up suddenly, but no one was there. There was a canvas pouch in the bottom of the captain's bag, knotted tightly shut. The pouch was light, and springy when he squeezed it. Eddie undid the knot with his teeth and emptied the pouch with his fingers. Something like dark horse hair came out. He realized what it was and stuffed the hairy wad back in. The same exact feeling he had ignored for the last two weeks filled him completely now. Knowing it would not be in the bag, he checked for the captain's gun.

Then Eddie packed his own bag with some clothes and the rest of the food from the cabin. He made sure the lamp was full and took it with him as he left, blowing it out once he was in open air, and sealing the top of it. There was still commotion in the pit, and he stood, for a time, in indecision.

The foreman's cabin was open, and no one was inside. There was one gun left on the rack, a short, lever-action Henry rifle. Eddie took it down and found a drawer full of cartridges. He checked the cartridges until he found the ones that fit, took all of those, and left the cabin. Hidden against the dark wall of another building, he loaded fourteen rounds into the magazine. Then he took the path up toward

the ridge, where the ditch was. There was no one along the path once he was out of the pit. The great pipes that ran with the path hummed with pent up water. The monitors must still be off, he thought, and thought fleetingly about the leaks that must be springing from the pressure. The path through the forest was dark, but when he reached the ridge, where the trees were cleared around the ditch, there was enough light in the sky to see the ground by. Four pipes came from the penstock at the edge of the ditch. There was a plank bridge across the ditch and he crossed it to where the path continued.

With the sun rising came a feeling of despair. The ditch rose evenly along the ridge, engineered through the mountain's contours. Penstocks led off the ditch frequently, and twice the path approached hydraulic pits, which Eddie could hear working but could not see through the trees. No one else was on the path, but he was careful to be close to the trees in case someone did come. He looked for tracks but was not sure of any of the ones he saw. He felt he was going in the right direction, but the thought to turn around hung with him until he found a muddy patch, where there was a leak in a pipe and he saw the footprints in it. For several minutes he studied them and went on, picking up his pace. As he gained elevation, the tree-line broke more frequently and he could look down. The valley below him was deep, and ridges twisted the feet of the mountains, hiding great portions of the landscape.

The sunlit corridor through the forest became warm, and he drank from the ditch, scrambling down the loose bank, headfirst, to put his mouth to it. He carried on, slinging his jacket over his shoulder. After a time, there were no more penstocks and he saw a tall slope ahead. The ditch reached the base of the slope. It was rocky and almost vertical, and the stunted trees curved upward out of it. A wooden flume, supported by a lattice of beams, took off along it, and connected to the ditch where Eddie was. The man walked out a short distance along the flume's gangway, until he could see across the valley. Several pits were visible in the forest, as well paths that branched off alongside pipes, from the main ditch. He climbed down below the flume, where the rocks were warm and he rested. He thought hard about the direction the men would have gone.

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Wilcox and the captain had followed the ditch until there were no more penstocks, and then had taken off down the slope toward the valley. There was no path but the captain knew that the first stream they reached had one running along it. He did not say where they would go after that. The gagged child followed them, scrambling down the slope, and the captain kept hold of the rope around its neck. They felt their way through the trees, Wilcox in front, with both hands out, and eventually the ground flattened and they heard the stream, which they followed until there was a tree across it they could walk on. The captain held tight to the rope and let Wilcox take his bag. The child did not try to jump though. They found the path and took it up the slope, against the current of the stream. The sky was lightening finally, and for a moment the stars between the trees seemed to brighten with the coming of day.

By the time the sun was really up, they had taken several turns and were no longer following the stream. The path they were on passed through oak woodland and the ground was fairly flat. The sky was clear and when the two men, with the child behind them, reached the meadow, it was warm. In the center was a wooden pavilion with a stone ring near it. The grass was not trampled except by deer. The captain, whose hands were tired from holding the rope, tied the Indian girl to one of the posts of the pavilion. Wilcox did not watch. He stood in the meadow with his face to the sun and his eyes closed. The captain came over to him and the two lay in the grass next to each other.

You'll probably never have to tie a person up, said the captain. This was your chance. Unless you retreat to more distant edges.

Is that where you're going now? More distant edges?

The captain's blue eyes turned to him, wrinkled skin around the sockets tired, but relaxed. Some kind of edge. What do you think about the child?

Truthfully? Wilcox said, and his voice had a nervous edge. She disturbs me a little. She's ugly, I think, in a very particular way. Perhaps from her people's history of murder and then regression to acorns. I sense a kind of swine spirit in her. But that could just be the acorns again.

The captain listened and then said. We could cover her face if you want.

Why?

If you're disturbed by how she looks. When we were at Sutter's Fort I first saw what you're seeing now. The diggers ate from troughs there. But, Willie, tonight don't use the word swine. If you say anything say pony, perhaps.

Okay, said Wilcox. Pony.

The captain said. I wonder if her father thought that blacksmithing would hide her color.

You think that's what he was up to?

I suspect. If so then he was a fool to think that would work.

And a fool to go into the tunnel, said Wilcox.

He was only a fool for not taking her with him, said the captain, looking at the child across the meadow. I'm going to miss the mountains, Willie. I wasn't sure I would ever leave them.

Yes, well. It seems lot of people won't ever leave the mountains on your account. So in some way you stay here.

You mean the tunnel?

There must have been others before him. Besides the Indians. Was he the first white man you killed?

No, Willie. But you don't have to worry.

Worry about what?

I know you're not staying in the mountains. If you had liked the mountains more I would not have involved you. Only a handful of men in the state recognize you, anyway.

I'm going to go to Los Angeles.

You don't have to be scared of me, Willie. To be frank, I think of you as a kind of son. You're going to go start something in Los Angeles. A business of some kind.

I am.

You know the mines aren't going to last for long.

It seems pretty clear.

We've found our last flake of gold. Now we can be off.

I won't be a threat to you.

Willie! You don't have to be nervous. The creature tied up over there? Is that what scares you? Don't let it. Unless one of us commits pointless sabotage we've succeeded. After tonight we will both have enough to get on. I'll go to the next far edge, wherever that is. Perhaps the Yukon. And you'll go to Los Angeles and become rich with your good business senses. Look Willie, I'm going to sleep for a while. I know you won't sleep right now, even though you need it. But I'm going to sleep and you keep a watch out. If you start to doze off, wake me up.

Wilcox nodded and the captain arranged himself in the grass. For a while, Wilcox sat nearby, chewing stems of grass, and tried not to watch the man too closely. Then he stood and stretched and rubbed his bleary eyes and walked once around the meadow. He looked at the gagged child, tied securely.

She was awake, eyes open, so he moved away, walking the perimeter again. This time he noticed a pine that split close to the ground, with the letter C cut into one trunk and B cut into the other, and he sighed, a little discontentedly.

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The first man to arrive was a kind of massive, gray-blond bulk, with a rifle across his back. He appeared at the edge of the meadow and approached like a heap of old straw. As he neared, the captain stood. The man stopped, creating an even triangle between the three of them, but he said nothing. His eyes wandered across the grass and he sat, his rifle sticking up behind him, where it rested on the ground. The next man to arrive had long, gray hair that he wore behind his shoulders, and a short rifle, and a pistol at his side.

Hey Captain, he said, also sitting. He nodded at the gray-blond bulk, and did not acknowledge Wilcox at all.

I haven't seen you for long time, Topaz, the captain said. Nice you're still alive.

Oh, I'm alive alright. I was married until last year, but winds blew south. I heard you were still meeting though. That all the old Blades were still welcome.

There certainly aren't any new ones, the captain said.

The last of the sun's tree-rays had begun falling as the fourth man arrived. He was much older, with creases in his face that folded in on themselves, and a bald head covered by a new felt hat. The hat seemed to contain all that might be fresh about the man, and he and it seemed strangely at odds. He greeted them by spitting in the grass. Then he went to the corner of the pavilion and looked at the Indian girl.

That's at least half digger, he said, spitting again when he came back. The captain nodded.

Topaz said. Lyon's vision hasn't gotten any better since I've been gone, I suppose? She is dark, at least.

No, it has not, said the newcomer, sitting, and then said. Will someone light the fire?

Topaz began to stand but the captain indicated that Wilcox should go. So Wilcox walked to the edge of the forest. When he stopped, he noticed voices approaching. A group of six more men, all much older than Wilcox, emerged along the path. They paused and looked at him briefly, and then continued towards their companions.

California! one of them shouted, waiting, poised, for a reply, and then repeated himself.

This time someone shouted back, from near the pavilion. Blades!

You're so old! shouted the first man, as the group moved away from Wilcox. He heard the conversation pick up, as he broke dry branches from the bottom of a pine and collected manzanita brush. He took them back to the darkening ring of soldiers. They seemed very ragged and all were older than fifty. Self-consciously, Wilcox passed among them, set the tinder down in the ring of stones, and then lit it.

The circle became quiet as the fire flared, and then someone said. Lyon is coming. He was back a ways.

Boss still insists on feeding us?

If the catamount can't catch no deer then it's time to die, someone said. Needs us to know he still got claws. Bad eyes, maybe. But sharp ears, and damn sharp claws!

I'll tell him you said so, said Topaz.

He'd agree with me about the aging. There was twice this many of us just five years back. We're all so old! he said, and then shouted. California!

No one replied though. The fire was going and Wilcox went to fetch more wood. The air was just lit enough for him to still peer through the trees. He found a long branch of oak and began dragging it back. Suddenly, he heard heavy footsteps, and ragged breath, and looking intently, could just make out a figure in the trees. The figure seemed to bear a large load across its shoulders.

Give me a hand now, boy, a man's voice called. Wilcox approached cautiously, and the voice said. Where are you?

Here, said Wilcox, once he was near. As soon as he spoke, the man turned and stepped toward him, dumping the load into Wilcox's arms. Wilcox dropped the oak branch and was just able to catch the thing. It was the carcass of a deer, cold, and smelling strongly gut-shot. Then the man was gone, headed toward the fire, lighting a cigar as he left. Wilcox followed him. He made it to the fire with the heavy carcass, and Topaz fetched metal posts from the pavilion and assembled them into a spit. Then, with all the other men watching, he and Wilcox skewered the deer. Then Wilcox went back for the oak branch.

Montana Lyon did not address the old militia, but they slowly began to tell stories. Wilcox realized, once several of them had spoken, that the men's minds were all in different places and times, and that out of all of them, he perhaps understood the most of what was being said. Lyon did not seem to listen at all. He turned the spit of the roasting deer, and smoked a thin cigar. At one point he took another cigar from a canvas pouch at his waist, and handed it out to be shared. The smell of gut-shot grew, and became savory. The coals that paved the fire pit now radiated heat a long way out. Wilcox felt no danger, though the men all carried weapons, or sat with them in their laps.

I've been waiting. Joshua, Silver Joshua has been waiting, a man said. To tell you what he saw in Mexico.

Here! We still use a talking stick? cried Topaz, rising. We'll start the talking stick.

He took Lyon's rifle from his back. Wilcox flinched but the old leader continued turning the spit and puffing smoke.

Talking stick! Topaz shrieked, and some of the other men seemed, from their postures, annoyed, or perhaps just cold. The man who had called himself Joshua took the rifle and shakily spoke.

It was in Mexico. On the shore south of Ensenada. It was a misty, foggy, silver day. The beach there is deafening. It's all cobble-stones and the waves really rattle and crash them around. And from this beach I saw, through the vapors, three ships made of juniper, the branches all still there, so I could tell, and on the deck there were Jesuit priests. I laughed and called out to them. I said, the mission here is Catholic, you're not welcome. Move along, maybe farther north! They couldn't hear me though and the beach was overly steep for landing anything. They tacked off, away from the shore, as if they were headed straight back out to sea. But the thing was, these ships were old, very old. They were galleons, Spanish galleons. I believe that the men on board were ghosts, and perhaps the ships as well.

The man fell into silence and the spit continued to turn. Then two men leapt up at the same time, each snatching for the rifle. They wrestled around the impassive Joshua. The smaller one was tossed off and the man who was still standing, toothless but with neat, clean clothes, broke his own dry voice into a sentence.

There's a dream I've been having every few nights, and lately I've been having it during the day. In fact, I am having the dream right now and that is why I needed to—Yes. I'm hunting in the forest and I bring a deer back to the house that I live in. I go in and my wife is in the bed with this dark—stranger—I go out. I'm burning the place down. But I realize, all of a sudden, that I don't know where my kids are. Now I start to look through the woods. I see their things on the ground, leading up to cave, like a badger's, and I'm crawling on through and I come out and see a camp the kids have made. There's food there and I eat it. Porridge. I'm continuing on and find another camp with their things. Only there's a deer dressed out here, and I eat some. And now I'm continuing on again. I can tell I'm close to them, so when

I find the next camp, where they've built a little house with a stove, I just look in. There's baked bread but I don't take any, and now I'm still going on, and I find a full size house they've built, with a garden and a pig tied up. The pig is wearing through its rope though, so I try to kill it, but the thing is rock hard and I go on, pursuing my children. And now, yes, in the trees there's this big house, a kind of mansion. It's all painted white, and my two children are standing in the open front door, all grown up. But as I go over near them, the boy, I realize, he's got a beard now, oh, he's pulling out a silver 45' and—

The man fell back and, after a moment, the other California Blades laughed. The smaller man he had fought for the gun now came and took it, and started to speak, but four other men rushed him and threw him away again, fighting near the fire. The gray-blond bulk rose from the tangle, and the men on the ground stayed there, in silence. For a long time he did not speak. Then he said. Remember that big brave we found, on the way to Nome Cult? Remember the fight he put up?

Someone gently took the gun and the fighting resumed, men taking turns speaking, telling stories of killing Indians, the smell of venison wafting around them, or rambling until they were shut up or knocked down. Wilcox felt glad to be somewhat outside of this group. He carefully took glances at Lyon. The man did not look at his followers, but sometimes glanced at the pavilion, smoking one cigar after another. It went on for a while until most of the men had spoken, and then Lyon stopped turning the spit. He cut a strip of meat off the carcass and ate it. The old men quieted and the rifle was set down in the dirt. Wilcox waited until they had all cut pieces from the carcass, and then went and took some from the haunch. It was dry and hard as leather, but somehow still cold inside, and bloody. He could taste the juice of the gut-shot now, as well as smelling it.

Nome Cult! an old voice shouted. California!

Blades!

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The fire cast itself to the edge of the meadow and faintly into the trees. The sky had overcast since the sun went down and the fire was the only light. Eddie had been standing in the thin brush for a long time and was kneeling now. It was getting colder and he began to worry more acutely that he could not remain still much longer. He stood up again. The men around the fire fought and seemed to make speeches. The blacksmith's daughter was left alone, tied to the corner of the open structure, but lit up by the fire. It had dimmed somewhat since Eddie had been watching, and the thought of trying to get close to her returned. There were no walls for him to hide behind though, and the ground was flat. The men were not drinking either, it seemed. He waited, kneeling and standing again, his arms wrapped around himself.

The big man at the spit had remained as steady as a windmill, his feet together and unshifting, arm wheeling. A cigar tip glowed red in the center of his dark head. The plume from the fire was pulled this way and that, around the meadow. One of the sitting men rose, as if to fight, but walked toward the girl instead. Eddie's heart pounded hard for two beats, but the man walked past her. Eddie realized that in fact he was walking in his own direction, and he crouched again, cursing himself for moving even as he did. The man approached him in a straight line, but he had no weapon out, or even at his side, and his eyes were down. Eddie realized, quite suddenly, that it was Wilcox. His cousin's profile caught in the fire and he emitted a familiar wheeze. He stopped just a few feet short of where Eddie crouched. The light on the trees was very faint, and Eddie was in shadow. He did not think he was visible.

Wilcox undid his pants and, with a little sigh, began to urinate. Eddie caught his voice in the back of his throat, as he felt some stray, splashing drops through the brush. His cousin's name was loud in his head, and again he nearly spoke it. He stayed silent though, and Wilcox finished, flicking his member, and redid his pants. The man returned to the fire and, a while after Eddie's heart had slowed, he became aware of the cold again. Many minutes passed and the men continued doing the same around the fire.

Eddie shivered, first slightly, and then uncontrollably. The men had not eaten any of the meat yet, and finally Eddie, standing again, turned and quietly walked away from the meadow. The forest was not

too brushy, but in it there was no light at all. His breath quivered as he walked through. Finally, when he was far enough away, he began jumping up and down, as high as he could, until he was breathless. His body felt less cold, although his shivering did not stop altogether. He went back to the edge of the meadow, where the men had started eating. This time he stood further back, and shifted continuously between standing and crouching, to keep the cold at bay. Thoughts of death and torture visited him and quickened his pulse, but he dispelled them as best he could, and even considered for a moment how they might even warm him a little.

Finally, the big man who had been turning the spit seemed to address the men, holding his cigar, and after a time a man, whom Eddie realized was the captain, went and untied the girl from the post. He brought her to the fire and the big man was handed a rifle, and Eddie suddenly realized what was going to happen. He would have sobbed, but instead he brought the stock of the foreman's Henry rifle to his own shoulder. His heart pounded and his bowels felt suddenly loose, and he cursed himself for not having acted while the girl was away from the men.

But they did not shoot her. Instead, the big man simply took the rope lead that was tied around her neck, saluted to the men, and left the fire. He moved across the black meadow with the girl in tow, away from Eddie. Eddie took off quickly through the trees, keeping himself at the edge, his eye on the fire. The other men seemed to be preparing to disperse as well, by the time he had found the path and left the meadow behind. He stepped as quickly and as quietly as he could.

It did not take long before he smelled the cigar smoke in the air ahead. He moved more quietly and a little slower, rifle still out front. Then he heard the sound of someone stumbling ahead, and the grunt of a man. Then footsteps, leaving the path. They were loud in the thicker leaf duff. Two pairs. They moved away and he stood still until they were barely audible, and then he followed them again. He had not realized that the slope above the path was so steep, and with his first couple steps he nearly slipped and jammed barrel of the rifle into the ground.

The darkness had never felt dangerous to Eddie, but tonight there was no moon, and there were clouds, and the trees were thick. He touched the trunks ahead of him with his free hand. The rifle, he held in his arm crook. Not a memory, but its shadow passed over him, of being lost in a similar blindness in the Pennsylvania woods, near his uncle's house. He did not wish to be back there though or to remember anything more; he listened instead, and felt the forest he moved through, and breathed deeply to steady himself and pay complete attention. He followed the slope upwards, stepping carefully and listening, losing the distant footsteps and then hearing them again. Where there was pine the ground was muffled but under the oaks he was loud. He had to keep from cursing himself silently as he picked his way up.

It had been some time since he had heard their footsteps and he thought again about how they had left the path, and the fear that he was not the only one following them rose momentarily, but it did not matter, so he quelled it. His hands found the trunk of an oak tree and he paused, his feet silent again. His heart slowed and after a moment of stillness he felt his feet warming in their footprints.

Cigar smoke played in his nose and then was gone. There were no footsteps though, and he felt an intense chill. For a full minute he held perfectly still, and then smelled the smoke again. He made a plan and forgot it, and then remembered it again. He felt the tree for a crotch. There was one, just above his head. Silently, he eased his bag off his shoulder and took the closed lamp from it, and three matches. He put his bag back over his shoulder and realized that oil from the lamp had spilled on his hands. He spent a tedious minute wiping his hands clean on his pants and the rifle stock.

Then the man stepped as quietly as he could away from the oak, counting five even paces, while his heart still pounded, and he lit the lamp. As quickly as he could without jerking it, he stretched his holding arm all the way out to the side, putting the sudden light far away from his body, and began back towards the oak. There were shutters on three sides of the lamp and he pointed it up the hill, illuminating the stalks and stars of young maple. He bumped into the oak with his extended right arm, jostling the

lamp and skinning his knuckles. He nearly dropped the gun, but recovered and was able to move behind the oak and set the lamp in its the crotch. Then he got down, nearly flat, on the ground below it.

The gunshot coincided with the explosion of the lamp, and with Eddie's realization of some gaps in his plan. So he screamed and then cut it off, and then screamed again, through clenched teeth this time, as if he was trying not to. Above him, all over the bark of the oak, the lamp oil was burning. From up the slope he heard loud footsteps. Eddie made one last sound, this time a kind of huffing cough, and he kicked his feet in the leaves. Then he stopped. The footsteps also stopped. After a time, they started again. For a moment Eddie worried they were moving away, but they were not.

He pulled himself into a crouch on the lower side of the trunk and snugged the rifle stock to his shoulder, holding it with both hands. It took several more seconds for the man to approach. His footsteps were very quiet, but not silent. The oil flickered and stopped burning on the tree, and it was dark again. Eddie heard the man cross onto the papery oak leaves, moving slowly, and Eddie raised the gun, and then with a noise that was almost not, heard the man rest his weight on the oak tree. He expelled a dry breath that reeked of smoke and Eddie pulled the trigger. The muzzle flash lit the man too briefly to tell if the bullet had struck and Eddie threw himself down the bank, still holding the gun. There was no shot from the man's place though, and no movement. Fear filled Eddie and he took off running up the slope, skirting the oak tree. He stopped and listened, and heard nothing. Then he called out.

Michael. Michael. It's Eddie, he said, his voice of an indeterminable volume. He called again.
Michael!

He moved a little way up the slope and called out again.

After a few moments he heard the child's voice, and then again, a little louder.

Here, she said.

He moved toward the voice and spoke so that she would know he was not the other man.

I won't hurt you, he said. I don't wish to hurt you. Will you come with me?

He was close to her now and he could hear her breathing. She was lying on the ground and Eddie felt around her warm body to where her feet and hands were bound together, behind her, and cut the ropes. Then they ran together across the slope, and luckily the forest stayed open instead of turning to brush. They found a road and ran down it a way, and then up the opposite bank and into the trees there. In a thick copse of maple, they stopped and listened. Eventually the child slept, huddled next to Eddie, because it was still very cold, and Eddie kept listening until the sun rose.

In the dawn light, the blacksmith's child's face seemed peaceful, despite the bruises that the thin sun showed. The anxiety was not gone, for it felt now that they were hiding from more than a few men. He shook his head, because he knew he was tired and that it was not true. He ate dry oats from the bag and let the child sleep until early afternoon.

She woke and he said. You don't have to be afraid of me.

After a while she said. I know.

How do you know? he asked. Because I killed that other man?

My pa trusted you.

Your pa trusted me?

Yes.

I—he said. I don't want anything from you.

*

The road to Sacramento was long and the two travelled later that afternoon, once it had become dusky. They left the Henry rifle and ammunition where they had slept. They did not get very far and then

they camped again. The stars were shrouded by clouds still, but it had become much warmer, and early in the morning a few drops fell, but then stopped, and the two did not end up needing to move. In the morning they travelled some ways, skirting Nevada City. When they asked a passing miner for directions they said that they were brother and sister. In the afternoon the rain started falling in huge, plentiful drops, and the two took shelter under a stand of yellow pine. They both sat against a big pine trunk, but soon they and their bags were drenched. It was not a cold rain though, and they stayed where they were. Eddie tried to prop his jacket up, as a canopy off the tree.

Is Michael your real name? he asked. Do you have another you would like me to use?

The child had a calm face, even while the flesh was tight with tiredness. Katherine. That's what my name was before my ma died.

I can call you either. Do you want me to keep calling you Michael?

She nodded.

The rain became incredible and Eddie was relieved to see that he was still not becoming chilled and that Michael was not shivering. In the evening they made a fire, beside their canopy, out of manzanita, which was dry inside and broke easily. The fire hissed and steamed and they surrounded it with big rocks, and when they were hot, buried some of the rocks under the ground where they were going to sleep. The two curled around the tree and each other as the fire dwindled and the rain continued. They did not sleep well but when they woke in the morning they were still not too cold. They continued walking. There were not carts or many people on the road. The ruts flowed with water and in low places it stood in deep puddles. Their shoes were long ago sopped, squishing and foaming with each step.

When they reached the Yuba River, one day and night later, they found that the bridge to Marysville had been washed out. The churn of muddy water reached over the banks and up to the feet of

the forest. The rain was beginning to slacken though, the drops smaller and fewer. Michael pointed to the low, treed finger of land that led down to the river on their side.

Maybe there's another bridge farther down, he said.

So they took off through the forest and while they made their way, always keeping the rush of the Yuba within earshot, the big drops that fell from the trees became fewer. Late in the day they left the forest onto a knoll of tall, springy grass and oaks, and as they did, the sun came through the clouds, burning orange as it set. Below them was a wide, grassy valley, with a town visible across it, and the river still between them and it.

They camped there and in the night the sound of the river increased incrementally, until in the early morning it reached a deafening peak, and then started to quiet. When the sun rose the sky was clear. Eddie and Michael went up on the knoll before eating breakfast and looked down in amazement over a great, pale-brown expanse of mud where the valley had been, strewn with torn trees, and with silt lines undulating across its surface. The flooded river itself seemed to pulse above the tops of its banks, brown and spilling. The town on the other side of the valley was still visible but it was impossible to tell if the mud had reached it or not.

They ate the last of the dry oats, looking out over the valley, and then began the task of finding the edge of the mud on their side of the river. Slimy muck reached the bottom of their hill and they set out along the boundary. They walked for several hours until they could see beyond the expanse to where there were more low hills. After a time, they set out across the mud. It reached Eddie's knees and Michael's waist before they started rising again.

III

Eddie and Michael made their way back home from dinner with the ladies. The house that the ladies rented out for their work was less than a mile from the capitol. It had a front yard and a side yard, all planted to various roses. The sunset was just beginning and the hard edged movement of the traffic had softened, soon to be replaced by the swinging of carriage lamps through the dark. Michael, whose smoky hair was freshly cut, pointed down the street to where a lamplighter articulated the city's efforts against darkness. The boy recited.

The valley of the San Joaquin is the floweriest piece of world I ever walked, one vast level, even flower-bed, a sheet of flowers, a smooth sea ruffled a little by the tree fringing of the river and here and there of smaller cross streams from the mountains. Florida is indeed a land of flowers, but for every flower creature that dwells in its delightful places more than a hundred are living here.

Eddie lifted a page as Michael spoke, and squinted at it in the dusk. Afterward he said. *Most* delightful places. You're only off by one word. I'm sure you'll have it down by tomorrow.

Most delightful. Most delightful. Do you think it is paying off?

Paying off? Our work for the ladies? They're not out anything by it. It's what they have the house for. Perhaps our judge is tired of the same faces. But your voice is very clear and carries a lot better than most of the gray topped lawyers he usually sees.

A little time will tell where the case goes.

Yes. It could be awhile yet though. You don't have to worry.

They unlatched the gate and passed the roses to the front door. Eddie and Michael both had keys, although the space was seldom locked. Other guests had lit the gas lights inside already and the furnishing, which were not polished too darkly, brought a warmth to the room. The entry had stairs and four doorways leading off from it, and the pair went to the kitchen where Roberta, who was here for a few weeks, protesting in court the flooding of her Marysville hostel, leaned over a large pot of soup.

*

They went early to the courthouse, Michael fidgeting on the bench where they waited. The session was quiet, and the room stuffy, although not as stuffy as it had been at the end of the summer. Judge Sawyer did not seem to look up as testimony was made. There were no raised voices. The ladies, sitting on either side of Eddie and Michael, spoke a little to each other, in low tones, but seemed in general sleepy, their glazed eyes focused somewhere in the center of the room. Then Michael went and recited the John Muir. The judge looked up as the boy started speaking, and the ladies watched him, smiling. His child's voice interrupted the lull of the room like a stream of mountain water, Eddie thought. He finished reciting and then spoke for a little under a minute, about the valley as he had seen it, under the mud.

Where are those same flowers now? he finished. The ladies clapped enthusiastically. Some farmers, with clean clothes and tanned skin, nodded to him, and Judge Sawyer nodded too. Michael took his place again, his face tight but smiling as Eddie and the ladies congratulated him. He looked with great attention at the lawyer who came to the stand next, listening and nodding while the man spoke, but his attention soon diffused into the dim, wide space. They all went outside together at a break, and stood on the steps.

You were wonderful, Michael, said Mrs. Peterson. Really the only memorable part of the morning.

Yes, I think Judge Sawyer has a soft spot for you, said Mrs. Speck.

You've an eye for those things, too, Becky, Mrs. Peterson said, and to Michael. She's an eye for those things.

Of course I do! said Mrs. Speck.

The last lawyer from Bloomfield, said Mrs. Provensen. The Judge was listening to him.

Michael nodded and said. He was taking notes.

Well what was he saying? asked Mrs. Peterson.

He was refuting some points about the rivers being federal property.

Well aren't they? asked Mrs. Speck.

Yes, but it's better if the case is not appealed. For the sake of money and time, and a curbing of destruction. Because the mines continue to run as the case moves along.

Well, we can always make more donations if it does go on, said Mrs. Speck.

Yes, said Mrs. Peterson. I think we're almost there, anyhow.

*

Eddie, Michael and Linabeth Provensen walked through the warm afternoon, down the street toward the capitol park. Eddie carried a basket with a picnic of bread, cheese, and apples. They found pleasant shade beneath a high growing break of cypress, beneath which the air was sweetly scented.

Are you bored, Eddie? asked Linabeth, sitting on her skirts. Hanging around the court.

Bored? No, I'm comfortable.

Linabeth laughed and pulled Michael to sit leaning against her. Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Comfortable. You're a loafer.

Oh, no. I'm a *leech*, said Eddie.

No, Linabeth laughed. You're just a loafer.

Loafer. I first heard that word in Pittsburg, maybe ten years ago. I remember thinking, *what a stupid word*. But now it seems somehow fitting. I do feel like a loafer.

You're busy, though. Comfortable and busy. Why work if what you are working on doesn't do any good? It will be over soon enough though, and then we'll stop housing you and you'll need some other job.

Yes. It is funny. We're loafing around, trying to stop people from working, and then if we win, all these miners and I will all be looking for work at the same time.

Michael said. It's not to stop work in general. It's so that others can work too. The farmers from Marysville.

Linabeth said. Yes, that's true. You're going to work, Michael? As a blacksmith?

Eddie gave her a quick look but Michael said, looking off into the canopy of the park. Yes.

The Anti-Debris Society is funded by people who have worked hard.

Eddie said. Fitting. The wives of these industrious men throw their money at a project to halt someone else's. It must be strategic.

Michael said. Work could be slower. People could work on better things.

The three ate their food in the park and then returned to the courthouse. A preemptive feeling of boredom settled on Eddie, and he glanced at the sun, still high, before re-entering the building.

*

The sun was about to set when the court adjourned. All filed out, and the pair took their leave of Linabeth and the rest of the ladies. Eye-weary and hungry again, they walked back to the Anti-Debris Society's boarding house. They helped Roberta, who did not seem to like leaving the house, in the kitchen. Michael measured and mixed cornmeal and milk for rich pone and Eddie trimmed a fatty roast of pork, which Roberta had gotten for cheap from the butcher. After giving them some directions, she went to lie down for a minute, and once everything was cooking, Eddie and Michael sat across from each other at the table and read. The smells from the oven quickly began to fill the room, and Eddie found himself distracted from reading, and opened the stove to poke the fire.

*

My name is Bert Hansen. I am captain on the river boat Argos. I am here to speak, as other boat captains have done, to the diminishing navigability of the Sacramento, and especially the Yuba and the Feather, Rivers. I've been running up and down these waterways since the beginning of paddleboat operations in this state, providing people with transportation and entertainment. My boat has a flat bottom and doesn't draw much water, but there is still too much mud to make my usual runs. The rivers need to be dredged immediately and operations up at the North Bloomfield halted if boats are to continue transporting passengers. But this brings me to my other point. What passengers wish to cross a valley full of mud to get to towns inundated by mud? In appearance, and in odor even, this is nothing short of *defecation*. The miners soiling the few rivers this state has. And I hate to bring it up twice, especially in a mixed courtroom, but it is *defecation*—

Objection!

The objection was sustained, Judge Sawyer frowning and saying. That was not necessary.

Captain Hansen was taken, red-faced, back to his seat and a group of anxious looking farmers shot the man bad looks. At the break, Eddie, Michael and Linabeth walked toward downtown where there was a café where the ladies liked to eat. They moved down the walk at the edge of the street, speaking

casually. Suddenly a young man with freshly-cut, dark hair, and a lawyer's suit, hailed them from a stoop. The three companions stopped for him and he said. The miners won't win. But it's not going to be a victory for you either. It never is.

How do you mean? asked Linabeth, tersely.

When there's a court case such as this, a case where there are two such impressive sides built up against each other, it doesn't matter who wins. Those great factions have already been articulated by the case. It's done everything to make them enemies, brought forth every complaint and accusation. Even if the miners lose, as they likely will, you've created a sort of behemoth, or at least you've helped it recognize itself.

I don't think I agree with you, said Linabeth. She did not seem particularly interested in the conversation, but Eddie was not speaking, so she said. If the miners disband there will be no coalition against us anymore. The mine is the only thing banding them together.

Let's walk, the young man ushered them. You're going to McMaster's, I presume?

That's the name of the café? Eddie asked. Linabeth nodded tiredly and the man continued speaking.

They think that they are banded around the *future*. Around entrepreneurship, technology, capital investment, industry—all these ideals they believe created the hydraulic gold mine. But it's more than that. They think that the hydraulic gold mine also helped to create these things. They've created a kind of mental mine, which they will continue to band around. They think you are attacking the future itself.

But that's not true, Linabeth said. We're protecting the future. These miners are getting in the way of other people's work. Of the farmers, Captain Hansen's, hotel keepers in the valley. The Bay itself is brown.

They don't see it that way, the man said. And they won't start to now. *Farming is old*, it's not exciting any more. The way they see it, these men were farmers and now they are industrialists. You're getting in the way of the future.

Eddie said. Well maybe we don't mind that we've lost their friendship. If we win we win. What's your name?

Pardon me, my name is I'm Sam Baker. Assistant to the lawyer James Briggs.

So you're with the miners, Eddie said, as they reached McMaster's Café.

No. I'm saying that as the face of the continent changes, groups are forming and collecting power. It's very nearly invisible and could quickly become stronger than laws. The miners feel some of that power, because they've put a lot of gold into the market, and they think they have enough of that power, even though they don't. But in the future it might become more consolidated, and the courts and government won't be able to control whoever has it.

The noise in the dark-paneled café blended Sam Baker's words. He kept talking though, even as Eddie and Linabeth seemed to both lose his train. They ordered a lunch of egg salad sandwiches. Sam Baker ordered a glass of beer.

Michael asked him. What do you do once the government can't control the people with the power?

You look to each other! he said, emphatically. There are other commonalities, other beliefs and appreciations that can unify people to make sure the right thing happens! There is Christianity, there are other religions. There is race. There is the appreciation of nature—which I've heard that you have, young man. There are many, many other things. And when law ceases to work, those things need to be able to stand up to power.

The sun came through the window of the café and lit deep yellow motes of dust. Linabeth noticed that the dust seemed to constantly be rising toward the ceiling, but never fell. Their food came, and the voices of all the patrons enveloped them like many intersecting ripples, as if from rain, or spray, falling on a still pool.

*

Eddie and Michael sat in the kitchen of the boarding house, reading again. They had eaten with Roberta, who was leaving in the morning and so had gone to bed early.

Eddie asked. You're not really Indian are you?

Michael looked up, slightly startled.

Sorry, I didn't mean to say anything rude. But you're not are you?

Michael said, after a moment. No.

But you are something, Eddie said. What are you? Are you Mexican?

Michael said after a while. I don't feel like saying.

I don't care. It doesn't change the way I think about you. I thought you were Indian. What would I prefer you less as?

The boy's face was somewhat loose and he had no answer.

Eddie said. You don't have to say. I won't think less of you anyway. I was only curious.

Michael began reading again, his back stiff, and after a short time Eddie got up to walk outside and smoke.

*

Eddie, Michael and Linabeth walked down to the American River one Saturday afternoon, the many blocks tilted slightly in straight lines on either side of the street.

Walking in a city feels much different than in the country, Michael said. Things that look close are far away. It's like turning the world into a map. You can see more of it at once. But it doesn't change how far away things really are.

Michael, I think you're getting soft down here, said Eddie.

No he's not, said Linabeth. He's right about the city. About mapping. Perhaps he should be a draftsman instead of a blacksmith.

It might be a good idea, said Eddie.

I don't think drafting is my calling, Michael said. I would still like to apprentice to a blacksmith, if I can.

An engineer, perhaps, Eddie said. Someplace in between. You wouldn't use your body up so fast.

I would like to blacksmith. Like my father, Michael said again. That's what I would really like.

They continued down the street, the low, autumn sun directly before them and glancing off the street as well. After a time Linabeth asked. In a city, do you think it feels shorter to walk somewhere or to walk back?

To walk back, said Eddie. Without a doubt. The walk back always feels shorter.

And do you think that's different in the country?

I think—I think the walk back feels even more short in the country. The distances feel less different in the city. Maybe the destinations do too, and the landmarks, and that's the reason.

Everything is a little averaged. A little flattened out.

It's a map, said Michael. Like I said earlier.

Nearer the river some trees broke the blocks up a little, holding their late leaves, and dry grass covered the ground. Immediately at the end of the street was a dock, but they did not go out on it, walking instead a little way up the river. They soon found a portion of the bank which could have not changed at all since the city was built, as Linabeth pointed out, except for the view across the river, and the color of the river itself. The grass hid low, dried thistles, so they sat on their jackets. A walnut tree above them was losing its leaves and Eddie brushed one of them back and forth across the top of his hand. Somewhere, a meadowlark sang.

You can see where the mud has built up, said Michael.

Yes. Imagine if we brought actual mud into court, Linabeth said. As material evidence.

And flung it at the miners, Eddie said.

Michael laughed, his high laugh. I think he would like it. Judge Sawyer certainly has a sense of humor.

You think so? Eddie asked.

Or maybe the miners are just funny, said Linabeth. It's hard not to smile when some of them come to the stand.

I don't think they're funny, said Eddie. I'm afraid of them. Nervous as they seem. I feel they've insinuated certain threats that have gone over Judge Sawyer's head.

Well, they haven't done anything yet. And there are lots of eyes on them, as well as on the plaintiffs, to keep us safe. What does worry me though, Linabeth said. Or, moreover, what I do notice, is a total lack of compassion in these company men, or lack of morals even. I feel that is new. I always

thought that when people became rich, and got more comfortable, they felt more inclined to generosity. But these people have a terrifying coldness to them, when they act in the name of their company. The same way that a lawyer may lie, or act terribly in the name of their client. Mr. Provensen has had success recently, with his sugar business, and I worry about this same thing happening to him, that his morals are changing.

They looked out at the muddy river, passing by very slowly, and the sound of the meadowlark grew louder.

*

He dreamt that night that he was among trees and that there was one building nearby, a wooden fort, its walls solid and tall. White men and Indians fought among the trees and shots came from invisible chinks in the fort. Half the men in front of him were killed within a few seconds, but he was not fighting anyone. He held his knife out in front of himself, close to his hip and ready to jab. He had no gun. Although he was not resigned to his death he could feel it coming. From the group he was watching, a brave caught his eye, and ran out, swinging a long-handled hatchet. Somehow as they met the hatchet passed through him without doing any harm and the brave was caught up short against his body. He cut the Indian's back open, embracing him as his hand slickened, and he felt, all the way up into his forearm, the shiver of gristle and skin tearing. As he fell away, the Indian's contorted face passed just in front of his eyes. Filled with sudden war-fear, he turned around, expecting someone to be behind him, but the space was empty. He ran, trying to go unnoticed, into the forest. A gun went off by his ear, although there was no one there, and then he was away, with only trees around him. But then, stepping farther, he saw a woman's carcass nailed to a tree. It had been flayed open, short, deep cuts radiating out from darkness in her groin and face, and her intestines trailed out underneath her. He turned around, in sudden fear once more. The brave was flying toward him, and seized him in an embrace. The man's whole body seemed hard and heavy as stone. He tried to fight back but the man possessed an otherworldly strength. He

screamed as the man rolled him over and pulled his pants away. Then something hard was shoved into him and he screamed again but could only move his head.

*

Eddie spoke before the court. The session was moderately attended, but he was caught with nervousness. He almost thought he could hear the rain on the roof of the building.

My name is Edward Rulee and I worked for a time at the North Bloomfield's Malakoff Diggins'. My experience there could not fully be understood though until making my descent into the valley. I've seen with my eyes, and felt with my feet, the effects the hydraulic mining has had in the valley, and I have loosened the same mud with my hands, in the pits. I would especially like to point out that the conversation at the mines often refers to their closing as imminent, and not solely as a result of this complaint and case, but for other internal reasons. I would also like to point to the nature of such large companies as the North Bloomfield in general, which begin to take on a kind of horrid personality, whose responsibility is diffused, where work is delegated to small functioning parts of the whole, but where the morality of individuals is suspended, as it is considered that accountability in general is taken up by the owners or bosses, but which in truth is never claimed.

Monotonous, familiar, whispered conversations filled the room, as if with the buzzing of a great number of flies, and Eddie, mind blank, gripped the wooden island in front of him.

What are you trying to say, precisely? asked the judge.

Eddie glanced at the ladies, who were watching but did not seem to be listening. He said. Just, that I support regulating the tailings out of the mines, your honor.

Judge Sawyer nodded and Eddie thanked him and went to sit again, annoyed at the inattentive, whispering audience, and at himself as well. I'm not a speaker, he thought. I'm a watcher, an explainer.

He said later to Linabeth. I can't disseminate my intuition, and it doesn't prove anything on its own. Not for other people. For me alone.

*

Eddie was still in bed, but awake, when he heard a clamor from downstairs. He recognized the voices of some of the ladies, but did not bother to put names to them. He heard dishes put out, and then he heard a cork pop. Eddie got up and dressed, checking his reflection. His beard was trimmed and his face was a little fuller than it had been a year before. The stairs squeaked in quick succession as he descended to the kitchen, which was full of Anti-Debris Society members.

Ed-die! Mrs. Peterson cried out. We have incredible news for you.

She gave him a cup of coffee just as someone else shoved a glass of champagne into his other hand.

Has there been a decision? he asked Mrs. Peterson.

Yes! There has!

And it was in our favor?

Well we don't know yet for certain, but we've heard *rumors* from people *inside the court!*

Judge Sawyer will be reading his decision at noon, said Mrs. Speck, who had just approached. We are going to eat and then travel directly there.

Eddie nodded and saw Michael at the top of the stairs. He set down his glass of champagne and went up to where the dark skinned boy was.

There's been a decision, he said. It sounds as if in favor of the farmers. That's why all the ladies are here.

The boy nodded.

Do you want some coffee? asked Eddie, but the boy was still.

What should we do after the ladies don't need our testimonies anymore? Or help with the paperwork?

Eddie sighed and said. We've talked about the options. I doubt they'll let you out into the streets. I do wonder though—I wonder if it's time to be Katherine again.

I'd like to apprentice to a blacksmith.

You know there will be problems. It will lead to a life of complication and anxiety. You know that, don't you?

Michael took the cup of coffee and drank some.

I'll be nearby though, for a while. I think, said Eddie. If you need help.

Then Mrs. Peterson ran up the stairs with a class of champagne.

Michael! Our hero. Have this. I am sure that whatever our next cause is, we will need you there to help us. But come down! And Eddie, come *celebrate!*

She pulled them back down into the kitchen where pastries were being set out on platters. Eddie and Wilcox both looked for Linabeth, but she was not there. There were not enough seats at the table, so they both stood. Michael sipped the glass of champagne and Eddie took his coffee back. Mrs. Speck came to Eddie with a half-eaten scone.

How do you think the miners will take it? she asked, exuberantly.

Badly, he replied. I think they will take it quite badly.

Ooh! Do you think that they will attempt sabotage?

Of who? asked Eddie.

Of us! Or the court, or the farmers. I mean, those are dangerous men!

You're right, he said. They are. But I think we've got them.

They ate and drank together for a while and Eddie was just about to suggest that they proceed to the court house when someone else came in. Eddie vaguely recognized her face. She was the wife of a barley farmer from Chico, he thought, but could not remember her name.

Excuse me. Excuse me, she said, until she was noticed and the room quieted. I knocked. But I don't suppose you heard. I wanted to invite you though. We—a bunch of farmers and other representatives from our side of the case are outside. We are having a sort of procession to the court house, to hear the decision, and we wondered if you would join us. We wanted to thank you, in some way, for your help.

Oh, we know the decision! cried Mrs. Peterson.

Well, said the woman, reddening. If you would like to hear it read in full perhaps, we are walking now.

I'll go, said Eddie, but the rest of the ladies were quiet, and he saw several checking the time on the clock. Finally Mrs. Bauer spoke.

We will be along soon. Thank you, though, and—you're welcome. We were glad to take up the fight.

Eddie followed the woman out. Michael tried to go with him, but Mrs. Peterson insisted he stay, and she filled his glass again. He waved and Eddie waved back from the doorway as he grabbed his jacket

from the rack. The crowd gathered outside was quiet, its mood more serious than the ladies'. The woman shook her head as she joined the group.

Not coming out? a man with a youth-strong, but creased, face asked.

They're coming along a little later. They seem to be sure of a positive outcome.

Did they tell you why?

As she shook her head some of the men and women looked at Eddie, but he shook his head too. He joined the crowd and the whole body started moving. The woman who had come in, whose name Eddie still could not remember, walked farther ahead, but not at the front. The people around him looked forward and did not speak. The procession went along the edge of the street. Carriages passed them and people on the sidewalk turned their heads, surprised, or amused. Along the street the buildings changed from residences to businesses, and then they were at the court house. They filed through the doorway one at a time but were held in the overcrowded lobby. Eddie spotted Linabeth sitting with her husband and he waved and then went to sit with them.

The ladies seem to think they know the outcome already, he said.

I think it's fairly certain, said Mr. Provensen. Eddie had only seen the man a few times, but had a positive impression of him, and hoped that the feeling was mutual, although he was not sure it was.

Mr. Provensen continued. Sawyer is sensible. When you add up the costs and benefits, it is fairly clear what California needs in order to go on.

Did you talk to them about it? asked Eddie.

I spoke with Lina about it, but no one else. Not in detail.

I'm not the source of the gossip, Linabeth said. I can assure you.

And these farmers don't know, said Mr. Provensen. Neither the plaintiff nor the defendant can predict these things. Their position is too low, too self-occupied.

They all sat a little longer, speaking quietly, until the door was opened and everybody filed into the court room. Judge Sawyer sat at his bench, his usual pile of loose papers gone now, replaced by a single, thick document. All sat and there was another long wait and the representatives from North Bloomfield and the Hydraulic Miners Association arrived and sat as well. The ladies of the Anti-Debris Society arrived shortly afterward, and sat near the door, where seats were still empty. Michael was with them and Eddie and Linabeth waved. Mr. Provensen kept his gaze on Judge Sawyer, who remained impassive. The court was as full, and as loud as Eddie had heard it, and on other days he knew the judge would have tapped his gavel for quiet. Finally he did, and then he read. Eddie felt something drop in his stomach, but it only felt like a pebble, slipping into a pond. He realized that he wished he could leave.

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It had been an hour and a half and the ladies, who at first, once the intent of Sawyer's decision seemed clear, had piped up with jubilation, now were quiet and glazed. All except Mrs. Speck, who continuously whispered to her neighbors, and then spent periods listening intently and nodding. Mr. Provensen nodded too, but when Mrs. Speck rose, tapping the other ladies on their shoulders and gesturing toward where Eddie was sitting, Mr. Provensen was the first to rise. There was a momentary pause in the judge's reading, but by the time they passed through the large door into the hall, his pace had resumed. Outside, in the pale winter sun of the new year, Mrs. Speck spoke from the steps, her voice clearer than Sawyer's, but somehow lost in the space.

As we have already arranged, this afternoon we will march to North Bloomfield. I hate to leave the court early, but we must be off. Accommodations are set up at a comfortable place in Nevada City, and Mr. Hansen has offered us transportation and entertainment as far as Marysville on his paddle-steamer, from which point there are carriages. Now! Listen. Every war has its victory march, its demands

and terms for surrender. While those particularities are determined in this case by the esteemed Lorenzo Sawyer and not us, we still have carried the fight. Through perseverant testimony and the collection of solid and economic evidence this victory is ours, and it will be our pleasure to deliver—Mrs. Speck lifted high a many paged document, and there was a cheer. Judge Sawyer’s decision straight to the offices of the North Bloomfield. We did it! We won!

There was another cheer, and Michael, rubbing his eyes, came to stand beside Eddie. The group of women, along with many of their husbands, began to move, this time walking down the very center of the street.

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The heating system clunked on and for a second almost brought Bernice out of her paperwork. She did notice the warmer air flowing into the badly-insulated portable. The light that fell in through the structure’s small, sliding windows was dim, and had been unnoticed for a few months now, overwhelmed by the fluorescent strip inside and the North Dakota clouds in the sky.

Payroll came every month and took a week to finish. Bernice’s head swam looking at the pages, but for a moment she relished the feeling, sensually tracking her mind’s shift out of temporary confusion. A whole space to myself, she thought, as she did many times a week. She hesitated to call it an office, as there were a dozen identical portables adjacent to hers at the center of the field, and several of them were temporarily empty.

Outside, in the sky, the frozen vapors contorted. They did not drop snow, but slowly convected, a thousand clouds moving north-west. Steam plumes from the field below cooled to the same freezing temperature as they rose, and by the time they met, the two seemed the same, and they drifted off together.

It was only noon, but the day had felt longer. Some shifts Bernice sat for ten minutes at a time, looking at the door handle without moving, but so far she had worked steadily today. She thought if she went soon for more coffee in the rec trailer, she could make it without stopping until 2pm. Exhaling silently, she squared the stack of papers again and set them down next to her keyboard, thumbing the top one into her left hand and typing with the other.

One hour later and just before she planned to go for coffee, a sound, less familiar than the clunk of the heater, disturbed Bernice. She was confused, because although the field was fairly loud with industrial noises, there was never any music playing. Grabbing her mug, Bernice opened the door. The music, specifically the sound of a drum, a raw, steady beat, was louder, and she stepped onto the ground below the single stair of the plywood trailer, the exterior of which was stamped with a circle logo containing a yellow drop.

Voices came to her suddenly, a chant, and then other angry voices. Bernice walked toward the sound, leaving the portable complex and skirting one of the main fracturing rigs, its plume stretching the tower's height indefinitely upward. She did not look up though, stepping over some insulated cables and gas lines. Standing facing each other, but on opposite sides of the main pipeline, which was chest-high and painted sky-blue, were her bosses, wearing in hard hats, and a group of Indians. They beat their drum. They wore sweatshirts and jackets and chanted. Their leader, a young woman with her hair in a red beanie, called out over the pipe and the men on the other side of it shouted back.