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Como Lobos

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COMO LOBOS

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Master's Program in Creative Writing

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2021

Dedications

For Erika, Alexander and Helena,
my reasons for it all.

COMO LOBOS

by

DAVID ANDREW PLACE

THESIS

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Preface

Como Lobos is an episodic historical novel set in Texas and Mexico in the early to mid-nineteenth century. Structurally, the book resembles Lydia Millet's *Fight No More* and Ray Bradbury's *The Martian Chronicles*, with several short stories, some containing a linear connection and an evolution of characters and others that exist almost independently, sharing only a common location or character at the story's periphery.

Como Lobos explores the hearts of men and the duality of human beings capable of committing atrocities against their adversaries, yet retaining their own humanity to cultivate profound relationships, sharing love and affection with friends, children and spouses. The work addresses mostly paternal relationships, the father and son dynamic explored in multiple stories with different themes such as paternal loss, adoption, abuse and patricide, etc.

On the surface level, *Como Lobos*, a western with heavy components of magical realism, is set in Mexico and Texas in the mid-nineteenth-century with characters ranging from Comanche warriors, Mexican land-owners and peons to displaced soldiers and Tejanos.

Some of the early stories make connections to the Mexican myth of *La Lechuza*, a shape-shifting witch that can transform into an owl. I've threaded this folk legend into the main bogey of Comanche belief, Piampuitz, a cannibal owl. In this is a world, spirits talk and other cultural beliefs are viewed as commonplace facts. The winds speak, the sun punishes and strange women shape-shift into murderous night birds.

As stated above, this is also a story of fathers and sons. Storm Crow seeks power to compensate for failing in his father's eyes as a boy. As a young man, Storm Crow loses his own wife and son during childbirth; afterward, he kills Broken Gun's biological father and abducts

the boy, eventually growing to love him. Broken Gun struggles with the trauma of losing his white family and his love for Storm Crow.

The original arc for this project follows Storm Crow as he grows in power until he matures and passes his paternal role onto his adopted son, Broken Gun. As Broken Gun ages, he's separated from his Comanche family and returned to white society where he struggles to adapt, eventually crossing paths with a twelve-year-old African-American boy and adopts him as his own son, teaching him the way his adoptive father, Storm Crow, taught him to be a Comanche.

As this project developed, Storm Crow became more important to the story and I decided to approach this work as a trilogy, with *Como Lobos* being the first book in the series. The second book will concentrate on Storm Crow surviving the final confrontation with Broken Gun and wandering a shadow world as he seeks a way to reclaim his power, taking the war trail alone in hopes to find redemption and rebuild his medicine or commit suicide by dying against an insurmountable foe, ultimately failing to perish at the hands of his enemies, defeating all of them in combat. The third book will focus on Broken Gun and the boy he adopts, the son of a freedman, during the antebellum era, the Comanches nearly exterminated and confined to the reservation.

During the mid-to-late Nineteenth Century, Native American horse tribes held dominion over the plains. Tribes continuously moved their horse herds to graze and follow the hunt for buffalo. The military superiority of mounted warriors, their nomadic lifestyles and cultural hatred of outsiders led to many bloody conflicts between Amerindians, Mexicans, Americans and European immigrants.

In the Southwest, the Comanche, with their Kiowa allies, drove the Apache, the Tonkawa and the Kickapoo from their ancestral hunting grounds. To the north, the Comanche and Kiowa pushed toward the Rocky Mountains where they clashed with the Ute tribes. In the deep south, Comanche-Kiowa raiding parties continuously penetrated Mexico for scalps, horses and slaves. Attempting to appease Comanche raiding parties, Spanish-Mexico and denizens of Mexican Texas, developed the practice of paying tribute to war parties searching for horses and plunder. Following Mexico's independence from Spain, Mexican settlements could no longer afford to give gifts to the war bands. Texas settlers viewed gift giving with disdain, and many refused to take part in the practice. The Comanche viewed the end of paying tribute as an affront, and the Comanche Empire declared open war on Mexico, turning Northern Mexico (including Texas) into the Land of a Thousand Deserts, leading to the large-scale destruction of Mexican and south Texas settlements.

Myriad recorded accounts of Native American raids during the nineteenth century exist in the historical record. The details of these raids are lurid. Two notable occurrences are the raid on Parker's Fort, also known as the Fort Parker Massacre and the Legion Valley Raid, also referred to as the Legion Valley Massacre.

On May 19, 1836, a large band of Comanche Warriors and a few Kiowa allies approached a fortified compound, home to the Parker family. The Comanche-Kiowa band approached the walls of the settlement under the guise of friendship, a ruse they abandoned, resulting in the murder of five men, the abduction of two women and three children with other men and women badly wounded and left for dead. Amid the carnage, Sarah Pinson Duty, a woman in her seventies, also known as Grannie Parker, was pinned to the ground with a lance struck through her abdomen and gang raped. Grannie Parker survived the encounter, pulling the

lance out of her side and freeing herself. Eight-year-old Cynthia Anne Parker, among the three abducted children, would later be adopted by the Comanche and fully absorbed into the tribe, growing up to become the wife of Peta Nocona and the mother of Quanah Parker, the last Comanche chief. Cynthia Anne would be captured by Texas rangers during a gun battle twenty-five-years later in which her husband and oldest son were killed. Her infant daughter, Prairie Flower, died soon after. Heartbroken by the loss of her Comanche family and unable to adapt to white society, Cynthia Anne Parker starved herself to death in 1870 at the age of forty-three.

On February 5, 1868, the women and children of two families in Llano County, TX congregated in one of the family homes while the men traveled to Fredericksburg to purchase supplies. Two of the children, Lee Temple Friend and Malinda ‘Minnie’ Caudle, were out playing in the snow when they noticed a small group of Comanches stealing horses at the corner of the property. When the children screamed, the Comanches stormed the house. The matriarch of the family, Matilda Jones Friend, eight-months-pregnant at the time, was shot in the side with an arrow, scalped twice and had her hand cut open by the leader of the raiding party. According to documents found in the *Bolt Family Homestead and Legion Valley Massacre Collection*, part of *The Texas Collection* at Baylor University, Gregory Michno’s *The Settlers’ War, The Struggle for the Texas Frontier in the 1860s*, and Johnnie Lee Reeves’ “Legion Valley Massacre.” from the *Handbook of Texas Online*, published by the Texas State Historical Association, Matilda Jones Friend survived by pretending to be dead and enduring the second scalping without moving or breathing. The raiders took Amanda Townsend, the eighteen-year-old niece of Matilda Jones and two young mothers (Samantha and Rebecca Johnson) and their children (Fielty Johnson, age 1 and Nancy Johnson, age 2) killing the infant and the two-year-old in front of their mothers during the initial escape by throwing the baby in the air repeatedly, then choking

her before bashing the infant against a rock. A Comanche raider held two-year-old, Nancy Johnson, upside down by her ankle and cut her throat. The young women were subsequently gang raped and killed. Samantha Johnson refused to travel with the Comanches and a rescue party found her dead, sitting upright, a lance driven through her right shoulder, the point exiting above her left hip, scalped with her throat cut. Rebecca Johnson tried to escape and the Comanches chased her down, killing her and leaving her naked body in the snow to be consumed by wild hogs. The two surviving children, Lee Temple Friend and Malinda ‘Minnie’ Caudle were adopted by the Comanches and later recovered. Lee Temple Friend, distraught after being separated from his Comanche family died from unknown causes at the age of fourteen.

Accounts like the two mentioned above are common in the historical record. Although violent encounters between cultures is replete in American history, the Comanche and their shared hatred with Texians (Texans) was deep rooted. There is no story without conflict and early Texas and Mexican history is fertile ground.

In this world of conflict, Storm Crow, a fictional Comanche warrior, leads a war party making its way through Mexico and Texas, stealing horses, abducting children and wreaking chaos as he seeks spiritual and magical powers, increasing his notoriety and prowess as a warrior. During one raid, Storm Crow abducts a white child, six-year-old Wade Vance. When Wade tries to escape, Storm Crow attempts to shoot him. When Storm Crow’s gun fails twice, he realizes that the boy is not meant to die and adopts him, renaming Wade, “Broken Gun,” in praise of the perceived magical intervention, the gun misfiring twice, that saved the child’s life. Broken Gun grows to love his new father but is haunted by the ghosts of his dead parents and visions of himself as a child and a shadow figure that visit him in dreams, the visions tormenting him and forcing him to remember the circumstances of his abduction.

Como Lobos explores the thematic motif of doubles in Broken Gun's dual nature, a young Comanche warrior haunted by his reflection as a six-year-old white child and manifest in Storm Crow's character as an adoptive father and the killer of Wade's biological father and in the contrast between Storm Crow's Appaloosa war pony and Midnight, Broken Gun's medicine horse.

Much like Vikings in their raids on the seaside settlements of medieval Europe, Texans and Mexicans along the frontier viewed Comanche warriors with abject terror. Myriad historical reports document large-scale raids, thefts, gang rapes, torture, infanticide, mutilation and murder at the hands of Comanche warriors. Conversely, friends and allies of Comanche groups widely viewed the tribe as generous, gregarious and family-oriented with a notable love for humor. Oral histories exist of Comanche headmen giving hundreds of horses to the Cheyenne as signs of friendship.

Finding written accounts of Comanche life recorded by Comanches living during the 1800s is difficult. While oral histories exist, near if not all accounts of Comanches in the time period of *Como Lobos* were recorded by Texians, Americans or Mexicans. The Comanche did not have a written language until 1994, when the Comanche alphabet, developed By Dr. Alice Anderton, was officially adopted by the Comanche Nation. The closest, first-hand accounts of Comanche life are the biographical histories of white captives who wrote down their experiences, such as Hermann Lehmann, the son of German immigrants living in Texas who was abducted by Apaches and later ran away to live with a band of Comanches. Lehmann made note in his autobiography, *Nine Years Among the Indians 1870-1879*, that Comanches treated their children with more love and affection than the Apache. Lehmann also tells about fighting with Apache children after his initial capture.

I was aroused, painted and made to wrestle and fight a while with the boys. They would get me down, but I would scratch, bite, kick and knock until I got on top. Such was our camp life from day to day. (Lehmann 20).

Duality is evident with the Tonkawa, ancestral enemies of the Comanche and Apache. The Tonkawa, despised by most of the neighboring Texas tribes, most likely for their practice of cannibalism, aligned themselves with the United States Army and served as scouts and support troops. In his autobiography, *Tragedies of Cañon Blanco, A Story of the Texas Panhandle*, Captain Robert Goldthwaite Carter describes Tonkawa scouts performing heroically alongside their military allies.

The “Tonks” came down from their high perches on the bluff overhead, where they had given the entire command one of the finest circus acts (with several rings) of lofty tumbling, somersaults, vaulting, standing on their heads, etc. it had ever been our good fortunes to see in an Indian country, and, upon parting the bushes found both Qua-ha-das. (Carter 53).

Lehmann paints a starkly different picture of the Tonkawa (Tonkaway) in his recount of a conflict between the Tonkawa and the Comanche after the Tonkawa killed and ate a Comanche warrior.

The Comanches and Tonkaways had been at war a long time, and the Tonkaways had been nearly exterminated. The hatred the Tonkaway had for the Comanche was fierce, for they blamed the Comanche for all of their misfortunes and eventually made a treaty with the white people and combined with them to exterminate the Comanche, acting as scouts and trailers and warriors for the whites.

When we found these Tonkaways in camp our chief gave a war-whoop and we all joined in one continual yell as we charged that camp. They fled at the onslaught and several of them were killed. We took possession of the camp and what do you suppose we found in that fire, roasting? One of the legs of a Comanche! A warrior of our tribe. (Lehmann 93).

Lehmann goes on to tell how he and the Comanches tracked down and engaged the remaining Tonkawa (Tonkaway) and killed them, dismembered their bodies and burned them on a bonfire.

The barbarous nature of men and the complexity of men engaging in savage acts yet maintaining their humanity, manifests in Storm Crow, one-side of his self, a magically imbued war chief with a propensity to kill and mutilate his enemies while also taking on a paternal role and adopting an orphaned boy. The character, Broken Gun, struggles with the identity of his former self as a double, battling buried memories of his biological family and his abduction.

Some literary models for this project are *Blood Meridian* by Cormac McCarthy, *Gone to Texas* by Forrest Carter and *Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution* by Mariano Azuela.

Blood Meridian or the Evening Redness in the West by Cormac McCarthy follows a character known as the Kid, a ne'er do well who runs away from Tennessee to South Texas, where he joins a militia bound for Mexico in the wake of the Texas revolution. A horde of Comanche marauders roving the borderlands slaughters the militia but the Kid survives the encounter and escapes to the City of Coahuila, where he winds up in prison and is recruited to join a vicious band of misanthropes, hunting the land for Indian scalps. The Kid commits himself to the scalp hunters on an odyssey of brutality until the band's own depravity destroys them.

Blood Meridian aligns with my book, *Como Lobos*, on several levels that make it a relevant resource in the composition of my project. Not a typical western novel, *Blood Meridian* concentrates on war, depravity and moral corruption. *Como Lobos* shares similarities in geography and time. *Blood Meridian* begins in Texas and Mexico and spans the years between the late 1840s and middle 1870s.

While *Blood Meridian* shares commonalities in time and geographic settings, McCarthy's characters degenerate in the cyclical violence of his novel, whereas the events in *Como Lobos* demonstrate the actions of characters who commit atrocities but are still capable of love and compassion. *Como Lobos* contrasts with *Blood Meridian* in its perspectives of Mexicans, Comanches, Tonkawas, Anglo-Americans and African-Americans in conflict.

Como Lobos explores themes of patriarchy, as Storm Crow feels shame from his father for abandoning his older brother to a band of Tonkawas and adopts Wade Vance, renaming him Broken-Gun, who later adopts Moses Browne and renames him Paints-The-Sky-In-His-Hair, the latter being the main character in the third part of the trilogy. Both Storm Crow and Broken-Gun take the role of father with great sincerity.

Not a traditional western novel, *Como Lobos*, like *Blood Meridian* has a thread of magical realism. In *Blood Meridian*, the Judge, a chaotic and enigmatic character, both everywhere and nowhere, appears as a black-hearted manipulator with a penchant for murdering children. The book's conclusion reveals the Judge as a Mephistopheles-like character intent on stoking war and discontent between men, finally appearing in the outskirts of Fort Griffin to collect the Kid, the last survivor of the gang of scalp hunters. One can argue that *Blood Meridian* is a journey through hell on earth as the characters move toward their own damnation. *Como Lobos* also deals with the spirit world, although more from a Comanche perspective.

Como Lobos' multiple stories stem from the path of a Comanche raiding party, some of the characters are white and share similar world views with characters found in McCarthy's novel. However, other characters in *Como Lobos*, Comanche, Tonkawa and Mexican, reveal their respective world views. Like *Blood Meridian*, brutal and unflinching, *Como Lobos* also has long pieces that paint tableaux of violence. Unlike McCarthy's largely immoral characters, *Como Lobos* shows how men commit barbarous acts and unleash merciless depravity upon those they view as adversaries or less than human, yet they still return to their families with love and kindness among their own. Whereas McCarthy depicts man as a hopeless devotee of war who damns himself to hell, *Como Lobos* shows men's two sides, a dichotomy between men as makers of war and as loving fathers.

Gone to Texas by Forrest Carter is the story of Josey Wales, a Confederate soldier in the American Civil War who refuses to surrender to the Union Army after the conclusion of the war. Wales becomes a renegade pursued the Union Army into the Indian Territories. He allies himself with an aging Cherokee warrior and the two men take the trail to Texas. Along the way, Wales takes under his protection, an abused Native American woman and an elderly white woman and her granddaughter. Their journey ends at the homestead of the elderly woman's son, on a bountiful piece of land hidden away in the West Texas desert. Wales discovers that a sizable band of Comanches, led by Ten Bears, migrates through the valley to winter in Mexico and on their return to Texas in the Spring, the Comanches intend to route Wales and his people from the land. However, Wales meets Ten Bears as an equal and makes peace with the Comanches.

Gone to Texas relates to my project *Como Lobos*, on several levels. It shows the reality of Texas as a land of outlaws and renegades during the post-bellum era and shows the Texan

perspective of the Union Army and Amerindians on the frontier. Wales treats the Comanche with both fear and respect, their barbarism well-documented, but Ten Bears and his warriors aren't two-dimensional murderers and rapists incapable of thought, courage and honor.

Comanche characters are prominent in *Como Lobos* and the episodic stories take place around the movements of a Comanche war party. In the story "Medicine Horse" Broken-Gun is fully embraced in the lifestyle of a Comanche warrior and the love of his adoptive culture made apparent.

The Underdogs: A Novel of the Mexican Revolution by Mariano Azuela tells the story of Demetrio Macias, a poor man who joins the revolution to protect his family and save their way of life. A natural leader, Macias becomes a general in the revolution. After a series of defeats from the Federales, Macias becomes disenchanted and loses his passion to fight.

Although the time period of this novel begins approximately fifty-years after the events in *Como Lobos*, *Underdogs* looks into the life of rural Mexicans caught up in a war that came to the doorsteps of their mountain villages. It shows racism between Mexicans and indigenous people and the oppression of peons and Indians. In addition, it illustrates complex relationships between characters and emphasizes their humanity. Azuela shows his characters in combat, suffering from starvation and injury but also shows their sense of humor and fidelity to one another.

One of the stories in *Como Lobos*, "Blackbirds," focuses on three ex-soldiers traveling from Mexico City to their villages in Tamaulipas. As they travel, they face starvation, dehydration, encounters with raiding Comanches and their own personal demons of guilt and regret. The mindset of these characters runs parallel with Macias and his band of rebels tiring from the revolution and the exhaustion of war.

I selected this text because Azuela wrote the novel while serving as a doctor for the revolution. Although the work is fiction, I felt that the author's first-hand knowledge and credibility would help me view characters from a geographic location and time period relatively close to where the events of my work take place.

I have conducted extensive research on the Comanche people, the Tonkawa, Native American mythology, war paint and horse symbolism, historical records of Comanche raids, memoirs of United States Cavalry soldiers, Texas Rangers and early Texas settlers. A particular area of focus is given to accounts of abducted children taken by Comanche, Apache and Kiowa raiders.

My first entry into research came in a series of interviews with Dr. Donald Frazier, Director of the Texas Center at Schreiner University in Kerrville, Texas, and former Professor of History at McMurry University in Abilene, Texas. Dr. Frazier, the President of the McWhiney History Education Group and the author of a series of books on the American Civil War, spoke with me extensively on the topics of the Comanche in Texas, the Comanche practice of abductions, slavery in Native American societies in the Southern Plains, Texan and Mexican conflicts with the Comanche people, buffalo hunters, U.S. Cavalry practices, U.S. Army forts on the Texas frontier, vigilante organizations and the American Civil War. During one of our discussions, I questioned Dr. Frazier about white captives abducted by the Comanche and other Amerindian groups. Dr. Frazier stated that the number of Mexican captives was much higher than whites with hundreds, possibly thousands of children taken from Mexican settlements due to extensive raiding in Mexico and the consensus among the Comanche that Mexican children could be easily assimilated into the tribe and harder to distinguish than white captives. Dr.

Frazier shared the following anecdote about speaking with an elderly Comanche man at a history conference in Dallas, Texas.

Several years ago, I was at a convention giving a talk about Texas history and the Comanche. There was a really old Comanche man that was in the audience who had come to hear the talk. After it was over, a bunch of us historians and history professors gathered around this old guy and started asking him a whole bunch of questions. He told us that he remembered his grandfather going on raids down to Mexico and bringing back little kids. One day he walked up to his grandfather after he brought in a kid strapped on his horse and he asked him, “Grandfather, why do you always bring back children from Mexico?” His grandfather told him, “Because those Mexicans make damn good Indians.” – Interview with Dr. Donald Frazier, September 15, 2017.

After speaking with Dr. Frazier, I viewed a series of lectures on the Comanche and Texas history presented by Dr. Frazier and the McWhiney History Education Group. I then discovered a series of presentations by Dr. Lindsey Montgomery, Professor of Anthropology at Arizona State University. I contacted Dr. Montgomery and asked her for an interview, but Dr. Montgomery declined, citing schedule obligations and referred me to Jhane Myer of the Museum of Indian Arts & Culture, Native Film & Special Projects. I got an initial response from Ms. Myer but was unable to secure an interview. She referred me to Dr. Eric Tippeconnic, Assistant Professor of American Indian Studies at California State University, San Marcos. Dr. Tippeconnic, an accomplished artist and Comanche historian. I sent Dr. Tippeconnic multiple emails and did not receive a response. I sent Ms. Myer a follow up request for an interview and did not receive a response. I then sent a message to Dr. Linda Warner, Lecturer of American Indian Studies at California State University San Marcos and member of the Comanche tribe, I

did not receive a response. In a last attempt to speak with a representative of Texas Amerindian culture, I reached out to the Lipan Apache Tribe in McAllen, Texas. I spoke with Dr. Hermelinda Walking Woman who referred me to Lipan Apache Council Chairman, Bernard Barcena. I sent Mr. Barcena a request for an interview and he did not respond.

I contacted Baylor University and requested a copy of the “Bolt Family Homestead and Legion Valley Massacre Collection,” a dossier of historical documents, maps and newspaper clippings regarding the Legion Valley Raid. Sylvia Hernandez, a librarian at Baylor University, scanned the collection and sent me an electronic copy.

My research also included Native American languages, an important component in *Como Lobos*, and to treat multiple cultures with respect and authenticity, I procured a Comanche Vocabulary compiled by Manuel García Rejón, arranged from dialogue Rejón recorded in interviews with a Mexican boy who lived as a Comanche captive during the nineteenth century. This particular Comanche Vocabulary is highly important because the Comanche language has changed over time. Historically, Comanches would not speak the name of a dead person in fear that doing so could summon a ghost. With people being named after animals and objects, this belief forced the language to continuously change and new words brought in to replace words no longer spoken. I also procured a digital copy of “Beginning to learn Tonkawa” prepared by Don Patterson, a booklet used to teach the Tonkawa language to Tonkawa children in elementary school. I used this document to translate some rudimentary phrases.

I consulted a variety of historical and anthropological texts including: *American Indian Mythology* by Alice Marriott and Carol K. Rachlin, *Being Comanche, A Social History of an American Indian Community* by Morris W. Foster, *Bravo of the Brazos, John Larn of Fort Griffin, Texas* by Robert K. DeArment, *Comanche Bondage* by Carl Coke Rister, *Comanches:*

The History of a People by T.R. Fehrenbach, *Comanche Vocabulary: Trilingual Edition* by Manuel García Rejón, *Crimson Desert* by Odie B. Faulk, *The Captured* by Scott Zesch, *The Conquest of the Karankawas and the Tonkawas 1821-1859* by Kelly F. Himmel, *The Life of John Wesley Hardin* by John Wesley Hardin, *Tragedies of Cañon Blanco, A Story of the Texas Panhandle* by Captain Robert Goldthwaite Carter, *A Fate Worse than Death* by Gregory Michno, *Recollections of Early Texas* by John Holland Jenkins, *The Settler's War* by Gregory Michno, *Texas Indian Myths and Legends* by Jane Archer, *Three Years Among the Comanches* by Nelson Lee, *Nine Years Among the Indians 1870-1879* by Hermann Lehmann and *War of a Thousand Deserts* by Brian Delay.

In my research, I uncovered several detailed accounts of massacres, rapes and abductions. The term, *depredations* or *Indian depredations*, is the common, historical label for these incidents. Many of these documented events include candid statements declaring violent reprisals from white settlers, Texas rangers and in some cases, United States soldiers. These discoveries shaped my understanding of common misconceptions perpetuated by fiction and historical revisionism. The idea that Westward expansion and the concept of Manifest Destiny victimized Amerindians and exposed cultures living in peace to violence brought by Europeans is sometimes flawed. To clarify, several components of manifest destiny inarguably ushered in destruction, but Amerindian tribes engaged in large scale massacre, rape and slavery far before white settlers appeared on the continent. A more realistic viewpoint is the perpetuation of violence. In many cases, tragedies occurred to innocent families above and below the Rio Grande, often at the hands of raiding Amerindian men seeking fame and glory. Conversely, Mexicans, Texians (Texans) and Americans committed atrocities on native people, sometimes in retaliation for massacres inflicted by different tribes. The modern lens through which we see the

accounts of westward expansion paints two contrasting pictures, whites oppressing the “noble” savage or “innocent” settlers suffering at the hands of barbarians. The truth lies somewhere in between with the press of Manifest Destiny thrusting vastly different cultures together, forcing them to compete for land and resources. Racism ran rampant on both sides of the conflict.

Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* influenced me far before I started writing *Como Lobos*. In *Heart of Darkness*, Charles Marlow retells his account of piloting a steamboat up the Congo to retrieve a prominent ivory trader, Mr. Kurtz, who has disappeared in the far reaches of the jungle. The farther Marlow travels up the river, the darker the jungle becomes and Marlow experiences the brutality of the tribal Africans. When he finally discovers Kurtz at a far-off ivory processing station, Kurtz is living as a god-king, totally engulfed in primal savagery.

The concept of savagery lying dormant in the souls of men and awakening as men immerse themselves in a primal world, as illustrated in Kurtz’s descent into madness in the far reaches of the Congo, lingered in my imagination. This initial concept, accompanied by the information uncovered in my research became a formative base for *Como Lobos*.

Although *Heart of Darkness* is a profound influence on my work, the experience of the primal world is viewed through Marlow’s eyes and told from the vantage point of a witness, a traveler moving through a world that is alien and unfamiliar and the Africans hardly speak, one of the references relating purely to cannibalism.

In *An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad’s “Heart of Darkness,”* Chinua Achebe makes the argument that the book takes a racist approach to Africans, particularly because the Africans hardly speak and when they do, the characterization is savage.

Giving the Comanche and Tonkawa characters in *Como Lobos* a voice became a strong motivation as I wrote. In the story, *People of the Wolf*, three Tonkawa brothers practice tribal

cannibalism as an act of retribution. This is a well-documented practice among the Tonkawa, and I chose to emphasize their motivations, showing the characters as people, human beings engaging in a taboo for reasons and beliefs engrained in their culture, not as mindless, flesh-eating monsters.

In one of my interviews with Dr. Don Frazier, I brought up brutality found in several documented accounts, stating that I uncovered incidents of Comanches killing infants and small children, as in the Legion Valley Massacre. I asked Dr. Frazier, if these men did these things, what would justify their actions and what would essentially be enough to send a warrior to Comanche hell? Dr. Frazier replied that cultural belief systems for the Comanche were different and the mindset of an outsider didn't understand this.

First off, the Comanche were incredibly racist. They called themselves the People and if you weren't a Comanche, you weren't really a person. You didn't have to be born a Comanche, you could be adopted and accepted and you'd be OK, that would make you one of them but it didn't matter if they were dealing with babies or little kids. Ideas of heaven and hell didn't apply to them. The afterlife was just a world like this one but better and each Comanche had a personal belief about his own afterlife. Some might imagine going to a place where the weather's always great and the deer and buffalo roam, others might think about seventy-thousand virgins or what have you. The idea of hell and punishment wasn't a thing and applying those Christian views really isn't fair to them. (Frazier).

Amerindian religion and belief systems are underrepresented and largely ignored. As I wrote, I decided to enhance the world of *Como Lobos* and explore these beliefs. I chose to avoid

describing the world and the Comanche and Tonkawa from the eyes of a white settler but rather to view the world from the vantage point of the characters living in it.

I had a profound experience happen as I neared the completion of *Como Lobos* that inspired me and underscores my need to write. In the book, one of my characters, Captain Richard Daly, is tortured and subsequently killed without finishing a letter he is writing to his estranged wife. A few weeks ago, I had a dream in which I saw Captain Daly's death scene, seeing the character in full detail, the shape of his face, the color of his hair, the texture of his beard and the wounds from his torture. Captain Daly looked at me in the dream and I saw a longing in his eyes, a sad expression imploring me to tell more of his story. When I woke up, I knew that the Captain wanted me to finish the letter to his wife.

I never had a dream in which I saw, much less interacted with one of my characters before but I often hear an internal narrator speaking in my head when I find moments of calm, whether it happens on a long drive or taking my dogs for a walk. This internal storyteller motivates me to write. Although I would love to say that I write to influence the world and enlighten others, those assertions would be disingenuous. I write because I have to, because lines of dialogue drift into my head before I fall asleep and because I see worlds when I close my eyes, and I want to show other people the things I see and the worlds I dream about.

This project has spanned the length of four years, starting with preliminary interviews, research and early story drafts. Over this time, I've endeavored to learn about Native American cultures, including the Comanche, Tonkawa and Lipan Apache and expand my familiarity with the culture and customs of northern Mexico. I have lived along the Texas/Mexico border for the better part of thirty years and my wife and in-laws are from Reynosa, Mexico which supports my connection to Mexican culture and has influenced much of my writing in terms of Mexican

folklore, vernacular and customs. My wife and father-in-law have been proven resources for language, traditions and euphemisms over the course of writing this project.

Although this project is a work of historical fiction, the characters within are not historical figures or intended to be stereotypical representations of different races or ethnic groups. The violence and action depicted in the writing is honest and framed in a historical context, drawing inspiration from documented events. It is my hope that readers will recognize this project as a representation of Texas and Mexico in the nineteenth century, as brutal and bloody as that depiction may be.

This project has been a labor of love and devotion, resulting in years of research and long hours of writing, often spanning late into the night. This process has allowed me to realize that creative writing is not only a means of self-expression but also a method of sharing ideas with others. Writing a work that is gritty and unflinching is crucial in my perspective of telling an honest story.

When I began the Creative Writing program at the University of Texas El Paso, I had envisioned a different novel that I wanted to develop over my time here. While researching an idea for a chapter in that novel, I stumbled on the rich and brutal history of the Comanche people. I knew that I wanted to write about a world grounded in reality and magic, a place where life and death are in a constant battle for balance and ghosts, witchcraft and the spirit world are intermingled. I knew that I wanted to do something with magical realism but I hadn't found the way to fit it into the world. The more stories I write about this world, the more I see it through my character's eyes. I can see the spirits beyond the land of the sun and hear the four winds talking to my characters. Exploring new realities in fiction has deepened my experiences in the

desert with Storm Crow and helped him to grow in depth as a character. This has been a profound experience for me as a writer.

Medicine Shield

Storm Crow wiped his brow.

Red lines crossed his forehead.

He slit open the rabbit's belly and laid out its innards on a rock.

He cut lines down the carcass with his hunting knife.

He slipped his fingers in to the wet incisions—pulling back, peeling off the rabbit's skin.

He tugged and jerked.

He tore off the coat of fur, matted with blood.

He placed the hide down on the rocks next to the entrails.

He would eat the heart and the stomach.

Such a small meal, the wind whispered through the grass.

Perhaps you will starve.

He ignored the voice, stabbing the rabbit with the sharpened end of a stick.

He balanced the dripping red carcass over the flames of his campfire.

Heat licked off the gore. Fire sucked out the animal's fat as it fell on the charred wood.

Blue red coals caught the dripping grease in tiny craters exploding in ash.

The fire failed to comfort Storm Crow, it wavered and bent at the whims of the wind.

Storm Crow kept the fire small, just enough to give him warmth and cook the rabbit. The wind blew its spirit into the fire, transforming it into a large blaze, showing the night and everything in it that the young man was alone. Tomorrow he would begin the long walk through the Chihuahuan Desert with no food, no water and no horse—to walk until the spirits granted him sight.

Father Sun might kill you. The wind spoke again, dangling at the edge of a flame. *The heat of the sky will pull the water from your tongue and fill your mouth with dirt.* The wind beat the flames, slapping against the fire and stoking it, coaxing the flames to rise up and dance like devils mirroring the forms of men clothed in wavering red light fringed with purple edges. Storm Crow picked the meat off the stick. He ignored the wind, staring into the fire as he chewed on the roasted rabbit, swallowing lumps of fear and animal flesh. He savored his meal.

Darkness settled on the earth. The coals in the fire pit hummed the song of cicadas. Fire warmed the youth, blanketing him in orange shadows. Howls and yips filled the faraway air. Somewhere wolves celebrated a kill in a swale of grass glowing blue under the moon. Storm Crow rested with open eyes, staring into starlight that burned white hot against the canopy of the night. His eyes grew heavy. Sleep claimed him but brought no peace. His mind and body turned. Feasting wolves howled at his spirit in fitful dreams.

Dawn split the night.

Storm Crow woke up under a pink sky. Father Sun, still clutching onto dreams of Mother Moon, basking in the predawn bliss of fleeting fantasies, struggling to fall back into a dreamland of stars and clouds, yawned and spread his arms over the world.

The wind snatched out the fire's life sometime deep in the night. It crept into the camp and stole away the light and heat, leaving behind a pile of blackened sticks and animal bones. The cold morning shook Storm Crow awake. He rose from his bed on the hard ground and arranged his camp, leaving his bow and his hunting knife nestled in the roots of a Cottonwood tree. The morning air was quiet. The wolves filled their bellies in the starlight and left the killing grounds, hiding from the day, scurrying into their dens with blood matted muzzles.

The sun lulled in the early dawn, its happiness with the moon only an illusion. Father Sun's understanding that Mother Moon would forever be kept from him on the other side of the sky, spurning his fury to rise up and burn the earth, blasting down through the blue sky, lashing the ground with undulating heat waves.

Storm Crow walked out into the desert, alone—with nothing.

He had no sign, no totem, no *puha* to translate through blood and pain.

You are weak. The wind hid in the nearby hills, shrieking through the dry air, drifting beyond the canyon rocks.

I can see your spirit. I can smell your ghost. It stinks of dead children and a squaw with a sour womb.

Storm Crow walked on. His mind lingered on red memories. His weakness had brought him to the desert. He'd come here for a vision, the way his father had done and his grandfather before him. He came to commune with the spirits the way all men do, starving and suffering. The sun beat down on his head, burning his back, boiling his blood. Shame welled in his belly, reaching up to tear out his tongue, scraping the back of his throat, choking him, turning his head down and blushing his cheeks.

He remembered two boys playing by the Clear Fork of the Brazos.

He saw a boy with his face.

He saw himself and his brother, Grabs-Hare-By-The-Tail.

He saw the yellow-painted faces of Tonkawa scout, lost, starving, crazed with hunger.

Shame twisted inside him.

The Tonkawa scrambled out from the tree line, their bone necklaces rattled against their clavicles, bone striking bone through emaciated skin.

He remembered a boy's shrill cry

He remembered his brother being carried off.

He remembered running away, telling his father.

He saw his father's face and remembered a twisted frown of scorn when the warriors found his brother in clumps of flesh on a smoldering fire pit.

Bones chipping and scratching in Tonkawa teeth.

He remembered a bluebird singing and dew wetting his moccasins.

Storm Crow shook his head, shaking off painful memories with droplets of sweat that stung his eyes as he squinted and looked out on the vast emptiness of the Chihuahuan Desert.

His heartbeat drummed in his temples.

His lips blistered and peeled.

Scum formed on the backs of his teeth.

His shoulders slumped.

His feet shuffled in the dirt.

Are you a coward? The wind whipped and tangled his hair.

I was a boy.

You are still a boy.

Why have you not brought a horse? The wind spoke in the heat of the day. *Are your people not masters of such beasts?* The wind blew hot breath into the young man's face. *Surely such an animal could lift you off your feet and bear you away.*

Storm Crow walked on, ignoring the wind. The wind howled and bit his ear, distracting him from his footpath on the loose rocks. Storm Crow tripped and fell, his chin striking the ground. A flash of black, a glimpse of motion caught in the corner of his eye, the movement of

two rattlesnakes entwined, tied together in a mating dance, slipping and twisting around each other as they turned up the earth. He lifted his face out of the dirt and inched back, his eyes level with the mouths of the breeding snakes. He rolled onto his side, hoping to get far enough away to stand and run. Without warning, without a rattle, Grandfather Snake struck at him. Storm Crow scrambled to get away, the female following her mate's attack. She struck, a vicious hiss of air escaping her lungs as her strike fell short and stabbed into the ground. A pool of venom pumped from her fangs, seeping into the sun cracked earth. Grandfather Snake struck again, the edge of left his fang grazing the young man's ankle. Storm Crow's feet flailed as he scrambled to get away. The back of his hand slapped against a flat rock as he kicked more distance between himself and the tangled serpents. He picked up the rock and threw it at the two snakes, crushing their heads, smashing their skulls under the flat stone. The bodies of the snakes writhed beneath the rock, dancing their wedding dance in the land of the dead.

The wind laughing, blew dirt into the young man's eyes. *You've killed your grandfather and your grandmother. You have suffered and now I will show you.* The wind split itself four ways and became a thing with four names, no eyes and all seeing.

The North Wind beat the war rhythm against the everlasting sky. Thunder cracked, chains of lightning pulling black clouds over the face of the sun. A storm without rain. Vibrations moved through the earth and the air. A drum beat sent currents of power that shook Storm Crow from his feet. He fell on his knees, his skin tingling, the hair bristling at the back of his neck.

A shot rang out in the East Wind, from a white man's gun. Storm Crow looked and saw a boy with hair the color of red clay and a magnificent black horse riding the night. The South

Wind showed him a vision of a man with *his* face, painted black and white. The four winds fought in his hair as he made war and stole women, children, horses and scalps.

In the sky, a red owl cut its shape against the stirring clouds stoked by the breath of the West Wind, two crows perched beneath its wings, facing to the east and west. Storm Crow saw a shield and heard a woman's scream. The shield, adorned with the scalps of a cannibal and a woman's golden hair, decorated with the skins of two rattlesnakes that struck without a sound. He saw the owl painted on buffalo hide, pulsing with life and power.

Dreaming the Sun

Bear-With-Broken-Teeth stood in the shadow of Storm Crow's lodge. Patches of snow surrounded the old man, littering the ground with dozens of white crystal islands, each playing host to spikes of green grass, defiant in rebirth, stabbing up through the receding veil of winter, reaching up to touch the warmth of the sun. His gaze lingered on the melting snow and his thoughts drifted over life, death and suffering.

The grandfather stayed silent, his eyes staring past Storm Crow, looking beyond into nothing and everything as the young man rode into the village. Storm Crow's horse trotted between the tipis of his neighbors, the pony dancing in the mud. The horse seemed to share the warrior's arrogance, kicking mud at the mares and other stallions skulking by. Perhaps it was reversed, maybe the proud stallion blew its breath into the young man and kindled his spirit with the fire of the four winds and the lust to run over open ground. So much like his brother, Bear-With-Broken-Teeth thought of the dead boy often. Ten years after his eldest son was taken by the Tonkawa, murdered and defiled, Bear-With-Broken-Teeth's mind often lingered on Grabs-Hare-By-The-Tail, musing over the boy he was and the man he might have become. A part of him hated Storm Crow for running away and leaving his brother. The other pieces of Bear-With-Broken-Teeth's heart knew that he nearly lost two sons on that horrible day. The old man forgave his youngest son but Storm Crow never could and never would forgive himself for being afraid.

Storm Crow called out to his friends as he entered the camp, waving his bow over his head as he turned the horse in a circle. His eyes blazed and the smile on his face shined with jubilant exhilaration. The carcass of a white-tailed deer draped over the horse's croup, the dead thing's eyes wide, its belly bloated, its tongue lapping the chill from the cold spring air.

Women laughed as they cut the dead deer down from Storm Crow's horse, singing as they drug the doe away to skin off its hide and divide its meat and sinew. One of the women ran her hand over the belly of the blue tongued deer and discovered a fawn coiled in the mother's womb. Bear-With-Broken-Teeth heard the women and recognized the portent.

Storm Crow slid down the side of his horse, smiling as he walked toward his father. The old man waited for his son to come close. Bear-With-Broken-Teeth's face seemed grimmer than most days. He carried a burden behind his eyes, the same look he showed to the world the day Storm Crow rode into the village screaming news about Tonkawa scouts and a missing brother. Fear clung to Bear-With-Broken-Teeth's neck the day he searched for the son carried away by cannibals, fear manifested and realized in the remains of a smoldering campfire hiding the boy's bones in its ashes. Bear-With-Broken-Teeth brought a deep sadness home from the search for Storm Crow's brother, a sorrow that stayed with him long into his old age. The profound suffering of a man that loses a son. In Bear-With-Broken-Teeth's wisdom, he realized that today Storm Crow would finally understand his father.

Storm Crow looked in his father's eyes and felt his own heart grow heavy, shrinking behind his lungs, sinking into the pit of his stomach. A chill washed over his face and his blood ran cold. A woman sobbed inside the tipi, her moans dampened by the thick walls of buffalo hide, climbing up and escaping through the space between the lodge poles, climbing toward the clouds and the wings of birds returning through the southern skies. Storm Crow heard her clearly enough, as did his father. The old man lifted his head and spoke a truth that stabbed through his son's heart.

You would have had a son. Both the child and your woman are gone.

The old man turned away, sparing his son any shame brought by an errant tear. With no words and no understanding of the depth of his own pain, Storm Crow stumbled away from the village, tripping through the mud. Drunk with misery, he found his way to the water's edge and threw himself against the trees. The noise of the river rang in his ears. Again and again, he dashed himself against the trees, bashing his head against their trunks, throwing his shoulders against their unfeeling, unwavering, immoveable mass. Smashing his arms, pummeling the palms of his hands until the bark from the Live Oaks left his body bruised and cut. He did not cry. He had no voice to weep, it shrank with his heart and fell into the sick emptiness churning in his belly. He bit his lip and struck his head again. His vision blurred and he fell on his back.

His eyes fluttered and turned white, his pupils rolling backward to look inside his skull. How long did he lay there by the water, his body slowly sinking in the mud? Long enough for night to fall and the moon to rise and cover him under a canopy of a million spinning stars.

An owl flew between a web of gnarled branches, gliding silently, the shadow of its outstretched wings blocking the pale moonlight, the only sign of its presence as it circled and then perched on a tree limb. The branch creaked as it carried the weight of the enormous bird, the limb fighting to find resilience in the atrophied oak as it struggled to come back to life after the winter. The shadow of the owl turned its head and looked down from the backlit canvas of a March moon. Piamupitz, the owl looked down from a clear cold sky and saw that Storm Crow breathed and bled. Piamupitz watched with yellow, attentive eyes.

Wake up. Piamupitz screeched in a shrill, deliberate voice. She opened her massive wings, flapping them, causing the wind to shake the trees, snapping off branches still frozen from the winter storms. Debris rained down into Storm Crow's eyes. He blinked and turned his head

from side to side, struggling to avoid shards of leaves and tree bark flurrying against his face, splintering behind his eyelids, filling his mouth with leaf litter and sap.

Wake up. The owl called down again. Piamupitz' voice carried down on a raspy breath of cobwebs tainted with the stench of half-digested animals and a smell that reminded Storm Crow of dead bodies left to rot. Wake up and unbraid your plaited hair. Cover yourself in the white mud of the southern shore where the lake drinks the river. Do this, so your people will understand that you carry the spear for your woman and child. Mark your eyes black so that Death will know you and you will recognize Death as your brother and Death will be the brother you have lost and found again. Raise up your young men, the ones un-blooded and hungry. Take the war trail south and I will make your medicine strong.

No one searched for Storm Crow by the water's edge. Bear-With-Broken-Teeth left his son alone with his grief. The old warriors had no words to sooth him, the other young hunters had not learned to speak of such things. The vision of the owl faded with the moon. The rising sun found Storm Crow sitting by the water savoring his pain. His face lacerated and covered in blood, his arms and torso mottled with sickly shades of blue, black and purple. The suffering in his body mirrored his spirit.

He forced himself to stand, his legs bruised and trembling. He took slow steps at first, shuffling through the muddy bottoms by the water's edge. He gnashed his teeth and stretched his back, lifting his shoulders as he made himself walk straight. He raised his bloodied head high as he crossed the camp's perimeter, his arrival heralded by three barking dogs and the gasp of a woman carrying a basket. He spoke no words as he entered his tipi. The scent of his wife's hair lingered in the buffalo-hide walls. Dreaming-The-Sun—he wanted to forget her name and the name of the nameless child that he dreamed would grow up to look like him.

Dreaming-The-Sun, with her long black hair the color of night and all things he desired, all that he ever desired on earth and under the sky. His spirit forever tangled in that black hair and the memories of her laughter and her kisses in the long, dark night. He bit down, grinding his teeth to chalk, closing his eyes and turning his head as he held on to the thought and absorbed the sad, empty pain that hit him in the gut.

Storm Crow snatched up his bow and kicked away the tipi's hide flap, stepping out to the morning light that greeted him with bright, blinding rays. He sat down in front of his lodge and studied his bow in the light. The curved Osage Orange wood took on a deep amber hue in the sun. The inner band of the bow, between the tuft of black horse hair at the top of the arch and the patch of coyote fur wrapped around the weapon's lower half hid tiny pictograms of a bear, a star and a rattlesnake jaw. Storm Crow rubbed his thumb against the Orange wood, measuring a two-inch space above the bony snake mouth. He cradled his bow in his lap and spent the remaining day carving the symbol of an owl to sit eye level when he nocked an arrow.

The Messenger

The women sang as they stripped buffalo hides from the lodge poles. Barking dogs ran from gangs of naked children, dodging and darting between pack mules and horses tied to travois. Girls too old for the games of their brothers and sisters tended to animals and packed dried meat and blankets for their journey. Boys wanting to be men helped their fathers gather arrows and sharpen axes. The spring moon would soon swell and bathe the nighttime trails to the south in pools of light leading them behind their sleeping enemies.

Prairie Song tied a strip of cording around the poles of her husband's lodge. She looked up from her work and watched Yellow Feather navigate between the dust of falling posts and a group of boys screaming in triumph as they captured a puppy and held it up in the air, worshipping the tiny creature with innocent hearts. The children laughed, taking turns stroking the dog's fur. One of the smaller boys screamed then giggled as the tiny animal licked his face.

Yellow Feather's son was with the boys. He was older, slightly taller than the other children gathering around the tiny dog. He loitered in the back of the group, occasionally looking around to see if any of the men noticed him there. He glanced over his shoulder and then back to the dog that was being passed over a dozen raised hands, each child wanting a chance to pull the animal close, to feel its warmth and the wetness of its tiny black nose against his cheek.

The boy chewed on his fingers as he watched the dog being passed back and forth. The animal whimpered and the boy caught a glimpse of its frightened wet eyes. He pushed his way through the other children and reached for his chance to hold the dog. The unmistakable feeling of Yellow Feather's hand squeezing his arm made his blood run cold. He shuttered and turned to see his father, the boy's face hot with shame.

Yellow Feather looked at his son then at the dog. Come with me. There is no time for play.

The boy followed his father away from the screaming children and their four-legged idol. They sat together at the edge of the camp, next to a tall, pinto horse wearing Yellow Feather's saddle, far away from the games of youth, just close enough for Prairie Song to steal glimpses of her husband and her only son as she busied herself alongside the other women tearing down the camp.

Are you angry with me? The boy was too afraid to look at his father's face.

No. Yellow Feather pressed a piece of red clay in his hand and spit, working his thumb against his palm until the clay moistened in the saliva. He dipped his fingers in the mud and painted two red lines on his son's face, just under the boy's eyes.

There is a time for games. Yellow Feather spoke softly, hoping to ease his son's embarrassment. This is my fastest horse. Yellow Feather reached up and touched the animal's neck, unintentionally marking the horse's neck with a red palm print. Storm Crow is riding south to raid. Take my horse and bring him the message that Yellow Feather and his people will join him.

The boy's heart froze when he heard the name Storm Crow on his father's tongue. Storm Crow, the great war chief that pulls Apache arrows from the sky and hurls them backward into his enemies' hearts. The boy trembled and smiled proudly with bright beaming eyes.

Yellow Feather tied a knife around his son's neck. The leather loop sewn into a buffalo hide sheath dangling down to the boy's waste. There is food and water on the horse. Take your bow. After you give Storm Crow my message, stay with the other young men. Tell them that you are Yellow Knife's son and wait for me to find you.

The boy smiled and stood up. His father smiled back and rested his hands on the boy's shoulders.

Clay tried to sleep under his hat. Normally he'd be drunk by now, napping in the shade of a mesquite tree with a full belly and a bottle of whiskey. Today, he barely had enough money to eat and couldn't afford to lift his spirits with even the cheapest firewater the saloon had to offer. How far away was the nearest saloon anyway—five, six miles maybe? Clay's mind was still foggy, blurry with memories of cigar smoke brothels and the laughter of whores taunting him from the last town he'd been run out of, kicked down and chased out in a haze of flying fights and broken glass. Where was his horse? Down on his luck, hung over and without a Goddamn horse.

This is getting old Güero. Joaquin's voice complained from a patch of roots breaking out from other side of the dry riverbank, his body tucked beneath a shelf of knotted vines protruding from the wall of the dry wash. Clay lifted his hat just enough to see his friend nestled in the crevice.

I'm tired of sleeping next to rattlesnakes. We should take off, go south, ride down into Mexico and find the ocean.

What for? Clay spit his question in the dirt.

Serio Güero. I can't do it anymore. The hard riding, the fighting. I worry about the devil catching up to us for the things we've done. I pray for us Güero, especially for you.

How we supposed to eat? Clay asked lazily, resenting that he had to ignore the call of sleep to speak with his friend, disappointed that Joaquin found a way to toss God in the conversation. Clay stretched his back and noticed the growling sickness of an empty stomach, sour and whisky soaked.

We can rob a bank along the way. Joaquin's voice was firm, confident even as he adjusted his position to make himself more comfortable under the jagged roots. We can go south through Bexar, maybe Laredo. We could knock over something there and get over the river. A couple of weeks later we could be on a beach surrounded by señoritas. Don't worry, you have enough money and it doesn't matter how handsome you are Guapo. Joaquin laughed and shifted on his side. The earth of the dry riverbed, still cool, crumbled when he pressed his back against it. We'll find you a princess that's loca for ugly gringos. Clay's friend laughed and pressed his ear to the ground, blocking the sunlight with an outstretched arm hanging awkwardly over his face.

Dreams of women stung Clay with a lingering poison that started in his gut and worked up into his chest, coiling around his heart. He hid under his hat entertaining painful fantasies. He thought about holding up a bank with Joaquin and making a break for the border. They could blow all their money on tequila and beautiful, brown skinned women. He thought about lithe, naked forms entwining with his, delicate hands caressing his scarred, weathered body. His heart pumped harder as he imagined pinning a woman down and feeling her legs wrap around his waist. In his mind, he saw everything he wanted in life in the body of a soft, wet goddess.

His lust was a snake, a viper that turned and bit him, injecting his daydreams with the venom of reality. Women didn't desire Clay the way he desired them. He was an ugly, ragged man with scars and missing teeth. His body was lean and wiry. His skin had been blistered by a house fire that took away his parents and brothers and left him an orphan. The only women he had known were prostitutes that closed their eyes in resignation when he climbed on top of them. Sex was something he paid for, a quick frenzied act immediately followed by a sense of shame. Sometimes that embarrassment turned into anger, especially if he caught a whore casting a

judging eye over his body while he rushed to dress. Sometimes, usually when he was drinking, he'd beat on a whore if she laughed. Maybe that's what happened over in town last night? His head hurt and it was hard to remember.

Clay's goddess faded, the curves of her form mutated into the limbs of every prostitute that had bedded down with him out of obligation. Her soft smile turned into a sinister grin. Her moans of lust became mocking laughter, her black hair turned to crow's feathers. Clay's desire shifted too. As his dream woman revealed her true form his hand slid down to his waist and rested on the wooden grip of his pistol. He ran his thumb along the barrel of the metal phallus and blended fantasies of sex with murder. He was good at killing. He had killed at least six Indians and a few Mexicans. He was pretty sure he killed a white man in Austin but he couldn't remember. He remembered beating the son of a bitch till his face was bloody. Clay thought the fight was over a woman but the memory was foggy and he couldn't be certain. Women were always trouble, worthless harpies that scratched at a man's soul. He wrapped his fingers around his gun and exhaled, trying to push the temptations out with his breath.

Where the hell are we? Jesus Christ Joaquin, you hearing me? Clay lifted his hat and glared at his friend, his eyes squinting as he tried to see if Joaquin was still awake.

We still close to that town?

What did I tell you about saying the name of Jesus, cabron? You want to give us more bad luck?

Clay bit the peeling skin on his lips. Where the hell is my horse?

No se vato.

We got any Goddamn water?

You need some holy water Güero. From the church.

Damn it Joaquin! I'm tired of ya talking about Jesus and Sunday all the time. You think you're any better than me with all that church talk?

It's because I'm saved. I have the indelible mark.

What?

Bautismo, cabron. Como Jesucristo.

All you Mexicans are the same. You think you got something special tween you and God. What is it? You think Jesus is Mexican? I been in church before and seen him in paintings. Jesus got yellow hair and blue eyes. Don't look like no Mexican to me.

He's got a Mexican name cabron.

Indelible mark my ass. You're an indelible liar, that's what you are. An indelible son of a bitch too. Where's the damn water?

How do I know Güero? It's probably gone with your horse. Bet he ran off with your canteen to teach you a lesson for always treating him bad.

Damn it. I'd kill for a drink of cold water.

Joaquin laughed at Clay's frustration and settled back behind the overhanging roots protruding from the earthen walls of the dry wash. Sooner or later, all men will betray you, Clay knew that as he watched his old friend struggle to block out the sun with his forearm. They betray you over money, women, a misunderstanding, even a bad joke. Sometimes they aren't even really friends at all. They just bide their time pretending until they can get something from you, then it's over. The man you thought was your friend sinks a knife in your back. The trick is, you don't get too close. You never let yourself think you have a real friend in this world because the second you do, you're done for. Clay wondered what slight insult or incident of

friendly competition would be the turning point for Joaquin. They'd ridden together for a long time but lately his mouth was getting the better of him.

Listen. You hear that?

What is it now Güero?

Somebody's coming.

Clay rolled over on all fours and scampered up the wall of the dry wash, a beat-up prairie dog peeking his head out of hole.

Where's my damn rifle?

You probably left it on your horse with everything else you own.

Shit, lend me yours.

What for?

Somebody's riding this way, moving fast too. Come on, give me your rifle.

Joaquin crawled out of his hole and joined his friend peering out of the dry wash, their chins level with the ground. A lone rider on a spotted horse rode toward them. The rider was small, probably just a boy. He hung on the horse's neck and the leaned into the wind as the animal trampled up a storm of dust behind them.

Looks like a Ind'n. Give me your rifle. Clay's blue eyes blazed with the fire of white Jesus. He smiled at the thought of putting a round through a mounted Comanche.

¿Otra vez? Enough with this. What are you going to do? Rob this joto?

I bet I can hit him.

You can't hit him.

I bet ya a dollar I can.

You don't have a dollar cabron.

Just lend me your damn rifle.

Joaquin handed Clay the gun and watched as his friend checked the breach and loaded a ball in the weathered Trade rifle. Clay smiled wide with patches of black standing in place of missing teeth and eyes alight with lust of foul deeds. He nodded his head and rocked with excitement as he packed the load with the gun's ramrod.

You just watch and see what your Mexican Jesus shows you about this.

Clay laid the rifle prone on the earth, closing his left eye as he sighted in the rider.

What are you doing Clay?

I told you I can hit him.

Why do you want to do that?

Cuz I aint got a damn horse, I'm thirsty and I aint walking through the fucking desert. Now watch, cuz you're gonna owe me a dollar.

Clay whistled the way a man whistles at a dog and dropped the hammer. A loud crack and a plume of black smoke were the only signs of what was coming to the boy and they came with far too little notice to avoid the lead ball that tumbled through the wind and penetrated his shoulder. The boy fell out of the saddle. The horse must have felt his rider slip. The spotted pony slowed to a trot and then paused, finally stopping and turning its head back to look for the boy that had fallen down in the dust.

Hell yeah! Clay shouted and shook the rifle in the air. I told ya I'd hit him! Looks like my luck's done changing. I think that Ind'n pony's gun broke too. Look, it aint run off.

Clay scrambled out of the dry wash and walked toward the horse. The pinto snorted and stomped its forelegs against the ground.

It's all right. I'm gonna be easy on ya. Clay held out his arms and inched toward the horse, noticing the animal's uneasiness with the smell of gunpowder. He looked back and saw Joaquin approaching. Clay held out the rifle and waved it up and down, gesturing for Joaquin to come forward and take it from his hand.

Go on, take back your rifle. I don't think he likes the scent of powder.

Joaquin grabbed the weapon and tucked his head under the rifle strap, slinging the gun over his shoulder.

Best see to that Ind'n. Not sure if I kilt him or not.

Pinche bastardo. Joaquin spat on the ground and turned to inspect the fallen rider. The boy was flat on his back, his head bleeding from the fall, his eyes fluttering as he struggled to stay awake. The pain in his shoulder fighting to take attention away from his fractured skull.

Clay inched up on the horse and grabbed hold of a small, buffalo hide loop attached to the horse's neck. The animal didn't flinch. The horse lowered its head and smelled the ground.

Damn pony's tame. Clay snatched the boy's waterskin from the saddle and poured the warm, damp water over his face. The water smelled and tasted like leather and washed the blistered fragments of dead skin off his lips. Clay leaned sideways and rested his weight against the horse with one hand holding the waterskin and the other still wrapped in the loop around the pinto's neck.

Think he's Comanch? Clay asked and swilled a mouthful of water back and forth behind his teeth.

No se. Joaquin frowned and shrugged his shoulders.

Ask him something in Mexican. I heard some of em can speak it.

Joaquin poked the boy's stomach with the end of the rifle.

¿Como te llamas?

The boy gnashed his teeth and looked up at the men defiantly, blood pooling behind his head underneath a mass of black hair spread over the ground like a huge, crushed spider.

Dime tu nombre.

Joaquin crouched next to the boy and examined the knife hanging around his neck. He cradled the beaded sheath in his hand, studying the ornamental leather and the buffalo bone hilt attached to the hidden blade.

¿Qué es esto?

The boy glared at Joaquin, his eyes had stopped fluttering and were wild and dreaming of murder. Joaquin smiled and tore the knife away in a quick, violent motion—snapping the leather loop around the boy's neck. Joaquin rose up to examine the knife in the sunlight, the beadwork glowing with color. The boy went wild, kicking and biting, desperately trying to grab the knife back with his one good arm. Joaquin slammed the boy down and placed his boot on his chest.

¿Quieres morir?

The boy cursed him in an unknown tongue.

I'm guessing he don't speak Mexican after all. Clay laughed and watched Joaquin kick the boy hard in the ribs. The boy curled in a ball with his elbow tucked against his side. Joaquin grabbed the boy's ankles and pulled off his moccasins. He slapped one of the moccasins on the ground and placed his foot alongside it, measuring it for a possible fit.

What'd you ask him anyway? His shoe size? Clay looked around in the dust, pondering the disparity in the length of Joaquin's boot and the small moccasin beside it.

You think you're gonna fit your feet into them little Ind'n booties? Jesus Christ, I'll be damned Joaquin if you aint the oddest Mexican I ever known. Come over here and hold this horse. I wanna take a look at him.

Joaquin tucked the moccasins in his belt and stood up slowly, taking his time following Clay's instructions as to make it clear that Clay wasn't giving any orders, at least not to him. He walked over to the horse and patted it on the neck, speaking soft Spanish words in the pinto's ear.

How old you think he is?

Es un Niño.

You're sure as shit right about that. It don't look he's old enough to grow hair on his sack.

Clay kicked up dirt and meandered over to the boy. He clucked his tongue and looked down at the boy who lay prone on the earth drawing ragged, shallow breaths.

You took a hard spill there kid. Sorry bout all this.

The boy struggled to breathe. Clay put his thumbs through his belt loops and hitched up his pants high on his waste. He sniffled and looked off on the horizon.

I wouldn't of shot ya if it wasn't on account of my horse running off. Can't be out here with no horse and no water. You Ind'ns understand that. Yall kill white folks like me all the time.

The boy coughed and his breath faded.

Clay looked away and watched Joaquin fawning over the pinto.

Well, I suppose we ought to do him in fore his people come around.

You shot him, you finish it cabron.

Ah hell. Guess you're right.

Clay pulled his pistol and fired two shots in the boy's chest.

Nevia

Many-Arrows saw a shape on the horizon, a tiny lump breaking the flatness of the terrain, rising up from the surface of the horse worn trail down to Mexico. Something about the shape on the ground made the young warrior uneasy. He reached back and touched the stock of the old Baker rifle hung over his shoulder, the gun attached to a rope of golden cordage braided from the epaulets of dead soldiers. A plume of turkey feathers dangled from the rifle's barrel, the feathers died green, red, yellow and blue to match the beadwork wrapped around the gunstock. Many-Arrows pulled his arm out of the braided rifle strap and held the Baker level at his waste. He looked down at the dead boy and then back to the patches of chaparral hemming the trace. He raised the rifle to his shoulder and closed his left eye, scanning the green brush, looking for a glimpse of movement or an out of place shadow. When nothing moved, he made the call of a wounded coyote and waited to see if some fool Apache or Tonkawa would answer back from the thicket. After a long moment, Many-Arrows lowered the rifle and looked down on the dead body once more.

Yellow Feather's son stared at the sky. Blood pooled in the dirt, the puddle grew wide and then split into a dozen tiny streams forming the crude shape of a war bonnet behind the boy's head. Many-Arrows recognized the face of the child that played with the dogs in the village and tended Yellow Feather's horses and he felt a great, empty feeling open up inside him, a deep sadness that seized his heart and squeezed it until it ached. He wiped away a tear with the back of his hand and cursed the enemy that shot a hole in the boy. The warrior cried for the boy and for the pain of the boy's father and for the indignity done at the moment of his death. The boy's moccasins had been taken, a sign that enemies counted coup of the boy's body at least three times. The boy's scalp was gone and his spirit doomed to wander as a ghost.

Many-Arrows walked his horse in a wide circle around the boy's body, counting tracks in the earth. A horse with iron feet walked off to the south hours ago, its tracks shallow and fading. An unshod pony ran through the circle at a gallop and then slowed and returned. Boot prints met the pony's tracks. Many-Arrows recognized the muddled sign of a man cutting out a strange horse. A second, shod horse ran to the east with the unshod pony following behind. Horse thieves, maybe Apaches but the men wore boots, not moccasins. Probably whites or Mexicans. Many-Arrows walked over to the boy's body and knelt down by his side, resting the butt of the Baker rifle on the ground and leaning his weight against the barrel.

Many-Arrows drew in a deep breath and sighed. Damn *Tejanos*. They could have left your spirit free.

He ran his hand over the boy's face, closing his eyes. A thousand thoughts raced through the young man's mind. Should he leave the body and follow the horse thieves? Should he rush back and meet Yellow Feather or ride ahead and catch up with Storm Crow and the other men taking the war trail? He thought of the boy's ghost watching him from the chaparral and his heart thumped hard in his chest. Many-Arrows touched the dead boy's shoulder and looked for signs of shadows moving in the brush. A crow cawed from a nearby mesquite tree.

I will take you to your father.

Yellow Feather led a band of forty men and a host of horses, women and dogs riding south to raid with Storm Crow. He rode a white horse with red circles ringing its eyes and seven Golden Eagle feathers braided in its mane. Three red horse shoe shapes marked the pony's left hindquarter, signs of successful raids. Yellow Feather hoped to paint a dozen more marks on his war pony before coming back from Mexico. He sat high upon his painted horse, his long hair plated and threaded with feathers from the same race of eagles that leant their plumage to his

pony's mane. Three vertical, amber bands of pigment painted the man's face from his forehead to his chin. He rode in silence, stoic as he followed the sign left by Storm Crow's war party and his own scouts riding ahead to reconnoiter and follow the tracks made by his son. He suppressed a smile from breaking his war face as he envisioned his son and the swift pinto carrying the message to Storm Crow that Yellow Feather and his warriors took the trail south. Behind him, forty painted men rode in single file chanting a primal hymn. Behind the warriors, women and children followed. Some of the women carried papooses, others had children still growing in their bellies or scolded older boys that rode naked atop horses with spirits as wild and free as their own. Behind the women and children, pack animals carried dried meat and dragged travois over the ground. In the rear of the procession, captive children pulled lodge poles and herded over a hundred head of horses.

The silhouette of a rider broke the monotony of dust and scrub brush skirting the horizon. The rider waved his arm and called out, his words faint and distant, swallowed by the wind. Yellow Feather raised his hand and stopped his horse, the sudden halt of momentum spreading backward among the warriors, women, children and slaves in a chain reaction causing some of the horses to stumble and bump into each other. The chant of the traveling song died on the lips of the travelers. Some of the men behind Yellow Feather grumbled and talked. A few of them took up arms, raising bows and rifles. A young man on a chestnut colored horse whooped and broke free of the formation, charging forward to meet the rider coming forth from the hazy wall of heat waves that danced in the distance, taking on the form of some strange and ancient magical barrier. Another warrior, eager with curiosity, clicked his tongue and followed, his horse darting forward and shrinking as the pony chased down the other horse and rider.

The vanguard reached the approaching rider and abruptly turned their mounts, flanking the rider on each side, escorting him back to the main body of the procession, their horses moving at a casual pace, the rider from the horizon holding onto an object draped over the neck of his horse, taking care not to let it slide and fall. Yellow Feather squinted, his eyes fighting to distinguish the forms in the distance. The shapes of the riders grew as they approached, revealing the marks of their horses, the colors of their war paint and the limp body of Yellow Feather's son draped over Many-Arrows' pony.

A warrior on a blue roan skidded his pony to a halt. The horse whinnied and huffed as the man jerked back the reins, turning the horse's head sharply to the left. The warrior swore under his breath as Prairie Song's horse tripped, colliding with the roan's flank. The man turned his head and glared at Prairie Song, his black eyes burning beneath the brim of his buffalo horn headdress. Men whistled and called to each other and the horned rider turned away from Prairie Song, shifting his weight on the roan's back as he leaned to the left and right, attempting to see what caused the band to stop.

Prairie Song guided her horse away from the irritated warrior, working her way up toward her husband as dozens of men broke from the single file procession and rode ahead toward Yellow Feather's position. Men began to yell and swear, some of them calling out war chants and circling their horses, eager to fight something unseen and unknown. A naked boy rode past Prairie Song, he stood up on the back of his horse, curious to see what was happening. Prairie Song recognized him, he was a child that often played with her son, racing horses and trick riding. The boy craned his neck forward, his eyes opened wide and his mouth fell open. He fell back, sitting on his horse, a blank look washed over his face and he began to cry. The boy turned his horse and rode to the side of the procession where a dozen children congregated

on horseback. He sobbed and the other children began crying, a contagion of sorrow spreading among them.

Prairie Song felt a weight growing inside her belly. Her hands shook and her mouth dried up. Fear struck her heart, a phantom knife stabbing into her chest, carving a trench from her breast to her pelvis. A place inside her, deep between her legs and below her abdomen tingled and she felt a sensation like something had been tugged from her groin and cut away. Her body trembled as she pushed her knees against her horse and rode forward to find her husband kneeling on the ground, holding the body of their son in his arms. She heard Yellow Feather's bellows of pain and echoed them with her own tortured screams. She fell off the back of her horse and crawled toward Yellow Feather and the body of their son. She tore out clumps of her hair, screeching as she scraped open the flesh on her knees, dragging herself over shards of errant rocks. She threw herself on the body and then on the shoulder of her husband and then on the dirt, beating the ground with her fists. Warriors saw her grief and became enraged, splintering off in groups to find and kill whoever had taken the boy's scalp. The other women began to wail and cut themselves, bashing their heads with rocks. Prairie Song took her skinning knife from her belt and cut her face and slashed at her breasts. When the pain inside her took over and possessed her completely, she sat with her hands in her lap and cut off two of her fingers. The women of the band threw themselves on the ground, shearing their hair with knives. Dogs howled and terrified children milled about the mourning women, crying their own tears of terror and bewilderment.

Forty men rode south, spreading out over the valleys and low rolling hills. Curses and demands for blood rose up to the sun and the sky. Father Sun looked down on the People as they wept and saw the lost spirit of a boy wandering the earth now and forever.

The Dead Men

You think that kid was a Comanche? Clay huffed as he spoke, his breath short from rocking in the saddle, urging the stolen horse to move faster.

I told you I don't know. He might be. Probably was. *Pinche jotos* are crawling all over this place.

I don't think he was. He wasn't wearing no fancy regalia.

Why would he need to be dressed up fancy to make him a Comanche?

Potter told me he'd seen a bunch of em doing some kind of a war dance once. Said they was all dressed up, turning about in circles. Spinning round and round, one of em kept blowing on a whistle.

A whistle?

Yeah, some kind of a long slide whistle, like one of them Swanee whistles they was trading to Indn's when we was up north. That's what Potter told me. You remember Potter? Old boy with a limp and a long scar over his eye? Told me he'd seen a whole bunch of them Comanches before, all dressed up in colorful paint and feathers. They was hopping around, banging on drums and blowing on whistles. I suppose they ought of been some sort of flutes now I'm thinking on it.

Where did Potter see that?

Trading post up on the Santa Fe Trail. Potter told me how a whole posse of em rode in one day carrying loads of buffalo hides and a herd of ponies for trade. Said they seen some other Indn's and started acting real pissed off. Said the other ones saw em and left real quick. Took off without swapping any of their goods. Said them Comanches took to trading pelts for guns and lead, then got all dressed up and started dancing and making noise.

What else did that *mentiroso* tell you?

Old Potter had all sorts of stories. He told me how he worked on a ranch up there and learned to speak Mexican. Said he got sick of punching cows so he started helping some of them Mexican *Comanchero* types at that trading post. One time he told me how those Comanches came up there with a little girl and tried to trade her. Said they was going on in Mexican about killing folk down in Texas. Told him how they rode in on a homestead all whooping and hollering then burned the whole place down. You know them Comanches take little kids. Unless they fuss too much, then they're like to smash em up against a tree. Potter said he heard of them painting up little ones to look like baby Ind'ns. Braiding their hair and rubbing pecan shells all over their skin to taint em dark. They stole a little girl down in Bexar and stained her hair black with a mixture of tallow and coal. Potter said they ransomed her back to her daddy after a spell. Time he got her back her tongue was all twisted up talking Ind'n language and she couldn't speak American anymore.

So what happened after those Comanches got dressed up and started dancing?

Potter said they left after a while. Took to their ponies and headed off in the direction them other ones got off to. Said he figured they ran off to kill them other Ind'ns nested up in the mountains.

Clay swore and struck his boot against the pinto's side. The pony lurched, threatening to break into a run. The horse flinched, confused by the white man's kicks.

Let's go, you dumb fuckin horse. Come on! The pony stomped and snorted. I thought this damn thing was broke right. Don't know how that little Ind'n pecker was riding it so fast.

Clay grabbed his hat in his hand and held it tight as he ran the back of his forearm across his brow. Sweat dripped from his forehead, stinging his eyes with fluttering, wet kisses. Clay

squinted and shook his head the way a dog shakes off water. Something flashed in the corner of his vision. He closed his eyes trying to bring up tears to flush out the sweat. He winced and saw another flash, a tiny sunspot pulsing bright, then disappearing.

You see that shit?

Joaquin rode up beside the man squirming on the back of the Comanche pony. See what?

Just saw a flash up on that hill, Clay wound his hand in the reins and steadied the pinto.

You've got sweat in your eyes, *Güero*.

I saw a goddamn light. We need to get the hell on.

The two men sat their horses and scanned the hillside.

There look, you see that?

Two silver flashes blinked from a nearby hillside and burned away in tiny, orange red dots.

Mierda.

Joaquin reached across from his horse and grabbed the pinto by the reins before turning his own mount in the opposite direction of the flashing lights on the hillside. He started his horse in a slow trot, leading the pinto alongside until the stolen pony gave into instinct following Joaquin's horse, the urge to run with one of its own kind stronger than the fear of the man on its back.

You think they found the kid?

Probably.

Shit. We need to get out of here quick.

Andale, vamanos.

Clay slammed his boot heel against the pinto's side.

Get a move on, damn it!

The riders brought their horses to a quick trot, then a fast lope growing into a full gallop and an all-out run for their lives.

Give My Love to Emily

My Dearest Emily,

I don't know where to begin. I have seen so many wondrous things to tell you about in my sojourn upon the frontier yet I struggle to write this letter, the way I always struggle. Time and again, I sit down to put ink to parchment and I find myself bereft of words. How many nights have we been apart, you alone in an empty house and me, here in a vast and cunning wilderness that seems eager to take a man's life for the smallest insurrections against nature? The land here is beautiful yet dangerous. The rolling hills near our home have long since flattened and plateaued into endless fields of high, tawny grass. Here, the sun has no mercy on the land. Only cacti and rattlesnakes thrive...

Captain Russell Daly sat on the edge of a rocky outcrop overlooking the great, empty wilderness of the Edwards Plateau. He studied the low stony hills that dipped and rose on fringes of miles of tall, yellow grass. He noted how the land climbed and flattened and cracked open into deep canyons hiding ancient streams and green, stagnant bodies of water. He felt the urge to sketch his impressions of the scenery and stopped himself, trying to concentrate on the deeply profound and frustrating task of writing a letter to his wife.

He tapped the nib of his pen against the journal page hoping to coax out some shy sentiment, some poetry to manifest from the ether, seeping out long lines of ink soaking into the vellum. The golden nib tattooed a pattern of tiny dots and a small inkblot on the page resembling a tobacco stain. Every time he sat down to write a letter to his wife he ran short on inspiration. His words felt trite and contrived. The confessions of his lovesick heart devolved into observations about the weather or notes on terrain, abstract thoughts, distractions and

misdirection. He found every excuse to avoid telling his wife how much he loved her, using his time to write paraphrased incident reports or supply lists. Dozens of incomplete letters filled his brown, leather journal. He never finished a letter, never got far enough to sign his name with love and promises of coming home. He left the bottom halves of pages as blank white fields or scrawled maps below his prose. Sometimes he filled in empty spaces with notes on skirmishes and descriptions of the men he'd killed. He devoted a dozen pages to character studies of different Comanches and Kiowas who impressed him. His rudimentary drawings gave the facial profiles the characteristics of bizarre caricatures. In the corners of these pages he wrote footnotes about each man: *Comanche warrior, mid-thirties, two eagle feathers in his hair, wore a hair-pipe breastplate decorated with red and black beads. Kiowa Chief, early-fifties, yellow war paint, bone handle tomahawk.* In other pages he marked receipts of goods and ammunition. Lately, Daly used the spare pages from his journal to form decks of makeshift playing cards, or sketch tiny burlesque dancers kicking their legs over the corner of the pages. If he dog-eared a page and drew a third leg on the dancer, he could fold the edge of the paper and make her leg move up and down, timing the steps of a chorus line. Such was how the Captain passed the time when he contemplated his love for his wife, dawdling, fidgeting, finding excuses for stealing his thoughts away from Emily.

Had it been a year already? It was a hot day when he left. It's always hot in Texas, and gauging the month by the temperature wasn't an easy thing. Green hills shined like emeralds around Fredericksburg on the afternoon he left, blue bonnets popping up in the fields, playing hide and seek behind long blades of grass, swaying in the breeze. An ordinary day, hot and bright, late spring with summer on its heels. A day like every other day, waiting for the long, searing summer to rise up and hold dominion over the land and all living things suffering under

the sun. That day, Captain Russell Daly loaded his Walker Colts and packed his horse, cinching the saddle and his bedroll with no more noise than a dead man in a churchyard grave.

It wasn't her fault. She was suffering too; better men understood that. A good husband holds his wife, picks her up when she falls. Daly couldn't do it. He couldn't look in her eyes or wipe away the tears trailing down her dusty cheeks making tiny, gray rivers. She looked too much like her. Every time he looked at his wife he saw the face of his daughter and knew she was never coming back. Somehow, for some reason he blamed Emily for it all. If he'd never met her, never loved her, never married her, never even knew her at all, there'd have been no little girl to fall in love with, to watch wither away and die. Daly hated himself for loving his wife. He had a sickness, the kind that twists in a man's guts filling him with a sad, hungry feeling that never goes away.

He promised himself he'd send a letter home from San Antonio. He spent three days in that dusty town, drinking, resting and resupplying without posting any mail.

When he got to Austin he sent correspondence on Indian depredations and conflict reports, long dispatches rich in detail. He copied topographical maps and charted water sources. He forwarded three dossiers on hostile activities to his commanding officers but failed to stamp a simple missive to his wife.

Almost a year gone. Days coalesced into weeks that lengthened and matured into long, grueling months of tracking Comanches, fighting and shooting. Within a fortnight, Daly and his rangers hung a trio of horse thieves and fell into two running gun fights with a different band of hostiles following the Comanche trace down to old Mexico. Something big was happening. Daly might not have the repeated luxury of musing over his journal for some time. If his luck turned south with the Comanches, he might never have the chance to write her again at all. He

thought about his daughter and placed his pen in the empty region of the page below the drying ink.

Emily, I'm sorry. Sorry for it all.

Love Always,

Russell

Daly tore the page out of the journal, folding it neatly in thirds and sliding it into his breast pocket.

No more bullshit. You're gonna have to send this one. Daly glanced over his journal and slapped the cover of the book shut.

Los Diablos Tejanos

Ten white men moved under the bright sun. They rode west, the trees gradually shrinking to sagebrush as the grass burned brown. The green of the world died, fields of yellow vegetation sprouted patches of saw grass and prickly pears. Islands of tangled mesquite trees teased false promises of water hidden behind facades of rigid, gray bark.

The rangers buried their cookfires on the prairie, shoveling dirt over smoldering coals, pouring out cups of left-over coffee in the bushes. They buried their shit with their garbage, covering their sign, then moving miles in silence and pitching cold camps under the cover of night. They watered their horses in dried riverbeds whenever chance allowed it. Above them, the dawn broke each morning giving way to the long-lasting day where the Texas sky was endless and blue.

The riders moved in a serpentine line, squirming and turning over tight trails that hemmed the hillsides, the slopes ever threatening to trip the horses on loose rocks and send the riders tumbling down. The wilds of west Texas mocked the rangers, pricking them with cactus thorns and scaring their animals with slithering rattlesnakes and poor footholds, taunting them with threats of falling to a mounted death, crushed by their own horses.

Captain Daly kept his war face tightly snarled in the presence of his men. Daly's rangers were fighters, rough men, killers with a few decent Christians scattered among them. Daly lifted his left arm and gave the signal for his men to stop. Lines of smoke rose up from a distant hillside forming a mirage of black waves against the afternoon sky.

Daly held his closed fist in the air, waiting in silence for the column of riders to halt. Taking care not to move his head from one side to another, he surveyed the chaparral and shallow ravines for any signs of an ambush. He moved his right hand to his side until his palm

rested on the grip of his Walker Colt. The smooth grain of the wood reminded him of who he was and what he could do. The cold steel piece had spat lead into the backs of Indians and Mexicans all over Texas and left holes in men, women and children as far down as the Rio Grande. He cocked the hammer with his thumb and slid the nine-inch barrel out of the holster.

Lieutenant Hobbes rode up beside the captain. He spoke in a low voice just behind Daly's left shoulder.

I mark it about two miles southwest. It's black so it's still burning.

Daly nodded.

Move scouts up and clear out these bushes. Make sure we aren't riding into a trap.

Hobbes nodded and gave the order. Three men checked their weapons and dismounted. Sergeant Taylor, a tall man hiding his eyes under a filthy gray plantation hat wore a brace of Colt Paterson revolvers strapped around his waist and kept a pair of matching Walker Colts holstered on the saddle of his horse. He slid off the back of his pony and brought the .44 caliber Walkers with him. Taylor knocked back the hammers of his pistols with his thumbs and walked ahead of the other rangers, holding the massive handguns shoulder high as he crept forward, searching the terrain, peering into pockets of gnarled mesquite and creosote bushes. Two men armed with Kentucky rifles dismounted and followed Taylor on foot.

Two horses crashed through the brush carrying riders that met the rangers with wide eyes screaming promises of good intentions.

Don't shoot! We ain't Indn's, one of the men shouted as he clung to the neck of a mustang wearing a Comanche saddle.

¡No dispaes! ¡No dispaes!, the other man called out.

Taylor leveled his pistols on the white man riding the Comanche pony.

Hold em down!

One of the riflemen behind Taylor sighted in the man speaking Spanish while the rest of the rangers closed in around the riders and pulled them down from their saddles, slamming them down hard on the ground, piling on top of them as they stripped off their guns and checked their belts and bootlegs for knives.

Daly's horse trotted up to the scene of half a dozen men wrestling down the two riders and disarming them with an occasional punch or kick.

What do we have, Sergeant?

Taylor spat and looked up at Daly sitting in the saddle. Looks like we got two men making a run somewhere. One of em's got an Indian pony and a scalp on his belt. Got himself an Injun's knife, too.

Taylor reached down and yanked a long, bloody mop of black hair from the man's belt loop and took it away, tucking into his own gun leather. The Sergeant motioned with his arm and tossed a knife in a beaded sheath up to the Captain. Daly held the ornate craftwork up to the sun, studying a rainbow of colors bouncing across hundreds neatly patterned beads. He looked down on the two men collecting themselves in the dust. A gaunt white man with burn scars and missing teeth started to pick himself up. Taylor intercepted him, kicking him back down to the ground with a boot heel on the back of his shoulder.

You boys see any Indians? Daly studied the stranger for a reaction.

Ind'ns been hounding us since morning. Tracking us all over hell's creation.

Daly glanced down at the knife in his hand and turned his head to get a better look the white man's mustang.

You see that red hand print on the horse's neck you were riding?

The wiry man turned to look at the pinto as it stamped and snorted, pulling its back and turning away from a ranger that held its reins.

That's an Indian war pony. By the look of that wooden saddle and that patch of buffalo hide on its back, I'd wager that's a Comanche pony that you came bolting through the bushes on.

Daly raised the beaded sheath in front of him and drew the knife, studying the detail of the blade.

Considering that you're carrying this knife in your possession and the freshness of that scalp on your belt, I'd surmise that you've done something to make someone very dangerous, very angry.

Daly closed the knife, tying the leather thong that looped through the sheath to his gun belt. He leaned forward on his horse, resting his hands on the saddle horn.

So, what happened? Did you two boys come across a squaw tending her husband's ponies? Maybe you found yourselves a young girl? Maybe a boy?

The two men stayed quiet, each waiting for the other to dream up a believable lie convincing enough to get them back on their horses before the Comanches caught up to them or they wound up with ropes around their necks.

You boys bounty hunters? Daly gestured toward the scalp hanging from Sergeant Taylor's belt. You out here head hunting. Stirring up the wildlife?

You some kind of marshals? The scraggly white man's voice cracked when he spoke.

Daly leaned back and scoffed, a crooked smile breaking at the corner of his mouth. He looked up at something in the clouds that no one else could see and smiled even wider.

No, we're a lot worse than that.

You gonna do us in for killing a Ind'n? I'm a white man like y'all. My friend's a Mex'can. You cain't just kill us for nothing.

Daly's smile disappeared, and his eyes narrowed, focused and cold.

You won't find any Indian lovers here. Personally speaking, I don't care if you killed an Apache, a Comanche, a man woman or a child. An Indian's an Indian and as long as you aren't out here robbing and killing white folks, I've got no reason to waste my time with you.

Daly shifted in the saddle, turning to Lieutenant Hobbes.

Get them up. Put them on their horses and give them back their guns.

Hobbes nodded to Taylor, two rangers helped Clay and Joaquin to their feet, smiling and slapping dust off their backs and shoulders. Taylor laughed as he handed Clay his pistol, the pommel facing forward and the barrel down.

A high pitched, buzzing screech came from a nearby mesquite tree, startling the men as they reconciled, the call of an owl in broad daylight.

What the hell is that? Taylor squinted looking up in the branches, searching for an animal camouflaged in the desiccated tree bark, the men quiet, listening for the unexpected cry to return.

The sounds of screaming Comanche warriors made Daly's flesh crawl. They were faint at first, far away—mingling with the whistles of songbirds and the noise of the wind sweeping through the grass. The thunder of a hundred horses trampling the ground reverberated through the air, the treble of a phantom war drum beating a fast, rising rhythm. War whoops rose and fell above the stampeding tempo. Daly's hair bristled on his arms as the warriors closed the distance, he looked to his Lieutenant and saw Hobbes taking cover, ready with his Kentucky rifle. Taylor and the other rangers mounted their horses and circled waiting for the Captain's orders.

They're coming! Daly shouted and raised his Walker Colt to his ear, the barrel of the gun pointing straight up to the sky. Give them hell!

The first Comanches took the brunt of the rangers' fire. Hobbes spent the ball of his Kentucky rifle in the skull of a boy with black lines painted on his forehead. The other rangers cracked open hailstorms of lead and smoke from their pistols, nearly every shot taking an enemy from his horse. In seconds, most of the rangers' guns were empty and a cyclone of Comanches spun around them, trick riders turning their horses in a fast, spinning circle, warriors hanging on the sides of their ponies, firing arrows underneath their horses' necks.

Daly emptied his pistol in the storm of circling riders. He saw two men fall, other warriors trampling their bodies as their horses broke free and ran clear of the dust-devil of arrows, horses and howling men.

Reload! Daly shouted over the screams and the thunder of the turning horses. He charged his Walker Colt and searched for an enemy to kill amid the endless motion of rotating horsemen. Arrows stabbed out from the circle, dropping rangers down to their deaths.

A Comanche riding an appaloosa broke from the circle. The winds danced in his long black hair, blowing his locks in four directions as he rode toward the center of the circle and Captain Daly's dying men. The rider wore a shield on his left arm, the tanned buffalo hide adorned with a crude drawing of an owl. His skin was covered in white mud with black handprints on his shoulders and across his mouth. The fingers of his right hand gripped a seven-foot war lance. His eyes were cold and cruel and the Captain realized a hint of recognition in his enemy's stare as the Comanche rode toward him and called a challenge in words Daly didn't understand. The warrior raised his shield and lifted his lance to the sky. The Appaloosa war horse lowered its head, charging through the handful of wounded rangers as they struggled to

reload. The warrior let loose a war cry that seemed alien yet strangely familiar. The Captain's mind drifted to a place away from his own body. The world and everything in it slowed as he watched the black and white Comanche close in. Daly saw the Comanche trying to kill him and he thought about his daughter, he remembered his wife and realized he never sent his letter and for just a brief moment when he heard the Comanche's war whoop he thought about the unseen owl in the trees.

Daly leveled his Walker Colt and dropped the hammer. Dragon smoke followed a .44 caliber piece of conical shaped lead racing down the nine-inch barrel. The round flew straight and true, striking the warrior's shield as he held it directly in front of his face. The rider kept coming. Daly cocked the pistol and fired again, another shot striking the Comanche's shield dead on and doing nothing. The Captain fired again, the third round aimed at the clouds as the Appaloosa crashed into Daly's horse sending him hurdling out of the saddle through the air. Daily heard his own horse whimper as it fell down beside him, kicking its legs as it turned to get back up. The Comanche's war lance went through his side and the sky turned black as the Captain's consciousness fled with the rest of his senses.

Coyote watched from the darkness as the People cut apart the bodies of their enemies. He laughed and rubbed his hands together, smiling at the sight of fresh blood and the promise of a feast. His children gathered around him, packs of feral beasts coming together to eat the scraps of men alongside their father, whose teeth had grown long and sharp on the carrion of human beings. Coyote and his children watched as the People bound the last of their living enemies to poles and waited for their women to come up with torches and knives.

Clay heard the coyotes howling. The barks and yips growing frantic as the animals formed in a mass hidden in the dark perimeters where the firelight beyond the scalp pole fell away into a well of darkness. Blood was in the air. The coyotes could smell it and they grew bolder by the second, darting around the camp, probing the torchlight glow to nibble on the dying things they smelled from deep in the desert.

There were four of them left. They were upright in a row, bound to wooden poles facing a bonfire that loomed over them with tall, flickering promises of torture. Smoke stung their eyes and the fire's heat leached the last drops of moisture from their lips. They were close enough to touch each other if they weren't lashed to the poles by chords tied around their hands, feet and necks.

Captain Daly was in the center. Clay could see the orange firelight dancing with shadows over the man's auburn beard. His head had rolled forward and he mumbled like a man talking in his sleep. Sergeant Taylor was at the far left and still very much alive. His screams made the Comanche women laugh as they scraped strips of skin from his arm with a hunting knife.

Clay's body shuddered in pain. After the gunfire stopped, the Comanche on horseback trampled the surviving rangers, a warrior with a painted yellow face stabbed him in the back, an inch away from his spine. He fell in the dirt, a horse stomping and crushing his right leg. The Comanche men swarmed over Clay, Joaquin and the two remaining rangers, kicking them and cutting them with knives before they drug them back to the camp and crucified them on splintering poles.

Clay's nerves bristled with electricity. His muscles cramped and blood trickled from the knife wound in his back. His right foot was numb. The pain mixing with a tingling, cold

sensation brought on by nerve damage and lack of blood. He heard Joaquin, his friend propped up beside him muttering prayers.

Padre nuestro,

que estás en el cielo

Santificado sea tu nombre

Venga tu reino

Hágase tu voluntad en la tierra como en el cielo

Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada día

Perdona nuestras ofensas

como también nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden

No nos dejes caer en tentación y líbranos del mal

Amén

Joaquin heard the coyotes and the angel Lucifer walking close by, pacing, pausing, standing in the dark with the howling beasts, watching as men cast each other down into the bloody shades of death.

This was the end of Clay and Joaquin. The two rangers seemed intent on following them down to hell. God was painting the last scene of their lives on the canvas of the night sky with silver streaks of moonlight and orange accents of fire. Clay felt himself falling out of his body as a wave of pain pulled him back to consciousness, a sharp nerve pulse tugging the tether of his astral body back to the wounded host. He marveled at the beauty of God's design. Captain Daly cried out to God for mercy. Sergeant Taylor whimpered his own prayers as the Comanche women mocked him, making sounds like crying babies as they cut off his fingers. God was here. He was Father Sky the Comanche saw when the sun rose in the morning. The creator of the full

moon hung in the black night, the master of the coyotes waiting to feed on the scraps of dead men. The hand of God brought forth the devil crouching in the darkness and called the coyotes to the feast. For the first time in his life, Clay felt the presence of the Almighty waiting for him to give up and die.

Four men awaited transformation. When the pain grew too much and death inched up close to the firelight, the Comanche would put them to the torch to hear their last screams as the flames transubstantiated them. They would understand God as they became smoke and ascended to heaven on the wings of a funeral pyre or Satan pulled their screaming souls to hell, leaving behind a banquet of burnt remains for the coyotes. In the desert, hell is the path to heaven. Clay, Joaquin and the rangers were at the doorway, lingering, hanging onto the last painful moments of life, creatures of flesh unfolding before God, flowering as crowds of grieving women marred their flesh.

Captain Daly's head rolled to his left shoulder. He blinked his eyes, slipping in and out of consciousness, fever burning him alive.

A warrior with a golden eagle feather in his hair stepped forward hitting Captain Daly across the face with the back of his hand. He snatched the beaded knife sheath from Daly's belt, waving it at the ranger, shouting and striking the Captain again and again. A wall of Comanche women came up behind him, growling and muttering curses in low, guttural intonations.

Daly spit blood in the warrior's face, spattering red flecks over yellow war paint.

Go on and kill me you heathen son of a bitch.

The warrior flew into a rage, taunting the Captain with one of the ranger's Walker Colts, holding it up for Daly to see and then pressing the barrel against two of the knuckles on Daly's

right hand, dropping the hammer in an explosion of gunpowder, the Captain's middle and trigger fingers disappearing, leaving powder burned nubs in their place.

A black and white painted warrior emerged from a mass of howling Comanches. Shadows of firelight played across his war paint giving him the air of a demon striding under the moonlight. His face white as a skull, black lines over his eyes and handprint across his mouth emphasized the caricature of a death's head. He watched in silence as the warrior torturing Daly leaned forward to peer into Daly's defiant eyes.

The warrior in yellow war paint let out the most awful scream of anguish, rage and contempt.

Red Earth Greet the Dawn

The Captain stumbled, sliding on the loose rocks of the creek bed, the heels of his boots designed to ride in the saddle, not to run for his life. The trickling sound of water called to him, bidding him to stop and rest. His right hand throbbed, his stomach convulsed, waves of nausea rippling out through his mouth as he looked down at the mangled mass of flesh connected to the end of his wrist. The barrel of his own gun blasted away two of his fingers and a large piece of his hand. Beaten and slashed, stabbed twice—still alive. The Comanche's lance missed his vitals. He never thought an Indian could miss with a lance, especially up close. Maybe he wasn't trying to kill him, just hurt him bad enough so he could take his time dying? He bled most of the night, fading in and out, teasing death to come. He opened his eyes at dawn, lingering on the end of life, his blood-crusting eyelashes stuck together. He looked left to right, scanning the sleeping camp and the cooling coals of the bonfire. Taylor was dead, along with the two poor bastards they caught running from the Indians. Their bodies hung up on poles alongside him, red scarecrows of flesh and bone left to the flies. Daly turned his wrists in the ropes, the missing pieces of his hand making the appendage small enough to slip free.

Mud and grime stopped up the wound on his hand—what was left of it. His training told him to rest and drink. He was losing blood, his brain told him to keep running, to keep moving. His heart begged him to go home. A war drum pounded in his head, filling his eyes with white flashes of light. He was nauseous as he ripped his shirt sleeve with his teeth and tied a tourniquet around his wrist, trying not to vomit as he twisted the knot. Death was close, it dimpled his flesh with a cold hiss of anticipation against the nape of his neck. He pressed his left hand to his chest, instinctively feeling for the impression of the letter he kept in his breast pocket. Would someone find it? He wavered at the thought of his life being reduced to lines of ink on parchment. What

was in the letter, secrets, apologies? Had he told his wife how much he loved her or that he was sorry for blaming her for the death of their daughter? Sorry for failing her, sorry for abandoning her? Time, he'd wasted so much time. He looked down at his hand again and felt his body dying piece by piece. He couldn't remember what he'd written in the letter. In the end, he was bereft of words.

Yellow Feather heard the thumping of his heart. It raced against the breath in his lungs, swelling in his throat, pulsing in his temples. His legs burned from running. His knife flashed in the sunlight. The trail of blood is always true. He could see the white man kneeling by the water. He raised his knife to the sun and cried out. His voice became thunder breaking through the stillness of the morning air. The man fell down with a mouthful of dirt and Yellow Feather on his back. The Captain was weak. Yellow Feather felt the fight go out of the man, draining with his blood in the creek. He grabbed the white man by the hair, auburn curls tangling between his bronzed fingers. The knife drew a red line across the Captain's forehead. Yellow Feather felt his power flowing from the wound. Real power, *Puha* he could draw out in the kill and carry away on his horse. He would tie the Captain's bloody scalp to the reins of his war horse and let all of the young men know that he had cut down the enemy called *CAP TEEN*. The blade sawed open flesh. Yellow Feather pulled back the hair and skin. Lightning crawled down the warrior's back. He howled at the Captain's spirit and put out the man's eyes after he took his scalp. The white man's spirit would be angry at his death. Best to blind him in the afterlife and avoid his revenge. The Captain fell, Yellow Feather threw his head back in triumph, celebrating the glory of his enemy's death to the birds of the morning that watched from the creek's embankment.

The Sun looked down on the young man and a dead thing in bloody rags. The warrior raised a red scalp and showed it to the Sun and the Four Winds. The Sun beamed with pride. The winds blew, conjuring dust devils that whirled up from patches of barren earth. The North Wind whistled a somber song over the prairie grass. The West Wind howled, waking packs of wolves asleep in distant dens. The South Wind drifted on war chants, bringing news of victory to the bands of People wandering the hill country. The East Wind pinned the Captain's last letter to a thorn tree, tearing his words away piece by piece.

Blackbirds

The Mother of God sat on the southern shore of the Rio Bravo, midway between the villages of Santa Elena and Monteverde. A stone alcove sheltered the Blessed Virgin from the wind and rain. The sun-faded paint stained her blue robes, standing in contrast with the brown-green water flowing at her feet. Her never closing eyes watching the bank of the river in the place where a child drowned in the summer of 1826. Ten years after the tragedy, only the Holy Mother remembers the child's name.

Detachments of soldiers that fought for land between the Rio Bravo and the Nueces, stopped at the shrine, taking water from the stream, offering prayers and lighting candles. Going north, the soldiers crossed themselves and begged for protection from the the Holy Mother. Returning to the south, they gave thanks and prayed for their dead, lost at Goliad, the Alamo and San Jacinto. To the people of Santa Elena and Monteverde, the Shrine of the Blessed Virgin marks their travel between the two villages. Following the Rio Bravo, Santa Elena sleeps a league to the West near a bend in the river. A league to the East, Monteverde sits on an embankment overlooking the water.

Three ragged men fell on their knees and wept at the sight of the Virgin. They prayed and praised the Sainted Mother of Mercy for guiding them home. They kissed her clay feet and lit candles before crawling to the water on their bellies to drink from the muddy waves. The men drank their fill and rose to their feet, their bodies crippled with fatigue. They embraced each other and two men turned for Santa Elena while the other man walked toward his home in the East on the outskirts of Monteverde.

A gust blew through the remains of the house, pushing past the broken door, slapping against a shutter, whistling through a dozen holes in the roof. Another gust followed, pushing

against the half-standing door, opening it just a bit wider to tease Lisandro with a glimpse of the contents that lay inside. A patchwork of light glimmered through the dust, cascading through a roof of crisscrossed beams partially devoured by fire and termites. The golden light shone on the face of what used to be a woman, her body still and lifeless.

Another gust came, stronger than the others. It broke the door off its hinges, slamming it down to the dirt floor. The wind whistled and hissed and swept away a year's worth of debris and settled ashes, lifting in the breeze, black flowers rising on the air to welcome home the master of the house.

Lisandro walked as through a dream, his torn, naked feet barely carrying his weight. The house not the same, the land not the same, even the apple tree by the well had dropped its leaves and littered rotting fruit onto the ground. A murder of crows haunted its creaking limbs, cackling at the man shuffling toward the blasted-down door of what used to be his home. Lisandro's wife waited inside, sprawled out on the floor, staked to the ground with leather thongs cutting through her wrists and ankles, her eyelids scraped off by the edge of a knife, her face looking up at the sun.

¡Por favor Dios! Los Indios del diablo. Lisandro fell to his knees. He screamed and wept, begging God for mercy and for the soul of his beloved wife. He sobbed, deep, raspy gulps of air in and out of his chest. He beat the dirt floor with his fists and howled. He tried to punch holes into the earth. His feeble hands buckling against the solid ground until he collapsed next to the body of the woman he loved. When his voice was gone, he whimpered and clawed at the dirt until his fingernails bled. His body finally gave up and he fell silent.

The message from the *Indios*—scratched in blood, communicated through their visitation's aftermath without words or symbols. No crudely hewn stick figures etched on a rock

could tell the same story of suffering as a human body, cut apart and rearranged with diabolic creativity. It was the same message left for all *Mexicanos* coming back from Santa Anna's campaign to the north.

You have been gone too long making war on the whites across the river.

The road went on forever—a great brown serpent boring a path through the valleys and hills, a twisting thing, sunning itself on green fields, dividing pastures and connecting towns. At times it hid itself in the jungle, blending into the foliage, camouflaging its footpaths with overgrown vines and tall grass but it was always there, never ending.

Three men walked the road in silence. Their tired feet raked the earth. They looked down at the ground, their necks too weak to support the weight of their dusty sombreros. The men moved in single file, hedging the edges of the trail, ready to dodge into the chaparral at the first sight of another soul approaching from the distance.

Lisandro bit his lip. Every step he took sent a wave of pain shooting up into his knees. He tried to ignore it. His sandals had worn through and barely a shred of leather stood between the stony road and his calloused feet. He walked on without complaint. He had faced harder times than this, treks leading across the Rio Bravo to lands filled with dust and blood. He had marched for days to the battlefield at Agua Dulce just to shoot over the head of a Texian and give up his left eye to the point of a knife. He'd be damned before he complained of sore feet, especially to men who had marched alongside him in battle. He thought about Clara, his beautiful wife, waiting for him, caring for their *hijos*, Anselmo and Eliseo, little boys, too young to do much besides scatter feed for the chickens or chase a stubborn pig. He kept walking get home to Clara and his boys.

The war over, word had spreading through the ranks, a contagion spewed from one soldier's mouth to another, sickening their hearts with hope that they could go back to their families. Lisandro had retreated with the Army to *Ciudad de México*, leaving the Texians to claim the blood-soaked land where he'd lost his eye. His will to fight went dark with he'd lost part of his sight. He couldn't take any more marching, fighting, killing. He had *niños* and a beautiful wife who had kept her faith in him and her promises before God. He had to go home.

Lisandro left Ciudad de México with two brothers who had fought with him at Agua Dulce. The eldest of the two, Felipe, a slight man but loyal and strong for his size, had a wife and a son back home in Santa Elena. His brother, Gonzalo, claiming he was engaged to a girl, told the two men countless stories of her beauty and the couples' romance. Tales full of wild boasts, fights with jealous suitors, duels over the girl's honor. He carried a small, shell-shaped comb with broken teeth in his pocket, declaring that his *novia* pressed it into his hand after a brawl with a drunken farmer. At random times, he'd pull the comb from his pocket and run his thumb over the tips of the remaining teeth, an action thought to bring good fortune. Lisandro wondered if Gonzalo even knew the girl. Maybe she wasn't real, just a fantasy in the boy's mind to lift his spirits in the face of war. Either way, Felipe never contradicted his brother, at least not in front of Lisandro. The men walked away from Ciudad de México with the clothes they wore the day the Army took them from the *ranchos* and made them put on uniforms. They dipped hollowed-out gourds into a well and filled their pockets with dried meat and chunks of stale bread. Gonzalo stole a rifle, some lead and powder. He slung the rifle over his shoulder, walking away with it like someone had given it to him. Together they set out for Tamaulipas and the tiny villages where their women and children lit candles for their safe return.

A hand touched Lisandro's back.

¿Podemos dejar de caminar? Felipe pressed his fingers against his ribs, liters of sweat dripping from his shirt sleeves, the translucent, white cloth clung to his torso. He took off his sombrero and wiped the perspiration from his brow. Fresh beads of sweat rolled down his forehead, stinging his eyes, making him blink and rub his hands against his face.

Lisandro looked at the trail and then back at Felipe, running a finger through his mustache. He studied the yellow gourd hanging around Felipe's neck and wondered if it still contained any water. On la frontera the sun will kill you, burning through the blue sky, baking the ground and cracking the earth. Death, a hundred degrees in the noonday shade, lingering in the lame branches of pecan trees, mocking travelers in the midday heat with husks a fruit and desiccated pecans fallen in the parched dust gathering at their gnarled roots. Small reminders that doom is waiting to take anything wandering through the brush without water. Water, clear, sweet water—*la madre de la vida*.

Lisandro pointed to the gourd hanging from Felipe's neck. *¿Tienes agua?*

Si. Felipe shook the yellow container, listening for a faint splash.

Todo bien.

Lisandro urged Felipe to move off into the grass but the man didn't budge. Fastened in place, his sweat-stung eyes opened, taking in some wondrous thing he witnessed over Lisandro's shoulder, his mouth dropped open and waited for the words to follow.

¡Mira! ¡Indios!

Lisandro pushed his companion into the tall grass hemming the road, the movement snapping Felipe out of his shock, reviving the soldier's instincts dulled by exhaustion. The two men hid themselves in the green.

¿Donde esta Gonzalo? Lisandro whispered so low that he wondered if Felipe had heard him.

Estoy aqui. A voice hissed over the grass.

Gonzalo crawled on his belly. He held his rifle in his arms, walking on his elbows, his knees sliding over the ground. He moved slow, keeping the weapon out of the dirt. The India Pattern musket the only gun they had, any dirt in the muzzle or moisture in the powder they'd have no way to eat or protect themselves. Not that it could do much if they needed it anyway.

Gonzalo took a position next to his former sergeant, pressing the butt of the rifle against his shoulder. The tip of the socket bayonet mounted to the barrel, peeked through the grass as he sighted the first *Indio* coming down the road.

Mierda. Gonzalo exhaled and cocked the rifle. He prayed the *Indios* hadn't seen them before they'd jumped off the road.

A naked man, led the procession, covered from head to toe in white mud, cracked and weathered from the sun. Two black hand prints marked his shoulders, another hand print covered his mouth, a demon riding a spotted horse, an empty look in his eyes, the eyes of something possessed. The other *Indios* followed behind him at a respectable distance, slowing their horses, taking care not to close the gap between them and lone rider in the forefront.

Madre de Dios. Gonzalo's stomach dropped at the sight of the mud white rider. The horse didn't even have a saddle. The rider's legs the color of the Appaloosa he rode, a detail that stuck with Gonzalo as he watched behind his rifle's sights. The Indian seemed to grow out of the animal's back. Gonzalo felt a cold emptiness run through him, his balls shriveling up. He wouldn't have believed that he was seeing an Indian if it weren't for the *salvajes* that followed.

One by one, a parade of painted horseman followed *el jinete fantasma*. Each one wore his own mask of colored war paint, black and green faces painted on copper skin. Some had feathers in their long, braided hair. A few were naked, like *el demonio blanco* that had made Gonzalo a coward without the slightest provocation. Others wore buckskin leggings and breechclouts. Even more concerning, some wore sombreros and cotton shirts and donned the red and blue jackets of *soldados*.

The first fifteen *Indios* who followed their leader said nothing. They moved with conviction, stoic and silent. Down the ranks, the riders seemed younger and less disciplined. They laughed and called out to each other, making jokes in some savage tongue that Gonzalo and his *compañeros* couldn't understand.

Lisandro counted the *Indios* along with his blessings as they passed by without noticing the men hiding in the tall grass. Forty-three of them, including the mud-drenched thing that rode ahead of the rest. Lisandro and the brothers stayed quiet, watching as the last *Indio* disappeared down the road before they felt safe enough to speak. Gonzalo placed the butt of his rifle on the ground and crouched on one knee. Felipe drew up next to him. Both men waited to hear if their old sergeant had a plan.

Lisandro looked up at the sun, shielding his eyes with the edge of his hand as he calculated their position and the best path north, avoiding the road. They had to abandon the road altogether and travel through the brush. All of the men agreed. Lisandro studied the position of the sun. If they shifted their course by fifteen degrees, they could arrive due west of Felipe and Gonzalo's village. The Rio Bravo connected their settlements. When they reached the river, Lisandro would part ways with the brothers and head home to Monteverde. It would add another day or two to their journey but they could stay clear of the road.

The decision made, the men set out through fields of chest-high grass. Their bodies moved with renewed vigor. The fear of stepping on snakes dimmed with the possibility of being captured by blood-thirsty *salvajes*, having sticks stabbed through their ankles and being strung upside down from the trees while *pinche Indios bárbaros* roasted them over a campfire. Lisandro knew the sadism of *Indios*. He grew up on *la frontera* and had seen the aftermath of such things as a boy. He preferred to die from a rattlesnake bite.

The men walked until nightfall, fighting their way through the sea of grass. The farther they traveled from the road, the safer they felt but their exhaustion returned. The tall grass protested their passing, blocking them with passive blades that stood against them and folded over as they moved by. Lisandro couldn't walk anymore. He knew that Felipe and Gonzalo felt just as tired. He signaled for them to stop. The men halted and collapsed amid the roots of feather grass that had tripped Lisandro twice and tried to steal his sandals.

At least they were hidden. The tall feather grass concealed them as they laid on their backs, looking up at the darkening sky. In another hour it would be night. Another cold camp awaited them with no promise of a meal. Each man's body complained of hunger in its own way. Lisandro's stomach rumbled. How much longer could they walk like this with no food? They'd have to do something soon. They needed provisions and more than food, they needed water.

Eschucha. Gonzalo sat up, his eyes bright with excitement. He held up his right hand, signaling the men to stay quiet. His left hand reached for the India Pattern musket. Lisandro's hands trembled, panic seizing him in an icy grip. He struggled to calm himself and drew the small knife he kept in his belt. Gonzalo looked at the old sergeant and shook his finger. Grunting sounds came through the grass.

The men rolled onto their feet and huddled together.

Javelinas. Gonzalo whispered, a smile lighting his face against the shadows of the wavering feather grass.

Wild peccaries plodded through the field, grunting and running their snouts in the dirt, nosing for grubs and root tubers. At any moment, a boar could crash through the grass and gore one of them but they were hungry and they had a gun.

Gonzalo stood slowly, taking care not to make a sound or disturb the grass. As careful as his movements were, the javelinas' grunting turned to squeals. A wave moved through the sea of grass as the animals stampeded away from the hiding men.

Gonzalo held his rifle against his chest and chased after the javelinas. Lisandro and Felipe followed, both clutching knives in their hands hoping to leap onto the back of a peccary and stab it to death. The three men ran through the wake of trampled grass, desperate and hungry.

In the distance, the field terminated against a wall of tangled chaparral. Gonzalo cursed the Javelinas as he saw them jump out of the grass and follow each other into a thick maze of winding branches that no man could cross without a machete.

¡Carajo!

Lisandro and Felipe caught up to Gonzalo. The men said nothing, their frustration boiling over and exploding.

Mira allá. Gonzalo nodded, his head bending in the direction of the thicket.

Something moved at the edge of the brush. A large boar? Maybe a big sow with a litter of reds sniffing behind her? None of them could see behind the wall of tangled crucillo branches.

Gonzalo raised the rifle to his shoulder and aimed at the movement in the brush. The wall of crucillo branches more than a hundred and fifty meters away. Could he hit it from this distance? It was a long shot. He had good aim and he was too hungry not to take the chance. What about the *Indios*? Had they traveled far enough away to risk the noise? The *Indios* were riding south, they were walking northwest, hours had passed since they'd seen them. They could risk it. They had to risk it. Gonzalo cocked the rifle and fired. The rifle banged out a plume of smoke and fire, sending a lead ball spinning down the bore and over the field. The sound cracked in the air. A thousand blackbirds exploded from the chaparral and flew toward the setting sun, turning the sky black with clouds of squawking things leaving the earth in mass exodus. A woman screamed. Gonzalo looked at his brother and his former sergeant. The color ran from his face.

¡Andale! Lisandro pulled Gonzalo by the shirt. The men ran toward the moaning shape in the bramble.

¡Ayudame! A hoarse, shaky voice called out. The men looked down and had no words for what they saw.

An old woman lay in the brush, naked with a black hole in her shoulder spurting blood, her body horribly bruised, swatches of blue, black and purple covering her arms and torso. Thorn had torn fresh scratches into the skin on her arms and legs. Puss filled rashes spread over her feet and ankles. A huge gash cut a line down her forehead.

¿Señora, esta bien? ¿Señora? ¿Esta bien? Lisandro felt foolish for letting the words pass through his teeth, cowardly for asking the question twice. Of course, she wasn't all right. The lead ball seemed to have hardly made her situation worse than it was before. She was already dying, then Gonzalo mistook her for a Javelina. Lisandro knelt down her and touched

her calf, recoiling when he recognized the rosy pustules marked by poison ivy. He rubbed his fingers on his pants, forgetting about the old woman until she moaned again.

¡Ayúdame!

The men pressed close around her. Felipe took off his sweat-soaked shirt and pressed it against the wound.

¿Señora, por qué está aquí?

Why was an old woman running naked through the trees? Lisandro needed an answer. He touched the woman's purple arm.

¿De dónde vienes?

Mi pueblo esta detras de la loma, the old woman huffed.

Lisandro put his hand on her forehead, attempting to calm her.

Déjanos llevarte a casa.

¡No! ¡No! The old woman cried. *¡No podemos ir allí!*

The old woman threw her head back and wailed. She curled herself into a ball, hiding her nakedness from Lisandro and the two brothers. Lisandro's face flushed, his cheeks blossoming a rosy shade of pink. He straightened up and took off his shirt. She saw him unfastening his buttons and screamed, trying to wriggle away from him.

No señora. Está bien.

Lisandro tore off his shirt and covered the old woman.

It's all right. We won't hurt you. What a hypocrite? Gonzalo just shot her and she was bleeding to death. Lisandro tried to quiet the old woman. She seemed to understand and huddled under his shirt, grateful for even the slightest mercy. Gonzalo may have shot her, likely killed her by mistake but at least she would die in the company of honorable men.

The men argued but the decision was made to leave the old woman's body in the woods. They'd stay with her through the night and find her village in the morning. Lisandro thought about taking back his shirt but the torn *camisa* had become a burial shroud. His shirt wasn't long enough to be an adequate winding sheet. It covered the old woman's head and torso but her legs stuck out. Lisandro looked at the body wrapped in white cloth with its bare legs exposed, relieved that his shirt covered the old woman's nakedness. *Indios* had done this. The same ones they saw on the road? Lisandro had seen the work of *bandidos* and Texians before. Even grandmothers suffered rape during their visits but the gash on her head, the wound was made from a stone axe, a weapon of *salvajes brutales*.

Gonzalo primed the musket, packing a load of gunpowder behind a lead ball. He listened to Lisandro and Felipe praying over the the old woman's body and felt sick. He wanted to punish someone for what happened to the old woman, he wanted vengeance, wanted to hurt whoever hurt her, to release some of the responsibility for her death.

Gonzalo took watch. Coyotes barked and yipped at the night sky, he'd kill them if they came after the body. Damned coyotes. All night he played through the scene in his mind, convincing himself that he couldn't tell the old woman wasn't a javelina crawling through the thickets, a naked grandmother. Anyone in his position would have fired that shot, they were starving, exhausted—and why would an *abuelita* be crawling naked through the chaparral? He cursed the coyotes and his gun and the blackbirds that had flown out of the trees mocking him with cackling applause from their flapping wings.

As the sun rose, the three men crept over a hill, below them the remains of a settlement. A dog barked in the village. A *gallo* hailed the morning. *Perros* trotted through the dirt streets past dark houses, dipping in and out doorways. A swarm of flies attacked a pen filled with dead

pigs. A dozen arrows pierced the filthy, pink bodies. A squealing piglet pushed its snout against a dead sow, trying to wake its mother. The scent of burnt wood hung in the air, a few, meager houses ransacked, some burned to the ground. The men moved low and fast as they descended the hill and entered the village. They took cover behind overturned carts and crumbling, adobe walls, broken fences, corpses of men, women and children face down with arrows in their backs.

On the eastside of the village, the sun rose behind a small church, a huge, orange-red corona cut in half by the church steeple. *Indios* didn't respect the house of God. The church doors had been busted open, leaving a black mouth taking over the space where the doors had been. A statue of the Blessed Virgin lay toppled and smashed, half of the Holy Mother's face split away and gone. Lisandro, seeing the shattered icon, felt a sad kinship with the one-eyed saint lying broken on her side. He thought he saw something moving behind the statue inside the church but shrugged away the idea. He couldn't see well since the Texian at Agua Dulce had stabbed his left eye. He was exhausted. It was just a shadow in the church, better to leave it alone and keep moving.

Felipe and Lisandro found a well at the center of the village. They looked down into the black void. Had the *Indios* thrown corpses in the water? Even a dead animal would taint *el agua*. Lisandro brought up a bucket. He smelled the water for any hint of putrefaction. It smelled fresh. He lifted the bucket and let the cool water spill over his face and down his neck as he gulped huge mouthfuls until he choked. He handed the bucket to Felipe, who wasted no time wetting his blistered lips. They drank until their bellies were full, then dipped the hollow gourds that hung around their necks into the bucket, capping the vessels under the waterline to ensure they took every drop that they could carry. The men found clothing hanging from a line behind a small house. Lisandro whispered a prayer of thanks and covered himself with a new

shirt. Felipe's shirt was covered with the old woman's blood. He ripped off the red stained *camisa* and stole one from the same line.

The piglet, the only living thing in the village, the *Indios* must not have seen it next to its mother, or they didn't care to waste another arrow. The tiny thing's luck had run out when Gonzalo vaulted the fence, his sandaled feet slapping ankle deep in slop and shit as he landed on the other side. A man from the country, he thought about using his knife to slaughter the animal, with a knife it was an easy thing but not today. He had seen too much in the village and his mind wouldn't leave the old woman dead in the *monte*. He wanted to kill it quick. Butchering the thing would be bloody enough. He cocked the hammer of the rifle and put the animal down in the mud with a cloud of black smoke. A million blackbirds shook the trees and covered the sky over the village, calling and shrieking, mocking the frightened men. A week from now they'd find empty houses and dead wives, their children missing, vanished with the *Indios*, lost to the wilderness.

A million blackbirds circled around the sun.

Gonzalo begged Saint Christopher, Saint Michael and the Holy Mother of God to ask Jesus for a horse. Even a burro to bear him off his feet would have been a sign of divine intervention. He knelt at the shrine of the Blessed Virgin and asked forgiveness for shooting the old woman—and again he begged for a horse. Day after day, his brother Felipe prayed for a gun. A simple flintlock rifle, even a small pistol, something to protect his life with and hunt small game. Thirty minutes after leaving the shrine of the Holy Mother and only a league from his home, God answered Gonzalo and Felipe's prayers. Ten meters in front of them, three horses drank from the waters of the Rio Bravo.

¡Mira, caballos! Gonzalo laughed and slapped his brother on the arm.

Felipe grabbed his brother's shirt and pulled him down in the grass. *¡Cállate pendejo!*
¡Mira! Felipe pointed at the horses. Two pintos and a third, chestnut colored mustang drank from the stream, indifferent to the men crouching near the waterline. A shirtless man straddled the chestnut horse, his feet tangled in the stirrups of a weathered, American saddle. The man lay over the horse's neck, his face hidden in its coarse, black mane.

Gonzalo slipped off the rifle strap and raised the weapon to his shoulder. He studied the rider, he didn't move, he didn't breathe. Dark red patches covered the man's back, spots where his flesh had rotted away.

Esta muerto, Gonzalo whispered, scanning the area with the barrel of the India Pattern rifle. Felipe took off his sombrero and stayed low to the ground, listening and looking for movement. The chestnut horse snorted and shook its head, slapping away flies with its tail.

The brothers crawled through the grass toward the dead man and the ponies. The chestnut horse noticed them. The animal raised its head and looked at Felipe. Felipe rose and spoke to the animal.

Calmate. Esta bien. Felipe walked toward the horse. The animal didn't move.

¿Que pasó aquí? Felipe reached up and grabbed the reins of the horse, expecting the rider on its back to spring to life at any moment. The body didn't move, the dead rider's wrist, tangled in a hackamore, binding the *Indio's* corpse to the pony. *Hijo de puta. El Bastardo* got what he deserved, shot dead, twisted in a stolen saddle, riding on forever till his flesh rotted off the bones. Felipe untied the dead man's wrist and pushed him over the side of the horse, the body hitting the ground and falling on its back. Felipe looked at the dead warrior's face, gaunt and decaying underneath streaks of black war paint, a flap of skin torn away from his ribcage

where buzzards had pecked off scraps of meat. The stench made Felipe sick, he turned away from the hideous thing, the body, bloated with maggots, flies buzzing out from every orifice. A glimmer of light caught the corner of Felipe's eye as he turned to retch, he looked back to face the dead man on the ground. A ray of sun bounced off the cylinders of a pistol tucked into the *Indio's* belt. Felipe knelt down and snatched up a Colt Patterson revolver. He laughed and smiled. A rifle also hung from a leather sleeve tied to the horse's saddle. Felipe stuck the barrel of the Colt Patterson in the waste band of his trousers and went to the saddle, sliding out a polished Spanish Escopeta with a Catalan stock, a beautiful weapon, the sort of rifle officers carried against the *Tejanos*.

Sometime in the night, a wet snout nuzzled against Lisandro's neck. A pig blew its hot, grunting breath in Lisandro's ear, rousing him from sleep. His lazy eye blinked in the dark. Foul breath snorted into his face. He swore and struck the pig. The creature huffed and scuttled away in the dark. The damn thing must be half wild, scrounging for food. He should kill it, eat it for breakfast. *Pinche Cerdo*.

Lisandro picked himself up from the ground and wandered outside the ruins of his home. He'd found his wife but not his children. Anselmo and Eliseo, his precious boys, gone, vanished, not a trace of them anywhere. He'd searched in the fields and held a lantern over the black water in the well but he saw nothing. He looked for hours and couldn't find a clue or a sign of a grave, the rummaging pig, the only sign of life on his *rancho*. He sat down to the well and looked out over the cane fields as the pre-dawn sky turned pink. He sat in the morning cold, he had no more tears to spend.

Movement disturbed his eye staring at the horizon, riders were approaching. *Indios, bandidos?* He hoped for one and prayed for the other. He wouldn't fight, maybe they would kill him quickly, the sooner he died the sooner he could be with his wife. As the riders drew closer, his hopes for a swift death faded.

Felipe and Gonzalo rode a pair of horses, the *caballos'* ears split and yellow circles painted around their eyes. Waving lines decorated their front legs. The brothers led a third horse behind them, a small pinto with blue arrows painted on its flank. Felipe's horse snorted as he pulled back the reins, its breath visible in the morning cold.

Lisandro looked at his *compañeros*. They wore the same blank faces of men that have come home and found heartbreak. Lisandro studied the third horse. Gonzalo had equipped it with a tattered old saddle and a black and white striped blanket rolled on its back. Somewhere the brothers had found a rusty pistol and another rifle.

Los bastardos olvidaron sus caballos. La pistola es tuya.

Felipe scoffed and tossed the Colt Patterson to Lisandro. Felipe had wept for his missing wife and children back in Santa Elena, another sleepy village razed to the ground. Faint streaks marked his face below his eyes, lines where tears had washed the dirt from his skin. The young man grew old in the blue shadows of morning light. He wore a mask of grief that looked back at Lisandro, pantomiming his tragedy.

No puedes quedarte aquí. Vámonos.

Lisandro smiled. The cold metal of the pistol felt good in his hand. Felipe reached down from the saddle and helped Lisandro to his feet.

Midway between Santa Elena and Monteverde, the men stopped and offered prayers to the Virgin. They lit candles and ate a breakfast of roasted pork washed down with river water. The Holy Mother watched in silence as the men mounted a trio of horses, still painted with pagan symbols and headed south to search for their missing children.

Las Caras de la Luna

The lit moon hung over Hacienda el Jinete. The cold blue light dancing over a horse corral. Shadows move. A gate creaks. A dog barks. Juan Carlos walks near the stables, toward the smell of hay and horses. Shapes run through the black, the forms of men. A hiss in the darkness, an arrow piercing the back of Juan Carlos' neck, punching through his skin, choking him with its dogwood shaft, blood marking the turkey feather fletching dark red. Death reaches out and grabs Juan Carlos by the throat, pulling him down to bleed in the sweet summer grass, his fingers never reaching the musket tucked into his belt.

Don Ignacio leaned back in his chair on the veranda and drew in a mouthful of smoke from a fine cigar and held it behind his teeth, releasing it in slow, rolling curls turning from his nostrils. He raised a glass of mezcal to his lips and let the taste of roasted agave chase the flavor of tobacco lingering on his tongue. He looked over the moonlit grounds of Hacienda el Jinete, pondering the fates of the land, the horses and the people who he'd mastered since the Spaniards sailed back across the sea. He listened to the women coming from the kitchen in the house below. Plates clattered, cups rattled and clanked. The old man smiled as he heard the young girls sing and laugh while they prepared the evening meal. So many beautiful things filled Hacienda el Jinete.

Playful screams and the faint laughter of children drifted up to the veranda from the far end of the plaza near the stables, Don Ignacio watched their blue-black shadows playing games of hide and seek between the well and a broken-down manure cart. He wondered if his grandson was out there, mixing with the peasants, playing with the livestock, ignorant of his own importance. The old man looked for his grandson playing in the evening shades and thought he saw the boy chasing after a little girl. The don watched the game from a distance atop *la casa principal* and he noticed another player, a tall, sulking boy lurking in the shadows by the well. The tall boy watched the

others play. He seemed aloof, as if he were studying the younger children and plotting. Don Ignacio wondered if he was the same boy that he had caught trying to steal a bridle from the stables. *Pinché bastardo. Bien podría ser Indio.* He'd given him ten lashes for that and threatened to cut off the boy's right hand. The old man squinted to see what the boy was doing. *El pequeño bastardo debe estar tramando algo.*

Beyond the plaza and the corral, half a dozen men rode the perimeter of the fields. *Ex soldados*, men who had fought the Texians and *Tejanos* across the Rio Bravo. Men from pueblos Don Ignacio had never heard of, with names like Santa Elena, Monteverde, Piedra Azul. Men who had lost their homes and families, drifting between, cities, villages and towns, moving from Ciudad de Mexico to Monterrey, as far north as Matamoros, driven by a gnawing emptiness that stoked a rage inside their bellies, wandering until they stumbled upon the pastures of Hacienda el Jinete. Don Ignacio had seen their forlorn faces and he'd armed each of them with a rifle, a brace of muskets and a dream of having a new life.

The old man watched one of the *ex soldados* riding in the field just beyond where the children played. He could see the man's head scanning the perimeter of the fence line, his hat gleaming white in the moonlight. Don Ignacio lifted his glass of mezcal and looked through it, watching the distant man through a lens of aged agave. The old man spilled his drink on the veranda floor as he saw the rider's head jerk back and his white hat tumble down, following the man's limp body as two Indians pulled him from his horse. Don Ignacio rose from his chair on the veranda, his evening cigar spoiled by the opening gambit of murder.

¡Indios! The old man screamed, the cigar still smoldering in his hand. A war whoop answered his warning, echoing through the darkness. Horsemen with their faces covered in black war paint stormed the hacienda. Painted riders under the moonlight, feathered silhouettes with

raised lances emerged from the womb of the night to steal, rape and kill. *Indios* had let loose on the land, taking horses and children, riding north with them to trade with the *Americanos* for guns and lead, they found Hacienda el Jinete, nestled at the foot of *la Sierra Mojada*.

His eyes wide, his legs weak, Don Ignacio tried to stand. Again, another shout cut the night air, the shrill Comanche war cry, calling to a man's heart, telling him that everything he loves will die. Don Ignacio clutched his heart, his legs turned into stone, an emptiness swelled inside him.

Screams from the women working in the kitchen and children playing in the plaza answered the marauders. Two of the *ex soldados* stood near the main doors of the house, firing and reloading their muskets until the Comanche warriors ran them down and tore off their scalps. Clouds of black powder filled the air.

Men scattered, grabbing machetes and shovels, a handful of worn-out *campesinos* fighting for their lives. The tide of riders swallowed them. Arrows and tomahawks irrigated the land in blood. Don Ignacio stood transfixed on the veranda, his body trembling, watching the last three *soldados* being ridden down and scalped. All around him, his friends and family, killed and mutilated, he did nothing, he watched.

A warrior emerged from the dark perimeter hemming the courtyard below the veranda, his body covered in white paint, a single black line across his eyes, a hand print marked the lower half of his face, a black palm print covering his mouth, black fingers stretching over his cheek to his left ear. His hair, long, down to his waist, hung over his shoulders, swaying in the breeze. The warrior rode a spotted horse, its white hair and black spots blending with the rider's war paint, the horse and man forming a great beast with six legs and two heads, a shield resting on its arm, painted with the red shape of an owl. The horse and rider tarried, indifferent to the slaughter unfolding, ghosts moving through the chaos.

The rider raised his lance and shouted, sending a dozen raiders toward the stables to liberate Don Ignacio's prize-winning horses. Other raiders dismounted, throwing open the stable doors. They necked the horses together and led them past the burgeoning massacre. One of them grabbed a stallion by the reins and pulled the stolen horses toward open country. The others followed, the herd stampeding away from screams and gunshots, a cloud of dust stinging the eyes of the killers, settling over the dead. In the absence of the horses, an orange glow, the acrid breath of smoke, fire blossomed inside the famed stables of Hacienda el Jinete, growing and eating whatever the flames licked with burning tongues.

Some of the raiders jumped their horses over the fence and rode over the plaza lawn. More of them followed, breaking down the fence, riding toward *la casa principal*, firing off arrows and rifles. A Comanche wearing the head of a buffalo watched the children playing near the well and howled, riding them down, circling a war club over a pair of black horns.

Papá, a child's voice called out.

Three children huddled together underneath a manure cart.

Tiny shadows, illuminated by flashes of firelight.

Papá! The voice pleaded for help.

Don Ignacio recognized his grandson's screams. He had to do something. The old man's heart quivered, his legs couldn't move.

The black and white rider turned toward the voices. He pulled the reins of his horse and trotted the animal toward the shapes trembling beneath the cart. Don Ignacio cried out. *¡Sebastian!* The boy heard his grandfather and ran toward the old man's voice. The rider galloped up beside the boy and grabbed him by the hair, lifting him up and laying him across the saddle. Sebastian shouted and kicked, the boy's scream the sound of a dying animal as the rider pinned

him on the horse's neck. Two more Comanches rode up to the manure cart, one of them flipped it over while the other grabbed the children hiding beneath it, forcing them onto their horses and riding off after Don Ignacio's stolen herd.

All of them gone now, the white rider held Sebastian against the neck of the spotted horse. Don Ignacio cursed the rider, his oath falling flat in the air. The Comanche held the boy down with his right hand. He leaned, turning his horse to face the veranda. The Indian raised his shield and hurled his own curse at the old man. The Comanche's shout pushed Don Ignacio backward. He fell hard on his back, striking his head against the wall. His eyes fluttered and the world turned black.

Insects greeted the morning with praises, humming hymns on buzzing wings, feasting and incubating. Flies swarmed over the dead *campesinos*. The *ex-soldados* strewn about the pasture like discarded rag-dolls, dressed in tattered, blood-drenched clothes, ants crawled in their blood. In the field just beyond the plaza, the naked body of a woman festered in the tall grass, her eyelids cut away, the corpse staring up at the morning sky.

The sun burned hot on Don Ignacio's skin, half-conscious, he waved a fly away from his face. For one glorious moment, he dreamt he had drunk too much mezcal and passed out on the veranda. His eyes still closed, he laughed and rubbed the back of his head, his fingers warm and wet. He dug his nails into a huge gash near the base of his skull and tried to sit up, dizzy and weak.

The buzzing in the air told him the truth, the plague of flies feasting on his men, laying eggs in the women who'd worked in his house, the smell of drying blood calling rats from the fields. The knot on his head reminded him of raiding *Indios*, horse thieves, stolen children and a massacre. He refused to open his eyes.

A voice came to him, echoing in his mind, his inner-self shouted, *Cobarde. Deberías estar muerto. Si fueras un hombre viejo, habrías salvado al chamaco.*

Don Ignacio rolled onto his stomach and wept. He shut his eyes and clasped his hands, trying to pray but unable to speak with any conviction, nonsense twisted on his tongue. He pleaded for mercy and for the safe return of his grandson but abandoned his prayers, indignant at the act of begging for anything, even to God.

The voice inside grew louder. *Cobarde. Deberías estar muerto.*

Sebastian, Don Ignacio whispered the name. The *Indios* had taken him, taken the children, they always took the children but boy might still be alive.

The old man squinted, tilting his head away from the veranda's view of the grounds. He stumbled indoors, the hacienda ransacked, everything small enough to carry off gone, paintings slashed in their frames, furniture broken, feathers torn out of mattresses and strewn about the halls.

Blood seeped from the wound on the old man's head. He fell against a wall and felt his way to the staircase. He worked his way down the steps, following the sound of buzzing flies.

Two bodies blocked the entrance to the kitchen. A large man, his legs splayed, his back against the wall, the top of his head cut off, a red shadow covered his face and the wall behind him, a knife buried in his chest. Don Ignacio couldn't recognize him through the thick blood. He looked over the body, studying the man's clothes. His boots gave up the secret and told the old man his name. Don Ignacio knew the gilded leather. This was Hector, his friend and majordomo. The old man fell to his knees.

Don Ignacio crawled toward the body of a young girl. The corpse naked, covered in dried blood and larvae, the legs spread open, the breasts and scalp cut off, her clothes heaped into

a tattered rag pile near her head, maggots squirming in the raw, red patches that replaced her bosom. A thousand flies circled in an undulating halo about her mutilated head and face. Don Ignacio lifted her head and cradled it in his lap, the matted blood from her wounds sticking on the floor and making a ripping sound as the woman's hair pulled free from the carpet. He looked down at her face, the soft beautiful features cut away, the visage of a nightmarish saint, martyred by rape. Don Ignacio knew who she was. He recognized the curves of her youthful form from the nights in his bedroom. How many times had he studied her in the moonlight stealing through the shutters? Her beauty struck him the moment he saw her working in the field, taking water to the men tending the horses in the pasture. The shape of her hips and the arch in her back excited him as he watched her bend down. The master of the house could have any of these peon girls to gratify his lust in whatever ways he wanted. He ordered Hector to bring her into the house. Don Ignacio had given her comfortable work, letting her cook and mend clothes. The old man made her his lover and gave her all of the things that a rich old man can give to peasant girl sneaking into his bed. Esperanza's nubile form had been used in more devious ways than Don Ignacio had ever attempted, used and slashed to pieces. He held her, running his hand over her hair, that long, black silk forever destroyed as his fingers tangled in clumps of blood. Don Ignacio felt sick. He fought back tears.

The *Indios* had taken everything. His home, his horses, his women, even the burros that pulled the manure carts, his workmen, his lover, his grandson. What could he do? What could one old man do against them?

Sabastian. The voice inside came back.

The raiders had littered the grounds of the hacienda with bloating bodies. Don Ignacio stumbled past the familiar faces of his workmen, their expressions frozen in death.

He would have to follow the Comanches on foot, they left a clear trail, their unshod ponies and Don Ignacio's herd stamped sign in the earth for miles, he studied the path. They had ridden off to the northeast under the rising moon, heading toward the only pass through the mountains large enough to move so many horses. If he followed their trail on foot he would never catch up. There had to be another way, if he went south he could reach San Miguel in half a day, a small village but he might find help there. No, San Miguel had become a resting place for peons too old to work on his ranch, he would be lucky if they had a single burro able to carry him after the Comanche horses, even if he did find help, he would lose an entire day on the trail of Sebastian's abductors. He had to go on alone.

Don Ignacio saw the cave high up on the cliff. *El Vientre del Diablo*. The *campesinos* told stories about this place, something about a witch who lived inside. Peasant superstitions. The *Indios* had to ride around the mountain to reach the pass just on the other side of the cliff. He ran toward the cliff face. The old man's heart thumped in his chest and his lungs begged for air. The wound on his head throbbed and he felt dizzy again. His run slowed to a trot, then to a fast shuffle toward the little mountain that the peons avoided and crossed themselves whenever they made mention of its name.

Don Ignacio started climbed, his desperation driving him hard. His boots finding footholds, his hands reaching into cracks in the rock wall, he thought about his grandson. He scaled the first ten feet before his arms burned. Sebastian, the precious little boy. The *Indios* would beat him, break his will—enslave him. Sometimes they sold children or wiped away their identities and made them their own. He bit his lip at the thought of Sebastian painted like an Indian, growing up with no memories of his lineage. The old man pushed up another twenty feet, his body on fire, his arms and legs cramped, his strength fading with the sun. Long

shadows crept over the cliff face bringing the chill of doubt. Don Ignacio felt too weak to keep climbing. The wound on his head throbbed, blood running down his neck and the back of his shirt. He had to rest or he would fall.

Night covered the old man. His arms trembled. He struggled to propel himself upward, he was close to the mouth of the cave. A noise came from a place above him, a moaning sound following a rush of cold air. Just a bit more. The breeze blew again.

A strange sound echoed through the rocks, like a woman laughing. His fingers felt the lip of the cave. He thought about Esperanza, the pretty young girl the *Indios* had butchered. He remembered the way she felt in his bed, warm and soft, her skin smooth under his calloused hands. The *Indios* used her and hacked her apart. He gnashed his teeth and pulled himself up, one last effort to find the respite of a ledge. Don Ignacio sat on the edge of *El Vientre del Diablo*, looking into the mouth of the cave. He stared into blackness as he struggled to catch his breath, his eyes adjusting to the dark. The voice in the wind moaned again, this time clear and distinct, the sound of a woman, someone in the dark, mocking his feeble climb up the mountain. The old man squinted into the darkness. In the depths of the cave, he saw something white, a glowing reflection in the moonlight, a woman's form then the clear, unmistakable shape of an owl flying out at him. Great white wings beat Don Ignacio down from the ledge of the cave. He fell from *El Vientre del Diablo* and met death at the base of the cliff. The soft laughter of a woman lilted under the moonlight.

Yahaira

A shape moved through the vegetation, long and serpentine. Maximiliano watched the snake, a black mass cutting through the green blades of grass, raising its head as its body writhed across the ground toward the chicken coup. The boy's fingers squeezed the handle of the machete, his heart thumping in his ears, his knuckles white. The snake was huge, almost two meters long and thick as a rope. Maximiliano rubbed the dull edge of the machete with his thumb. The blade's edge round and blunt as he tested it against his skin. Would it kill the snake? He hated snakes. The boy knew what it had come for. The serpent's tongue flicked as it slithered toward one of the chicken's nests. Maximiliano's body tensed. He whispered a prayer. *¡Por favor Diosito, ayudame a matarla!*

He had to do it before it ate one of the eggs, but it was so big. What if it turned and bit him, its teeth ripping open his skin as the black thing coiled around his arm? No, God would help him. God hates snakes—that's what his mother had told him. She'd once showed him a picture in the church in San Miguel, a snake wrapping around a tree and a woman made out of colored glass. The woman, naked with red hair, pale with round breasts and a leaf covering the space between her legs, she held an apple in front of the snake's face. The snake must have stolen the apple from her hand. Snakes were fast. Yes, God hated snakes. Wasn't that what his mother had said?

Maximiliano had no choice but to kill the snake. If it ate one of the eggs, his father would beat him. The snake closed in on the nest, its tongue flashing as its head probed a pile of eggs. Maximiliano expected it to latch on to one of them, forcing his hand in the serpent's execution. The snake licked the air but refused to take any of the eggs. The boy watched, confused, desperate for the snake change its mind and slither off without a meal.

Maximiliano!

His father's voice led hurried footsteps. THWACK! The dull machete took off the snake's head, leaving two parts squirming in the dirt, trying to come back together. Maximiliano relaxed his grip.

¿Qué estás haciendo?

His father's grasp was firm and unforgiving, just like the man. He spun Maximiliano around to face him. The quick violence of the motion kicking up dust as the boy turned, making the child's eyes water. The man's hand tore the machete from the boy's fingers.

¡No podemos perder más animales! ¡Es tu deber!

Maximiliano's father pushed him back and stood over the snake's twitching body, striking it with the blade. The blunt edge crimped the serpent's body and sliced only halfway through it, too dull to make a clean cut. Maximiliano realized the miracle and smiled. God had helped him kill the snake.

His father, Ódiel held the machete in the air, the rusty blade reflecting the sun on a surface of pocked metal. He studied the blade's edge. Blunt, useless, worn dull from years of clearing brush. He frowned at his son and shook his head.

¿De qué te ríes? ¿Te dije que lo afilaras?

Maximiliano hung his head, too afraid to look his father in the eye. Ódiel slapped the flat side of the blade against his son's chest.

Sácale filo a esto. Y deshazte de la víbora ya.

Ódiel smelled the rot coming from the nests, the stench of decomposition and damp hay carrying on a breeze of fresh chicken droppings. He picked up one of the eggs that the snake

had passed over, black liquid seeped from the cracked shell. Ódiel knelt down and looked at the other eggs in the nest, all shattered and partially devoured by the hens that had laid them.

¡Carajo!

Ódiel threw the egg in the dirt, black liquid exploding with the shell. The *gallinas* scattered, dozens of clucking cannibals pecking at their eggs.

Malditos pájaros.

He'd have to thread a feather through their nostrils to keep them from destroying their own nests. A rooster with a blood-red comb hurried to the shattered egg and attacked the remains. Ódiel kicked it away.

¿Y que no los vio usted así? Ódiel asked his son.

Es que le tenía miedo a la víbora. The boy whispered, expecting the back of his father's hand.

Ódiel shook his head. First the damned goats had stopped giving milk, now the chickens. And the flies, the flies, the flies. Flies everywhere, even on cold days, swarming on everything, maggots roiling in meat and fruit. Now the chickens were laying rotten eggs. Ódiel spit on the ground. To hell with this place. The village of Yahaira was infected, an illness soured the land. Clouds blotted the sky filtering out sunlight, the animals sick, everything dying. It was a lost cause. Ódiel should leave it all behind, just take his family and go off the mountain, take his chances in the low lands where the Comanche and the Apache ran wild.

Ódiel had heard stories when he went to the market in San Migue, *viejos* gossiping as they bartered for eggs and cheese. The Comanche had made war on Mexico—raiding, raping and killing. The Apache *fantasmas*, came from the night shadows to murder *Mexicanos*. Old men in San Miguel talked of haciendas being built to look like forts, guarded by watchtowers. No, he

couldn't risk losing his scalp to an *Indio barbaro*. He couldn't gamble with Maximiliano's life. *Indios* might kill the boy or make him a slave. God knows what could happen to Rosa.

Maximiliano's mother wasn't an attractive woman, hard work and Ódiel's fists had beaten her beauty away. Little by little, year after year, her soft features hardened, her pretty, youthful face molded by Ódiel's knuckles, bloated and scarred. Her slight, youthful body had put on weight as she carried her son to term and his three stillborn sisters who had come before him. Ódiel winced whenever he thought of them. Gone without ever getting a chance in the world. At least they were girls, that eased the pain some. A man couldn't be without sons to carry his name. He couldn't stand the thought of losing three sons. Rosa was worthless. If she hadn't given Ódiel one surviving son, he would have left her in Yahaira a long time ago. Even the soil took its toll on her, bending her down to toil in the earth, hunching her back so she couldn't look at the clouds without craning her neck. If she was still the girl he loved, he would take her with him. He would have never thought of leaving her alone with the leering men in the village. Now, there were no fears of infidelity. No jealousy at all. He had slapped it out of her along with her two front teeth. A long time ago, Rosa had been a beautiful girl. But what could Ódiel do? He couldn't leave her. He couldn't just throw his son's mother to the wolves. She had lost her teeth and gotten fat but she was still his wife. He couldn't think of dozens of *salvajes* taking turns on her until the last one wastes his seed and they cut her throat. No, he couldn't leave Yahaira, not yet. Not without a good fight. He bit his lip and looked up to the sky. Maybe God was testing him? The priest in San Miguel had told him about such things. The villagers in Yahaira were still heathens, *Indios* full of superstition. Perhaps God was punishing them because they refused to eat the body of His son and drink His blood? All gods love cannibals. A sneer crawled over Ódiel's mouth. Maybe his chickens were blessed? He

laughed and scratched the back of his head. He should go to San Miguel and let the priest bless him, make a confession that his wife believes in magic and that she's afraid of a huge, white owl that watches the village from the nearby trees. He told himself that he had to go to San Miguel, while his son and a dozen crazy chickens hung on his words.

Ódiel stared down at the black slime pouring from the shattered egg. He kicked dirt over it and spit on the ground.

He packed the wagon. San Miguel was less than a day's ride but the path down the mountain could be treacherous. If he whipped the burro too hard he could flip the wagon or break the animal's leg. He knew that he'd have to travel slow and he wanted to be far away from Yahaira before night fell. The place had a feeling about it, something different that had come on when the flies swarmed and the animals got sick. A thickness hung in the air.

At night, when Ódiel closed his eyes and begged for sleep, he thought he could feel a disturbance in the air, a faint tremor against his skin. Sometimes it would unnerve him enough that he would get out of bed and bar the front door. He didn't want to be on the road at night anywhere near Yahaira.

Ódiel cracked the reins, starting the burro in a languid trot. Maximiliano and Rosa watched as the wheels turned, rolling the wagon on the path out of the village and down the mountain. Ódiel didn't look back as the wagon departed, he dismissed them with a casual wave. They were both already familiar with the back of his hand. Rosa pulled her son close. The owl called from deep in the woods.

Yahaira fell behind the wagon as it turned the corner down the grassy trail. Ódiel couldn't forget the tiny village on the mountain fast enough as it faded in the afternoon daylight dancing through the trees.

A screech slashed the forest canopy, echoing across the mountainside. Just beyond the tree line, a few meters from the trail, something watched Ódiel. He kept the wagon moving, slow and steady. The wheels turned, the sound of creaking wood filling the forest as the cart jostled along the mountain trail. He cocked his head slyly, looking for whatever was watching him, without being seen. A bird, enormous and white, sat high up on a tree limb, resembling a barn owl but incredibly large. It had the same heart shaped face but twice the size of a man's head. The usual cinnamon-colored feathers on the wings were absent, the creature stark white.

Ódiel had never seen an owl grow to such a size, freakishly large, bordering on monstrous proportions, large enough to fly off with a child clutched in the great, gnarled talons that fastened it to a tree branch. This had to be same owl that his wife was so afraid of. Ódiel could hear her in his mind, droning on and on about *La Lechuza*. *No Ódiel, no lo toques, no lo mires, seremos maldecidos y moriremos.*

Ódiel had listened to Rosa going on and on so many nights, *idiota*. A week ago, she tied seven knots in a rope and hung it over the front door of the house. *Debemos temerle Ódiel, hay que respetarlo*, Rosa had told him in forceful whispers. If he just had a gun. One well-placed shot would silence his wife and the damned bird from screeching all night long. Maybe not forever but long enough to give him some peace. Besides, its probably had enough meat on it to feed his family for a week. *Who in the hell eats owls anyway?* Ódiel would eat it. He would savor every scrap of flesh he pulled off the bones. Rosa would never eat it. She would be too terrified to even look at it. Maybe she would go hungry long enough to get her figure back, or get so frightened that she'd run off and leave him. Killing the bird might make his dreams come true. A gun would feel good in his hands, cold and powerful. One loud bang and a blast of smoke would knock the giant owl out of the tree. He would make Maximiliano pluck the

feathers and dig the shot out of the carcass. The boy needed to learn how to dress wild game anyway. Rosa was never any good at it.

Ódiel watched the immense white bird, its eyes hollow and black, its beak and talons dyed red from the last thing it had eaten. The feathers on its breast carried a pink coloration that looked like faded swatches of blood strung around its neck.

Ódiel sneered and spat off the side of the wagon, staring back at the owl.

¿Así que eres tu eh? ¿No debería estar durmido?

The owl's head followed the wagon as it rolled down the mountain.

The owl continued watched Ódiel from its perch. Ódiel could trade his wagon load of tools for a gun when he got down to San Miguel. He raised his hands, pretending to hold a rifle pointing at the giant night bird. Ódiel made a sound like a gunshot and recoiled the imaginary weapon. He laughed and shouted up in the trees.

Te mato al regreso.

Ódiel whistled at the enormous creature, its talons splintering the bark on the branch it sat on, arching and ready to snap under its weight.

Te voy asar, hijo de puta!

The owl's head turned. The wagon rolled out of sight.

The world below the mountain was silent, the usual birdsongs missing, absent with the whistling wind, the creaking wagon the loudest thing on earth as it bucked and groaned along the trail. A chill ran down Ódiel's back. A cold shot of lightning electrifying his spine and throwing his back and shoulders into convulsions. The hair on his arms bristled as he cracked the reins on the burro's back.

It was too quiet. There was a hacienda nearby, one with stables and fine horses, exquisite horseflesh that made Ódiel grind envy in his teeth every time he drove by—swatting the flies crowning his burro's head. Ódiel lashed the mule. The animal brayed and quickened its trot. The wheels turned faster but still too slow to ease the pain caused by the sight of a rich man's possessions, land, handsome women, beautiful horses, things Ódiel could never have. He'd rather beat the animal to death than amble by the pastures, reminded of another man's prosperity. He turned his head down in shame, cursing the hacienda's *patron* under his breath.

No me importa este bastardo.

He hissed into the burro's ear and spurred it with the whip.

Ódiel's nostrils burned and he coughed. A haze of smoke lingered over the fields, making his eyes water. He rubbed his fist against the socket of his right eye, grinding his knuckles into his tear ducts. A million buzzing flies darted through the rolling waves of smoke.

From the corner of a downturned eye he stole a glance across the pasture. An empty sea of green grass hedged the road. There should be men in the fields, working the hacienda's horses, tending to the patron's land, but nothing, no men, no horses, no one to greet Ódiel with a smile or a casual wave of a hand. Ódiel squinted and leaned forward in the wagon's seat. A great white cloud of smoke loomed over the hacienda's stables.

Ódiel halted the wagon. He drew in a long breath, calculating potential danger. A fire. People could be hurt, the house abandoned. Fine things were in that house, things worth money. Maybe he could have a look? Just a few moments off the road. Someone might need his help. Maybe they would offer him a reward? He could always take something valuable as payment for wasting his time.

Mierda, he exhaled and turned the burro toward the plume of white smoke. The wheels cut trenches through the emerald pasture as the wagon moved closer to the ruins of Hacienda el Jinete. The *campesinos* scattered across the grounds worshiped the sun with dead eyes staring up at the sky. Souls departed, still tending the land, flooding the grass with blood and feeding their flesh to the birds. Burned bodies of men were everywhere, hacked into pieces. Ódiel saw the corpse of a woman with her legs spread open, the smell of decomposition striking him hard.

¡Carajo! Ódiel cursed and spat, licking the back of his teeth as he tried to spit the stench of death out of his mouth. The spirits of the dead possessed Ódiel, as he surveyed the carnage, he spoke in tongues, spewing profane blasphemies. The burro brayed and shook its head, its ears slapping against the side of its face. The animal fidgeted and stomped, ready to move fast in any direction.

Ódiel set aside the reins and crept down from the wagon. He grabbed the burro by the face, forcing the animal to look at him till it snorted and pulled away. *No me dejes aquí*. The animal jerked its head back and started to rear, stopping itself as Ódiel's stare flickered with the bite of a whip. Ódiel drew back his hand, leaving the petrified animal with a glare of contempt before he turned back toward the hacienda. He stepped lightly, expecting an arrow to strike him down every time he heard his boots grind into the stony dirt path to the hacienda's casa principal. He bit his lip as he stepped over corpses and patches of red mud. Greed pulled him toward *la casa del patron*, an invisible thread pushing through the emptiness in his stomach, a knot tied around the base of his spine, pricking him and tugging on his guts from the inside out. His lust clawed his eyes open, scraping back his eyelids so his vision could linger on the tangled *senioritas* as they lay, spread open and washed in crimson. How those beautiful young things must have cried under the raiders' knives. The pretty ones always scream the loudest, ugly ones

are used to suffering. Ódiel could bear this. He could look at the wreckage of men and women left in scraps. Living in Yahaira had accustomed him to flies and the stench of decay. A gunshot shook him to his senses. In the distance he heard more gunfire and faint yells, hardly louder than whispers. He couldn't tell how far away they were, or in what direction they came from. Were they going away or coming toward him? They were far off, maybe from San Miguel. If he left now and beat the mule, he could make it back to the mountain and disappear into the mist shrouding Yahaira. The whip cracked and the wheels turned back toward the hills.

Ódiel peeled off the burro's flesh with his whip. The beast brayed and shrieked, filling the forest with hideous bellows as the whip peeled back strips of hair—leaving long, pink gashes dotted with blood.

¡Andale, hijo de puta! ¡Andale!

The animal stumbled up the trail, veering from side to side every time the whip cracked and took back another long line of skin. The louder the animal cried, the harder Ódiel struck it.

The burro frothed at the mouth. Again, it brayed and Ódiel answered the beast in profane shouts. Night falling, Ódiel still far from the village, soon the moon would be up and whatever crept out of the forest to corrupt the soil of Yahaira would awake and Ódiel would be alone. The burro's shrieks woke the wolves in the hills. They howled from distant mountain ridges, hailing the rising moon, promising to find the miserable animal and release it from its suffering, white teeth flashing in the dark. Ódiel cursed them, too.

Almost broken by the time they reached the village, the burro gasped and foamed, a huge swollen tongue dangling from its mouth. It ignored Ódiel's commands to stop, lumbering forward and splashing its head into a trough, water up to its eyes. The animal drank and drank

and drank, finding desperate relief in the old, stagnant water. Flies gathered on its wounds, even in the night—such was the way of things in Yahaira.

Ódiel stumbled off the wagon. His back ached and his legs and feet throbbed. He had punished himself with the wagon's wooden seat almost as badly as he had beaten the mule. Pain stabbed him in the back and ran a line down his left leg into his foot. He ground his teeth together and spat as the old men from the village gathered around him.

Hay indios en el valle.

Maybe the men had been milling about the center of the village when Ódiel arrived heard the animal braying and Ódiel damning it to hell as he beat the thing up the trail? He must have alarmed them because they congregated around him with dumbstruck faces, carrying torches and lanterns. Ódiel squinted in the orange firelight. Some old men had axes and machetes. He raised his hands to get their attention. Before he could speak, he heard Rosa screaming and another woman sobbing.

¿Que paso? Ódiel asked as he straightened his back, fighting to stand up straight and look strong in the company of the old men circling around him.

No podemos encontrar a los niños.

Ódiel sprang up at the old man's words and pushed his way through the crowd. He forgot the pain in his back and sran, heading straight for his house and Rosa's cries.

¿Dónde está mijo?

He grabbed Rosa by the shoulders and shook her. His wife sobbed and wailed. When she tried to calm herself enough to speak, her body erupted into convulsions, her words dying into long protracted hiccups. Ódiel shoved her against the wall of his tiny house and left her as

she slid down to the floor and curled into a ball. She wrapped her arms around her legs and screamed into her lap.

Ódiel bursted through the doors of his neighbors' houses. He turned over tables and tore blankets off beds. Most of the men were outside and the few terrified women he encountered didn't say a word as he threatened them and demanded to know the whereabouts of his only son. When he'd searched all of the houses, he looked where the dogs slept. After the *perros* had been kicked out of the way, he went to the shed and sent cords of wood rolling down the hillside in the search for his missing boy.

He found Maximiliano with the *gallinas*, the boy hiding in the chicken coop, curled into a ball with the blunt machete clutched against his chest, the color washed from his face, refusing to make a sound.

¿Qué tienes? ¿Estás herido?

Unable to speak, Maximiliano didn't look at his father, his eyes staring into the abyss.

Levántate. ¡Andale!

Ódiel grabbed the boy by the arm and dragged him out of the chicken coop. He wrested the machete from Maximiliano's hand and pulled the boy behind him.

¿Qué te pasa?

A woman saw Ódiel leading his son home and prayed. She called to her husband and they followed, both the man and woman touching Maximiliano, the woman blessing him and asking if the boy knew where her own son was hiding. If he knew anything, he didn't say. Ódiel pushed the boy into the house, sending him crashing down into the arms of his weeping mother, who still hadn't picked herself up off the floor.

Rosa cried and praised God. She crossed herself and crossed the boy. She pulled her son to her breast and squeezed him until he couldn't breathe, covering him with kisses. Ódiel crouched down and looked his wife in the eyes. She put her hand on her husband's chest and blessed him. Ódiel pushed her hand away and spoke in a low voice.

Si lo vuelves a perder te mato.

The morning Ódiel left for San Miguel, something called to the children of Yahaira, the cry of an owl ringing through the mountains. The animals of the forest hid from the nocturnal thing hunting in daylight. Song birds stopped singing, the goats in their pens trembled and stared toward the woods. The chickens didn't cluck, only the noise of their beaks pecking corn from the ground breaking the heavy silence.

Moments after her husband disappeared down the trail, Rosa heard the cry of *la lechuza* and ran to the shelf and took down a clay jar encrusted with salt. She poured white lines across the window sill and the wooden plank threshold of her family's tiny home. She covered herself with a faded red rebozo and rushed out to find her son.

Maximiliano had been helping his father with the *gallos*. Rosa hurried toward the pens, clutching her rebozo and muttering prayers under her breath. She saw a little girl standing by the chickens, holding a pail of water, her head cocked to the side, her eyes wide and blank. Rosa stopped and touched the little girl's face.

¿Mija? ¿Estás bien?

The girl didn't speak. She dropped the bucket of water next to the gallos and shuffled into the woods. Rosa followed the girl, calling after her to stop and come back. The girl disappeared into the foliage. On the trail out of the village, a boy dropped the reins of his family's horse and followed the girl into the forest. Rosa screamed for her son.

¡Maximiliano! ¿Dónde estás?

Were the children up to some game? Rosa called out, her voice echoing through the mountains.

The children were in the hills, all except Maximiliano. He was listless and said nothing. Ódiel threatened to beat him. Rosa threw herself over the boy and begged her husband to stop. Worried fathers gathered their lamps and machetes and climbed into the mountains, searching for their *niños*. Ódiel, the youngest man in the village, had found his idiot son hiding with the chickens and he knew that if he didn't go with the *viejos* he couldn't live with them if they came back without their sons. He filled a water skin and took a handful of old bread and a lantern from the kitchen table, then followed the other men to search the hills without even saying goodbye.

Rosa waited for Ódiel to leave with the men. She watched from a crack between the shutters as the lights from their lanterns drifted up the mountain—flickering, fading and disappearing, fireflies blinking in shadowed recesses of the forest, vanishing in the mystery of the mountain. The lights lost in the distance, she rushed out to the hen house. The birds squawked and fluttered, a score of angry chickens protesting her unexpected visit with clucks and flapping wings—kicking up dust and feathers. Rosa pushed through the throng of strutting birds and made her way to a huge, fat hen sitting on a nest. She swatted the *gallina* away and plucked a warm egg from the circle of hay. On the way back to the house, she picked handfuls of *albacar* from a bush growing outside under the kitchen window. She twisted and yanked the stems until she had all that she needed.

Waiting for his mother, Maximiliano sat still in the chair where she'd left him, staring at a mud-chinked wall. Rosa poured water into a small bowl and mixed it with salt. She placed the

bowl on the table and picked up the handfuls of *albacar* she had brought from outside. She prayed and swept his body with the *albacar*, rubbing the leaves over his head, face and neck. After she had cleansed his body with the leaves, she made the sign of the cross on Maximiliano's forehead. She picked up the egg she had taken from the *gallina* and waved it in a circle around the boy's head, mumbling prayers under her breath. She cracked open the egg and gasped as a bloody, red yoke fell into the bowl of saltwater and turned the liquid into a pool of stinking black ink.

For three days, the women of Yahaira kept watch for their husbands, sons and daughters. On the fourth night, Ódiel crawled out of the woods alone, his shirt torn to rags, his face pallid, deep scratches gouged into his chest. He fell into the doorway of his house and collapsed, Rosa ran to his aid and Maximiliano still mute, watched his father struggle. Ódiel grabbed his wife's hair and pulled her close. With ragged breath, he whispered in her ear.

Vamos. Tenemos que irnos.

Ódiel slumped in the wagon seat. He had no strength to beat the burro that he had nearly killed a few days before. Rested and fed, the animal moved faster downhill, away from Yahaira.

Rosa watched the night forest from the bed of the wagon. She kept Maximiliano close, fearing that her son might spring from her arms and leap off the wagon, lost forever to the devils in the dark. She tightened her grip on the boy and huddled next to him under a blanket.

Hours passed and the burro found its way off the mountain near midnight. The creaking wheels turned. Rosa crossed herself as the burro took them by the shadowed ruins of Hacienda el Jinete. She pulled her son's face to her breast and shrouded him in the blanket, afraid that he would see the mutilated dead that littered the fields.

Another hour and the wagon crept through the main street of San Miguel, bodies everywhere. Dead men sat in doorways with the tops of their heads peeled off, the corpses of women, young and old, turned into naked scarecrows, the shadows of the night slipping across their lifeless faces, making them seem to move and change their expressions. Rosa hid with her son under the blanket, steeling glances at the pillaged town. Smelling dead bodies, the burro snorted and slowed its pace, confused whether to move forward or turn back.

Ódiel groaned. Rosa looked up from the blanket and wondered why his hair looked so white in the moonlight. Shadows played over his face, his skin cracked and wrinkled, his head jostled from side to side as the burro bucked and picked up its pace

Ódiel. Ódiel. No te duermas.

Rosa reached up to rouse her husband. She hesitated to touch him, afraid that he might hit her.

Ódiel.

She touched his leg, a slender, bony thing. She pressed her fingers into his clothes, feeling for flesh and muscle no longer there. The man sitting at the reins didn't feel like her husband, not the way she knew him. The driver's arms went limp and dropped the reins. The burro stopped pulling, the wagon creaked to a halt surrounded by a town full of ghosts.

Ódiel. ¿Qué tienes?

A withered husk with Ódiel's face sat in the wagon's seat, aged and ancient, the face of an old grandfather. His hair had turned bright white and his teeth had fallen out of his mouth. Ódiel's clothes hung off his bones, making crisp, snapping sounds in the night wind. Rosa wanted to scream, but she might wake the corpses that watched her from the blackened doorways where they fell dead under Comanche knives. The husk's head fell forward and a long, rattling

breath crawled out of its mouth. Rosa knew the sound, the raspy death knell of an old man. She trembled and started to cry. She prayed and held her son. The two of them looked at the lifeless husk, without speaking a word.

They couldn't stay here, in this slaughterhouse, sitting next to a cursed dead thing. They had to leave, she had to protect her son. Rosa climbed out of the wagon and into the driver's seat next to her dead husband. She wanted to take him someplace, to give him a proper burial, with a priest that could bless him and save his soul. She looked at the wrinkled mummy and knew that she couldn't do that. Whatever witchcraft that touched him was too strong and her son couldn't be near it and neither could she. Her heart broke as she pushed the body out of the seat, falling from the wagon, landing face down on the dirt street. Rosa took the reins and struck the burro into a trot.

Whatever evil that touched Rosa's family was not satisfied, hardly an hour outside of San Miguel, she heard *la lamenta de la lechuza* from a nearby oak tree. Just off the road, she saw the silhouettes of riders framed against the swollen moon, *fantasmas negros*, their feathered hair and raised lances scrawling black lines on the face of the giant blue orb resting on the horizon. The riders saw her, too. She heard the savage *gritos* of the *Indios* and they were upon them. One of the *Indios* rode alongside the mule and shot the animal through the head with a musket ball. Rosa screamed as the gun flashed and a cloud of black smoke exploded in front of her face. The burro fell and the wagon crashed on its side, throwing Rosa and her son head first into the grass.

Maximiliano fell hard. He tumbled out of the wagon, slamming his face onto the ground. The world shook and he watched sideways from the ground while three *Indios* chased his mother through the tall grass. She screamed as the *Indios* laughed, running behind her and tearing at her clothes. Rosa begged and shrieked, disappearing into the vegetation, the *Indios* on top of her.

Some of the men climbed onto the wrecked wagon; others sorted through the pile of goods that spilled out during the crash. One of the *Indios* captured and bound Maximiliano, tying leather thongs around his wrists and ankles, then tossed a torch into the overturned wagon. Fire clung to the sides of the cart, climbing up the frame, the wreckage making a bonfire. The *Indios* moved fast, the bastards in the grass with his mother already standing and adjusting their breechclouts, laughing as they dusted themselves off over her whimpering body. Two men picked through the family's belongings, trying on Ódiel's clothes. Another pair discovered some of Ódiel's *pulque* that fell out of the wagon and took turns pulling mouthfuls of fermented sap from the bottle. One of them choked, his cheeks puffed out and he spat a milky colored mist in the air while his friend doubled over laughing.

Maximiliano heard a horse walking through the grass. Its hooves struck the ground near his head. He turned his neck as one of the hooves pinned his ear lobe to the ground. The boy cried out and the horse kept walking, indifferent to the screaming whelp tied up in the grass. Maximiliano raised his eyes and saw the horse's rider looking down at him. He looked like a ghost, painted white with black lines over his eyes and mouth, an owl feather hung in his hair. The rider watched the boy, unconcerned with the child's fate. The horse meandered through the chaos. Maximilliano watched in disbelief as the rider approached the spot where his mother had disappeared into the grass, two *Indios* lingering there moved away as the horseman approached, stepping backward and then running to the burning wagon. Maximilliano could barely see between the glare of the fire behind him and the black wall of night where the strange rider stopped and slid off his horse's back, almost floating in a bizarre, inhuman way that made him look like something out of a dream. The rider dropped into the tall grass where Rosa fell and disappeared. Maximilliano screamed. He knew the savage was doing some act of evil to his

mother just beyond his sight. A moment later the ghostly *Indio* stood up in the waste high grass. His eyes flashed yellow, blinded with moonlight—the eyes of a wolf surprised by a hunter’s torch, glowing gold in the vacant dark. He lifted Rosa’s scalp toward the sky and an enormous white owl glided over earth, fire and fields to snatch the offering from his bloody hand.

Piamupitz

Piamupitz raised her wings to the night sky.

She drifted over black clouds, weaving between shafts of moonlight.

Her speech, old and wicked, screeched on the wind.

Mother Moon! Mother Moon! The People have shed blood tonight.

Mother Moon looked down from her place in the stars.

The People always spill blood.

Mother Moon! Mother Moon! I want to taste blood and feed on flesh.

Mother Moon turned her gaze to the sleeping mountains.

She ignored the great beating wings of the devil that lived between the earth and the sky.

Piamupitz wanted blood. The North Wind felt her rise and climb the ladder of clouds to laugh in the face of the moon. The South Wind whispered warnings in the ears of the Comanche raiders. A distant moaning, a cold gust that dimpled their flesh and raised the hair on the back of their necks. Something old and hungry followed them as they fled Hacienda el Jinete with red hands and stolen horses—excited by the massacre. Piamupitz beat down the winds with her ancient wings, screeching and scolding them. She scratched her talons into the back of the West Wind and rode it down to the crumbling peak of a mountain. She perched and turned her head backwards to count her prey, five children carried to the north in bondage.

Sebastian fell from Storm Crow's horse, hitting the earth with a loud thud. The warrior raised his lance and the other Comanches slowed their mounts.

Paa. He pointed to a small stream running down the side of the mountain pass. *Hunubi.* The raiders turned the herd of stolen horses toward the flowing water. They dismounted and set to work filling their water skins.

Storm Crow slid down from his horse. He found the boy lying on the ground, too frightened to move. He reached down and pressed his hand onto Sebastian's chest, feeling for his breath and heartbeat. Satisfied that the boy was fully alive, he curled his fingers in the child's hair and yanked him to his feet. He pulled the boy's face close to his own and uttered a threat.

The *Indio* had a ghost face, marked white with thick war paint, a black line running across his eyes, a black hand print across his mouth, the fingers stretching over his left cheek, the thumb pointing up toward his right ear.

Nuhquitó.

He stared at Sebastian, letting the word drag on his breath, the boy looked back. Storm Crow slid the fingers of his free hand across his throat, he spoke again, in slow deliberate words, speaking a language that was not his own. *Le corres y te mueres.*

Storm Crow pushed the boy down and stepped over him. He shouted and shook his lance, pointing at his tribesmen, ordering them to make camp and attend to the herd of stolen horses. Some made fire; others counted the herd and divided loot from the raid. An argument broke out between two men over a musket. They yelled and shoved each other, yet no one seemed to care about the fight. Laughter rolled through the camp as the Comanche warriors admired the spoils of their raid. They grinned by the firelight, exchanging fresh stories. Sebastian started to cry.

Kneeling by the stream, Storm Crow scooped water into his hands and heard the boy weeping. He jumped to his feet, drawing his knife. He charged the little boy, kicking him in his stomach. Sebastian's tiny body landed face down. Storm Crow put his knee on the boy's neck and pulled back his head, pulling his hair and resting his knife against the child's throat. *No*

llorar! Sebastian understood. If he cried, the Indians would kill him. If he tried to run away, they would kill him.

Storm Crow stood and pulled Sebastian after him, his fingers still clutching the boy's hair. A scraping sound followed Sebastian's heels as they cut trenches in the earth. A rock caught the bottoms of his shoes and left him barefoot, his feet still kicking in the dirt.

A group of children huddled together near the stream. Sebastian heard a girl whimpering. The voice was familiar. He recognized it from long afternoons playing in the garden—and from the hiding place under the manure cart where he watched the Indians butcher the world. Adela, one the maid's daughters. The little girl with ribbons in her hair. She was so small. Sebastian wondered how old she was as he turned against Storm Crow's grip, twisting his neck, trying to see Adela's face, her pink ribbons gone, ripped out by the same *Indio* who tore out her braids. Next to the girl, an older boy, Miguel, saw the *Indio* dragging Sebastian, the rich boy, *hijo de patrón*. He watched Sebastian squirm and cry with the eyes of a snake. Even now, as he saw Sebastian brutalized, he studied him with a reptilian glare and a smile.

Two other boys shivered with Miguel and Adela, Rafael, Adela's older brother and another boy Sebastian didn't know. He wore peasants' clothes like peon from the mountains. He didn't know the child's name or his face.

Storm Crow pitched Sebastian into the ring of children. The boy fell on Miguel's lap. The older boy pushed him off. The Comanche stood over the children and waved his knife. He paused for a moment, studying Miguel. Storm Crow made a slashing motion in the air, then turned and walked away, calling to two other men and making gestures for someone to bring rope and stake the captives down. The others seemed more interested in the spoils of their raid. No one came to bind the children.

A long while passed before anyone spoke. Finally, after an hour of careful observation, Miguel whispered, *Tenemos que irnos*. His whisper seemed so loud. The sound of his voice defying the Indians' commands for silence, cut through Sebastian's spine, paralyzing him from the waist down. No, Rafael shook his head, beginning to cry. *Nos matarán*. The little boy wiped away his tears with the back of his hand and sniffled. *Deja de chillar, te oíran!* Miguel's stare froze Rafael. The smaller boy sucked down his tears, gasping, trying to hold his breath. *Tenemos que*. Miguel hissed, his snake eyes darting back and forth, keeping track of the men nearby. *Se irán a dormir pronto. Nadie nos mira*. The raiders had made camp and were bedding down in the mountain pass. *Nomás hay dos en guardia*. Miguel pointed to a high place on a nearby ridge, taking care not to raise his whole arm. A warrior squatted on a ledge, scanning the direction they had come from, looking for pursuers. *El otro esta con los caballos, no nos están viendo*. Miguel reached out and touched Adela's shoulders. *Vamos a casa. ¿Entiendes?* The little girl nodded. Miguel looked at Rafael and the nameless peasant boy. They both nodded, trusting in the strength of the older boy. *¿Y tu que?* Miguel asked Sebastian, the first time that Miguel had spoken to him since Don Ignacio had him whipped for touching his horse's bridle. Too afraid, Sebastian knew that the *Indios* would honor their threats if they caught them. He wouldn't go. He couldn't. The *Indio blanco* had used Sebastian's fear to pin him to the ground. He shook his head but remained silent, too ashamed to speak. *Bueno entonces quédate aquí*. Miguel spat his words on a forked tongue. *Pero si dices algo te mato vez pendejo*. Miguel meant what he said. He had probably thought about killing Sebastian before, some boys daydream about murdering each other. Sebastian laid his head on the cold ground. He closed his eyes and trembled, hoping to sleep, ignorant of the escape.

A blue giant looking over the world, the moon peered down into the mountain pass and blocked out the sky. Azure light shined down on Sebastian's face, nudging him awake. The boy's eyes fluttered. Still dreaming, he looked to the sky, the moon so big and so close that Sebastian thought he could reach up and touch it. Then the scream shook him out of his sleep.

The scream, the death song of a falling man, cut through the mountain pass and rang havoc into the ears of the Comanche raiders. The watchmen called to the others in screeches and animal sounds. In seconds, the sleeping men, armed and moving, crouched and silent.

One of the men kicked Sebastian and demanded something from him. When the boy shook his head in ignorance, he kicked him again. After a rap on the head and another kick, the man gave up his questioning and called two *Indios* to join him.

Storm Crow saw Kanabapuku waving for Red Elk and Chipped Knife to follow him. He grabbed his bow and ran after the warriors, both young men on their first raid, Chipped Knife and Kanabapuku could make mistakes.

The runaway children left tracks everywhere. Storm Crow looked on as Kanabapuku followed the sign. A half mile downstream, just out of sight of the camp, the trail ended in tattered clothing, pieces of flesh on the ground, tiny foot prints on the killing floor, scraps of flesh and blood strewn about in a crude circle. *Piaisia?* Kanabapuku looked to Storm Crow. No, it couldn't be wolves. No tracks, no scat, no distant howls. No signs of wolves at all. Storm Crow shook his head. *Matzohpe. Naboroyarohco.* Storm Crow scanned the mountain ledges for movement. Jaguars hunted here. A wild cat could easily slip between the shadowed recesses in the mountain pass. He looked for the faintest glint of silver, the silhouette of a stalking feline. Nothing, no tracks near the children's footprints. Why were the remains spread out in a ring?

No animals would do that. Storm Crow saw a wing pattern laid down in the blood. He crouched and dipped two fingers in the perimeter of the red circle.

Piamupitz! Piamupitz! Red Elk pointed to an owl feather on the ground. Kanabapuku and Chipped- Knife saw it, too. The three young men waved it off and backed away from the bloody circle. Terror stealing courage from their eyes, they moved back, urging each other to run.

Storm Crow felt the hair on his arm raise, invisible pin pricks, gooseflesh. He wasn't afraid. He recognized the magic. The air was thick, electric, pulsing with energy. He understood the power, ancient and primal. Storm Crow rose up and stepped forward. A red stained owl feather rested in the center of the place of slaughter, a sign left for him. Children missing—devoured. *Piamupitz. Puha.* Big Medicine. Storm Crow stepped inside the bloody circle. He reached for the owl feather and placed it high in his hair, pointing toward the swollen moon.

People of the Wolf

Timid things crawl out from the cold caves of Mother Earth.

Twitching noses sift the wind, raised ears listen to cicadas' singing in the bending grass.

In the night, fireflies burn bright, tiny stars igniting and dying in the dark.

Hungry things howl at Mother Moon and drink from silver streams.

Rabbit listens as the People of the Wolf bay at the moon and scratch the earth.

Chants riding the rhythm of drums and shuffling feet.

They sing and howl and crouch and crawl,

Wearing the skins of their forefathers, tooth, tail, fur and claw.

Rabbit watches the children of the wolf, wondering how they became men.

Three brothers sat under black clouds drinking moonlit water.

Don't be afraid, brothers, Rabbit whispered and stepped out of the tall grass.

It is I, Rabbit, your brother-in-law.

The brothers lifted their ears and prepared to run.

You do not look like Rabbit, the eldest brother said and tapped his foot on the ground.

You look like Coyote.

No little brothers. I am only wearing Coyote's skin.

How is it that you have Coyote's skin?, the middle brother asked and twitched his nose, trying to smell who Rabbit really was.

Rabbit laughed. Coyote became angry with me for tricking him and making him drown in the river, he hunted me through the forest and caught me up in his jaws. He shook me until I was dead and then ate me and left my bones in a mound on the riverbank. The river woke up my

bones and I snuck into Coyote's camp and stole his skin while he was sleeping. Come with me brothers, while Coyote dreams and I still wearing his face.

What for?, the youngest brother asked as he scratched a flea from his fur.

So we can pounce on Old Man Coyote while he's naked and distracted. I can find where he's hidden my skin and finally, we can eat him too.

Hunts-With-A-Dog woke from a dream. Glowing eyes watched the people as they slept, yellow orbs hovering in the black recesses between the trees. Still drunk with sleep, he blinked, his mind chasing the meaning of what his dream had shown him.

No rabbits sleep by the fire, Coyote growled and curled his lips back over his teeth. Hunts-With-A-Dog wondered why Coyote wasn't wearing his skin.

Listen with your nose and not your eyes. Owl leaned forward on the branch and spoke in a hushed voice. Your eyes are not as good as mine. Besides, meat is meat and we have been hungry for such a long time. Let us pretend that they are rabbits ALL, young, old, man, woman, child.

The dream shook Hunts-With-A-Dog. He woke up in a sweat, his eyes studying the black shapes leaning against the walls of his *tipi*. He felt for the knife he kept close when he slept, his fingers curled around the carved piece of deer antler. The night birds quiet, the cicadas had quit their shrill droning that deafens the ears of nocturnal beasts. He rose from his bed of buffalo robes and went outside of his *tipi*, naked except for the deer antler knife he carried.

Movement caught his attention, the young man crouched and slinked toward a trembling bush just past the edge of the Tonkawa camp. He moved with an outstretched arm and the other

hand holding the knife pulled back by his waist, ready to lunge forward and stab whatever moved outside the perimeter of the camp. He crept closer, stepping softly and staying away from the firelight in the center of the ring of *tipis* that slept under long shadows.

A tender voice spoke from the darkness behind the trees. The voice of a grandfather filled with a strange timbre that the young man had never heard before. The was anxious voice and the words it carried shook with a nervous tremor.

Hunts-With-A-Dog, don't be afraid. Your brothers are already here. Hurry, follow me.

Hunts-With-A-Dog pushed aside branches and leaves and stepped over the line that divided the camp from the forest.

Yes, come along. See that your brothers are here.

The young man looked to his right and saw his youngest brother, Summer-Buffalo, standing near him in the shadowy grove, his eyes wide with a look of bewilderment stretched over his face, his body painted black with night. Summer-Buffalo looked at his brother and shrugged, his empty hands cupped with mystery. He cocked his head and tried to see past Hunts-With-A-Dog.

Hunts-With-A-Dog turned and saw his middle brother, Finds-Water, staring back at him, Finds-Water's expression less amazed and more suspicious than his brothers.

Yes, follow me, the voice called again.

Once more, something moved in the undergrowth. Leaves trembled, a branch shook and an immense brown rabbit hopped out in a low place between the trees where the brothers could see it. The rabbit paused, turned and stood up on its hind legs. The rabbit twitched its nose and its long ears, back and forth and raised straight up as if listening to something far away in the forest. The animal studied Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers, panning his vision from left to

right. Its glance settled on Hunts-With-A-Dog and the tall, fat rabbit looked the young man in the eye. The animal cocked its head toward its shoulder the way a man gestures for someone to follow behind in the same direction. The animal turned and hopped down a well-worn game trail. Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers followed.

The ground beneath the Tonkawa camp turned cold in the dark hours of the morning, transforming the cool air into mist. A fog lifted from the earth, ghosts rising from the ground and blowing in from the forest, wandering through the camp, covering the *tipis* in tiny water drops that Mother Earth pulled down from the ether. The fog passed by the *tipi* of the great chief, Spotted-Cat, touching the walls of stretched buffalo hide with elongated tendrils of white vapor.

A great warrior in his youth, Spotted-Cat fought the Apache and Comanche and hung many scalps from his belt. Between the winters of a boy, a man and a grandfather, Spotted-Cat consumed the power of many young braves come to battle his appetites, long and storied, so much that it took him three days to die after the Comanche hung him upside down from an oak tree and cooked him over a campfire.

A black dog slept near the threshold of Spotted-Cat's *tipi*, coiled with its head touching its tail, its oily fur wet from the rolling mist. Its hair bristled, rising in patches along the back of its neck. The dog lifted its ears and smelled the air. It uncurled itself and leapt up in an explosion of guttural barks. Other dogs in the camp shook the droplets of fog from their fur and called back with yips and howls. War cries erupted from the trees ringing the Tonkawa camp. Spotted-Cat's dog howled and turned in circles, skittering and jumping aside as the first Comanche horseman charged out from the forest.

Perhaps some of the Comanche recognized Spotted-Cat or felt a kinship to the finger bones he wore around his neck. He may have eaten a father, a brother, an uncle or a friend of one of the People who rode into the Tonkawa camp howling for blood with guns and axes in their hands.

The attack woke Spotted-Cat from a restless sleep. The barking dogs and Comanche war whoops slipped into his dream, the old man hearing them before he awoke. He rolled on his belly and crawled over two of his wives, the women already starting to panic and cry. His wrinkled, twisted fingers reached for a rifle with a carved, wooden stock and leather braids wrapped around the barrel. Spotted-Cat threw back the buffalo hide flap of his *tipi* and stepped into the fray of raiders at the peak of unmitigated slaughter, the black dog next to him growling and spinning in circles. A mounted Comanche met Spotted-Cat at the threshold of the *tipi*, the buffalo hide flap still settling back against the entryway as the enemy rider thrust his lance through Spotted-Cat's left shoulder, driving the shaft through his torso until the point of the weapon broke free just above his right hip. The old chief dropped his rifle and staggered forth with a gaping mouth and white, clouded eyes, the dog whimpering and scurrying behind its master.

Mist rising from the forest floor hid the worn path of the game trail in wet, white clouds. Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers followed the rabbit through the woods. Whenever the rabbit got too far away from them, it would stop, look back and wait for them to catch up, the fog rising up near to the rabbit's neck. Hunts-With-A-Dog struggled to keep sight of the rabbit as it dipped in and out of thick patches of fog, seeming to disappear and reappear on a whim. By the time the

Comanches attacked the sleeping Tonkawa camp, the brothers, lost in the fog deep in the forest, they could barely hear the screams of their dying women.

Don't turn back, Rabbit said, his hop a slow run.

The brothers, in disbelief, could not see his face as he moved ahead of them, obscured by a curtain of fog, each man wondering if he was walking in a dream.

Coyote and Owl are out hunting. The People have come for scalps and horses. Even your grandfather, Old Spotted-Cat, will die. Don't stop. Don't turn back, the tremoring voice reverberated between the trees.

The brothers moved faster their walk became a trot, then an all-out race toward the rising sun and the place where the white men had cut a road through the trees. The pink dawn rose to burn away the morning mist. Rabbit dashed into a wave of fading fog and slipped away from the brothers, abandoning them on a path of yellow grass cut by endless tracks of wagon wheels that plowed the earth in parallel lines deep enough to kill the grass but too shallow to turn the soil.

The brothers knelt down in the grass and held council. Finds-Water doubted himself and became mistrustful of the rabbit they had run after through the long hours of the night. He argued to go back to the camp and look for survivors.

We have been tricked. The rabbit guided us away so we couldn't protect the camp. Finds-Water exhaled through his nose, battling to contain his own rage and frustration. The sun is rising. We can find our way back.

Hunts-With-A-Dog listened to his brother's words and kept silent as he thought. The two men looked at each other without speaking and then turned to hear Summer-Buffalo, young and afraid, who still had the face of a boy, round and smooth, framed by a pair of shell earrings dangling to his shoulders, his skin unscarred, save for a single black line marked on his cheek.

Summer-Buffalo looked back at his brothers, two seasoned warriors, their faces and bodies mapped with green-black tattoos, necklaces of bones strung around their necks. Fear carved a pit in Summer-Buffalo's belly, but he was more afraid of his brothers judging him as a coward.

Comanches and Apaches will take our horses, Summer-Buffalo told his brothers, fighting against his trembling voice. They will divide what they have stolen and part ways. We can follow them and strike when they do not see us.

Hunts-With-A-Dog remembered his dream and believed the truth of what they had seen. Rabbit had called them away from camp and led them to the white man's trail for a purpose that they did not know. He had saved them from the enemies' knives.

Hunts-With-A-Dog spoke to his brothers, When we were boys, Grandfather told us stories about Rabbit, our brother-in-law that played tricks on Fox and Coyote. Fox, Owl and Coyote hunted Rabbit—but Rabbit was clever and would always escape. Rabbit has spoken to us and shown us the way. He led us here, through the fog. If we went back, what would old Spotted-Cat say? He would ask us, why have you come back to a place of death after Rabbit has saved you? Have your heads been put on backwards and your feet turned the wrong way? Only fools would ignore such a visitation.

Finds-Water scoffed at his brother but knew that his words were true. He looked down at his naked feet and back at the grooves of dirt dividing the yellow grass marking the white man's road, the morning fog melting over the road and the fields that it separated from the forest. He drew in a breath and sighed, musing over the fates of his wife and sons.

Which way do we go?" Finds-Water sighed and asked his oldest brother.

Miles away in the dark, an orange glow beat back the drifting mist settling in the Tonkawa camp. The Comanche torches hissed against the *tipis*, searing out the moisture until the fire caught hold of the damp buffalo hide walls. A black dog whined. Gunfire and screams woke the last sleeping Tonkawa. Young men ran out to fight. A woman stumbled out from a burning *tipi* with a child in her arms. She tripped over her dead husband and ran screaming toward the woods. A Comanche rider followed her, splitting her skull with the same war club that had killed her husband. The woman fell dead, her papoose crying and squirming in her arms.

Spotted-Cat wandered through the camp. The lance struck through his shoulder and driven through his torso had paralyzed his arms and filled him with a well of pain so deep that he hardly felt the arrow that punched through his left lung or the three that followed it, driving deep into his stomach, chest and neck. The old man shuffled forward, mumbling his death song, his voice hissing through the hole the arrow made in his throat. Some Comanches feared his medicine and passed him over as they trampled through the camp, setting fire to *tipis* and dragging off women. A warrior covered in white mud heard Spotted-Cat's death song whistling through the air. The Comanche rode his horse alongside the old man and kept pace with Spotted-Cat as he staggered aimlessly. The Comanche's horse walked beside Spotted-Cat as the mud-covered warrior measured the old man's power. Without a warning or a war cry, the rider cracked open Spotted-Cat's skull with a stone axe. The old man fell on his back and the mud-covered Comanche leapt from his horse, cut off Spotted-Cat's scalp and mounted his pony again, disappearing into the throes of pandemonium as the old man's blood washed over his face.

Sunrise covered the ruins of the Tonkawa camp in pink light. Smoldering *tipis* and charred bones stained the ground black against the rosy rays of dawn. Spotted-Cat hung upside down from a tree, a stick driven through his ankles and fastened to a rope suspended him head-first over a small fire. Blood poured from his wounds, red rivulets streaking, splitting off and re-converging in profuse streams of crimson pouring out of his flesh, over his eyes and dripping into the fire below—popping into smoke in a bed of burning coals. The bravest Comanches took pleasure in stabbing Spotted-Cat as he slowly turned over the fire. The ones seeking *puha* yelled in his face and cut off patches of his skin and hair. After the first day, Spotted-Cat learned to forget his death song. When he was quiet, the People assumed he was dead. He watched from the bloody upside down as the Comanche divided the Tonkawa horses and split into three groups, two large bands turning to the north and south and a small group of four men taking all they could carry and heading east.

Dawn gave way to the morning as the sun warmed Mother Earth and urged her to forget the cries of the dying Tonkawa. Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers followed the road east. In two days, they could reach a white man's fort with soldiers. Other men from camp had gone to help the whites kill Comanche and Kiowa. Maybe there was a place for him and his brothers? The soldiers would give them clothes and good rifles, all they needed to make war on the Comanches that had attacked the camp. This must be Rabbit's trick, a way to make the Tonkawa strong enough to kill the Comanche. Hunts-With-A-Dog walked and pondered the medicine Rabbit had made.

The noonday sun showed the brothers the cruelty of the never-ending road. Sunlight burned the late summer grass in the surrounding fields, leaching out its green youth, killing it and

turning it shades of yellow and brown. The brothers had walked for miles since the morning and still the road went on and on.

Creaking wooden wheels turned in the earth and rose from the distance where the road twisted and lost itself in vast fields. Hunts-With-A-Dog raised his arm to shield his eyes from the sun. A white shape, larger than a buffalo moved on the road. A noisy giant clambering toward them, shaking from side to side, rattling *Hallelujah* and *Praise the Lord* from beneath a heavy cotton bonnet, child voices singing the hymns of the white God, the rhythmic, clattering pots and pans and loose baggage rocking in the wagon bed.

Te la hecu ye? Hunts-With-A-Dog asked his brothers in a whisper, not expecting an answer. His eyes strained against the glare of the sun. He squinted and blinked until he deciphered the shape of a covered wagon approaching from beyond the rippling sliver horizon. The men stopped on the side of the road and waited for the lumbering beast with no legs to approach. The singing grew louder as the wagon drew close, the clanging objects concealed under its tarp hurting Hunts-With-A-Dog's ears. He wanted to throw his hands up, shake his head back and turn in a circle singing his own songs to block out the strange chanting, but white men do not understand such things and Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers meant friendship to the strangers on the road.

A wide-eyed woman drove the wagon. She stole glances at the brothers from below the brim of a gray felt hat. Strands of flaxen hair splayed out over her face, hiding one of her terrified eyes. She yelled curses at the ox pulling the wagon and beat its back with a whip. Hunts-With-A-Dog understood pieces of her English and knew that she was afraid. *Friend*, he said and stepped out to greet the passing wagon. The woman screamed at the naked Tonkawa

standing in the road with a knife in his hand. She lashed the lumbering ox, the animal not noticing much as the wagon rolled by in the same labored pace.

Don't you get close! The yellow-haired women called out.

Summer-Buffalo didn't understand. He made the sign of friendship and jogged toward the front of the wagon. The woman screamed again and reached for a half-cocked pistol jostling in her lap, the barrel sliding between her legs.

I said get away! She lifted the pistol in both hands, the weight of the revolver and the shaking of the wagon making the gun move wildly from left to right.

Hunts-With-A-Dog and Finds-Water understood her threat. They grabbed their youngest brother by the arms and pulled him away to the side of the road. Summer-Buffalo's face burned with shame as he looked down at the earth. A canvas flap snapped as a tall, skinny man rushed out from the covered recesses of the wagon and jumped into the driver's seat next to the frightened woman. He snatched the reins from her hands and took over beating the ox and yelling commands until the animal quickened its steps.

Keep the gun on them, Sarah. The man's voice was shaky and desperate. Make sure they don't try nothing with the girls.

Two small girls sat in the bed of the wagon, the shade from the canvas roof doing little to spare them from the Texas heat as they sweat beneath their bonnets and flannel dresses. Their high-pitched voices made songs about the god Jesus with all the fervor of two innocents who had not suffered enough to question faith. As the wagon rolled by, the girls saw Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers. Their singing came to a stop, leaving clanging cooking pots, creaking wheels and the crack of the driver's whip, the only music to be heard.

The children watched the brothers and the brothers looked back at the children. Summer-Buffalo smiled at them and made the sign of *friend* once more. Hunts-With-A-Dog reached out and touched his brother's wrist, pushing his hands down. Finds-Water scoffed and spat on the ground.

The younger child reached down into her lap and lifted up a large, red apple in her tiny hand. She looked back at Summer-Buffalo. The young man smiled again and made more signs of peace and friendship. The little girl reached over the tailgate of the wagon and tossed the apple toward Summer-Buffalo, bright red, falling from her little hand and disappearing in the grass bending beneath the passing wagon. The young man laughed and knelt down, searching for clues of the red fruit peeking between the blades of grass. He found the apple and lifted it in the air, calling out words of thanks in a language the child would never understand. The girl smiled back at Summer-Buffalo. The children waved at the brothers and giggled together as the wagon pulled away from the three Tonkawa brothers and disappeared down the long winding road.

The sun was high in the heavens, four Comanche braves saw an ox pulling a lone wagon across flat fields of wild wheat. They hobbled their share of stolen Tonkawa horses and hid them behind the trees. Takes-A-Hundred-Horses notched a war arrow in his bow, the soft iron warhead barbed on the edges to rip the guts out his enemies. He marked the rail-thin man whipping the ox and loosed the arrow. The bow twanged, the arrow whipped through the air, striking the man in the chest, slumping him forward in the driver seat as the woman beside him began to scream. The Comanches raised a war whoop and rode down the wagon. Three more arrows brought down the ox, stopping the wagon cold. The woman stood screaming, waving a

pistol at the riders. Looks-Twice shot the woman through the arm and clubbed her in the back, losing her balance, dropping the pistol that she was too afraid to fire. She threw her hands up as she fell out of the wagon, flinging the gun away from her in the grass. She stumbled and got to her feet, lifting her dress over her ankles, she ran away screaming, her daughters following close behind.

Yes, Jesus loves me. Yes, Jesus LOVES me.

The little girl's voice quaked. She rocked back and forth, clutching a rag doll, her tear-stained face hiding behind the doll's hair. She looked up from her shield of tattered yarn and patchwork and saw him, standing still and silent. Her eyes translated the meaning of his black form before the sun and she jolted. Her hymn became louder but brought little comfort.

The girl looked down, grinding her chin into the neck of her doll. She stole another glimpse of him and wondered why he didn't move. The world around them was on fire. Growing flames tore apart the wagon's canopy, they cracked and popped as they twisted and changed shape, reaching close enough to singe her hair as they thinned and stretched in the wind. Silver heat waves fluttered over the grass. She could hear her mother screaming from somewhere behind the tree line. The painted men had torn them apart, leaving the little girl on her knees in the field as they chased her mother, yipping and howling as they tore at the fleeing woman's dress. Somewhere, her father was yelling and fighting. His cries of rage had turned to pleas for mercy, then stopped. Her older sister had disappeared.

She stole another glimpse at the man standing over her and looked away, afraid her gaze might send him into motion. The noonday sun stood behind him like a father looking over the young man's shoulder.

YES, Jesus loves me. The Bible tells me so.

The sun burned the skin on his neck, cutting through him. The stare of a disapproving father, angry with the young Comanche's hesitation. The heat on his back urged him on. His fingers tensed around his war club. He tried to move but the girl's song had power. Her words stopped his legs and made his arms heavy. He struggled to raise his weapon in the air. Maybe he shouldn't strike the child down? He could take her. The child was small. She could be taught to toil and sew and speak like a human being, she was old enough to graze his horses and burn the lice out of his buffalo robes. He didn't have to keep her. She could be a gift for Elk-Mother, who had lost her papoose in the winter snow, payment for the woman's kindness in his youth. The fate of the child undecided, the sun scorched him, demanding her death but the young Comanche lingered. If he brought down his club, her life would feed the earth with thick, red blood. If he put his hand on her now, he could claim her as his own. She could be his slave or his daughter. If she had the heart of a human being, he might grow to love her. If she refused the way of the people, he could trade her or ransom her back to the whites. He lowered his club and reached toward the girl with an open hand.

A howl deafened his left ear, startling him and making his arm recoil, frozen again in the heat of the sun. A flash in the corner of his vision. The wet thump of an axe. The little girl's life splattered across the young Comanche's face, red dots speckling his war paint. He watched as Takes-A-Hundred-Horses stood over the tiny body, his eyes wild with murder. Greedy for the red and golden scalps of the whites, Takes-A-Hundred-Horses held the bloody locks between his fingers and smiled. Why had his friend hesitated to take such a prize? Takes-A-Hundred-Horses frowned at the other young Comanche, Looks-Twice. He reached out with the bloody scalp and pushed Looks-Twice on the shoulder. The young man's eyes blinked and caught new life.

Takes-A-Hundred-Horses turned his neck and urged Looks-Twice to follow him. Together, they ran toward cries stabbing the wind in the distance.

A bridge of smoke connected the earth and sky. Fire gave birth to the great black cloud in the wreckage of a covered wagon set ablaze by a Comanche torch. The black smoke rolled and curled, filling the air with an acrid haze and the scent of searing flesh as the fire spread out and claimed the dead ox still hitched to the burning wagon.

Summer-Buffalo found the girl. The little child that had smiled and shared her apple with the three hungry brothers slept forever in a patch of red grass. Her bonnet missing, the top of her head cut off and taken for a prize, the boy gnashed his teeth and clawed at his face. He wept but his brothers stopped him.

Our enemies are still close, Finds-Water spoke softly as he grabbed his youngest brother by the arm and shook him.

A silver flash summoned Hunts-With-A-Dog to discover a deadly secret hidden in the tall grass—sunlight reflecting on steel. He stayed low as he moved, his eyes scanning for enemies. He crept toward the object gleaming on the ground. A silver pistol with an ivory grip, shining in the sun, calling for a warrior to claim it and unleash its pent-up power, waiting for release behind a cocked hammer. Hunts-With-A-Dog recognized the gun that the white woman had pointed at him. He reached down and took it from the earth, thanking whatever god that had changed his fortune.

The brothers followed screams toward the tree line. They snuck up on the backs of three Comanches as they laughed, slapping each other on the arms while a fourth brave beat the white woman and forced her legs open. One of the Comanches picked up the woman's gray felt hat and put it on his head, the rest of them laughing as they waited for their turn to rape the newly

made widow. A little girl sat on the ground next to the Comanche wearing the hat, her hands bound with strips of buffalo hide, a piece of her mother's soiled undergarments stuffed in her mouth. She sobbed, her cries stifled by the gag. The Comanche wearing the hat struck her with the back of his hand and pulled her hair, turning her to watch her mother being corrupted by Takes-A-Hundred-Horses.

For your friend, Hunts-With-A-Dog spoke sternly as he pressed his knife into Summer-Buffalo's hand.

Have no mercy.

Hunts-With-A-Dog raised the pistol behind the nearest Comanche's head and pulled the trigger. The gun flashed and the Comanche brave fell to his knees and collapsed, the gray felt hat tumbling to the grass behind him. A second Comanche turned and Hunts-With-A-Dog shot him in the face, laying him down dead on his back. The third Comanche reached for his warclub, but taken by surprise, his reactions too slow, Finds-Water cracked open his skull with a rock.

Summer-Buffalo leapt onto the back of the Comanche raping the white woman. Takes-A-Hundred-Horses had no time to pull himself out of the woman and roll over to get on his feet and fight. The white woman felt the Comanche spasm, shaking and kicking as Summer-Buffalo cut his throat with Hunts-With-A-Dog's knife. The Comanche fell dead on the screaming woman. Summer-Buffalo cut a line on the Comanche's forehead and yanked the dead man's hair, the scalp making an audible pop as it came free. Summer-Buffalo pulled the dead body off the woman and reached a bloody hand toward her in friendship.

Night claimed the world, washing the sky in cobalt blue. Millions of pin-sized stars blazed in the firmament, looking down on the burning wagon. The brothers heaped the dead

Comanches on the fire. The bodies sizzled and popped as the three Tonkawa braves sang and danced in a circle. The white woman embraced her child in silence, watching with fire in her eyes as their savage rescuers celebrated vengeance upon the murdering Comanches. The men took turns stepping out of their dance to cut off strips of flesh from the burning Comanches and devour it while they watched their enemies' corpses turn black in the flames.

Mother Moon climbed up the sky. Crickets chirped in the late-night hours when wolves prowl and eat their prey. Rabbit stood in the grass by the side of the road and raised his ears. He listened to the sound of running horses striking the earth with their hooves. Rabbit smiled as Hunts-With-A-Dog and his brothers rode by him on the road on Tonkawa horses stolen back from the enemy. The young brave, Summer-Buffalo, now a blooded warrior, carried a girl in the saddle behind him. A white woman followed on a Comanche war horse, carrying a dead child in a blanket. Rabbit turned his head and watched as the riders disappeared toward the fort where the white soldiers kept vigil day and night.

Midnight

Smoke choked out the chill of the night air, burning the insides of his wet nostrils. The orange glow flickering in the dark set the horse on fire, the stallion ready to bolt as Old Bill stiffened in the saddle and held the reins, approaching the burning house.

A white form lay twisted in the grass. Shadows shimmered over alabaster skin. Colors shifted over the woman's pallid body, red, orange, yellow, black—the spectrum of flames dancing on her blood-drained flesh, a patch of her long blonde hair sawn off and missing, taken for wives of murderers to sew on a patch of buffalo hide or hang on a warrior's shield. Her dress torn into rags, small pieces still clung around her shoulders, the fabric strewn along the path where the Comanches had chased her down, raped her and cut her throat. In the burning house behind her, the bodies of her husband and her daughters slept, soon to become ash in a funeral pyre. Somewhere a dog howled, over and over, an incessant, raspy whining howl that filled Bill's stomach with an empty weight. He pulled back the stallion's reins. The old man looked down at the woman and shook his head, trying to deny that the dead thing in the grass was the body of his daughter.

The first arrow hissed from a hiding spot in the tree line, splitting Old Bill's heart with an iron triangle fashioned from a barrel hoop. He clutched his chest, staring at the face of the dead thing, wide-eyed in the grass.

Midnight smelled the flesh and flame. The stallion, ready to run, the horse reared toward the sky, throwing his head back and toppling his rider. Bill gasped as he coiled his fingers around the arrow shaft sticking out of his chest, his last breath knocked out of his lungs as his body fell out of the saddle and hit the ground.

Half a dozen men with black paint on their faces ran out of the shadows. The painted men rushed the horse. One of them tried to throw a rope around the horse's neck. Midnight reared again, the stallion's whinny a banshee's wail. The rope missed. Another man jumped into the saddle and grabbed the reins. Midnight went wild, bucking and spinning. He threw the man off, kicking the raider in the chest on the way down.

More dark-skinned men rushed out of the trees, screaming and naked to the waist, their lower halves covered in breechclouts and buckskin, their heads crowned with buffalo horns and antlers. Like wolves, they howled and lunged at Midnight's reins. The horse bucked and kicked, knocking three more of them to the ground.

Night birds came alive in the trees, their wings beating panicked rhythms as they abandoned their nests, cawing and climbing, escaping into the vast, dark sky. The leaves of the trees trembled, shaking and falling as if chilled by the cold, dead kiss of winter. A warrior covered in white mud ran out of the shadows. A black streak marked his eyes, a hand print covering his mouth, the lines of fingers and thumb stretching toward his ears. Midnight felt him coming closer, the air around the warrior humming, the horse's hair bristling. The strange warrior's eyes on fire as he sheathed a red blade into his belt next to a clump of bloody, yellow hair. He leapt on Midnight's back and wrapped his fingers into the horse's mane. Midnight reared back to throw him off but the man held on, his hands tearing at the long hair on the stallion's neck. Midnight thrashed and twisted, lunging through the air, landing on his front legs, kicking his back legs at the sky, but the brave on his back wouldn't let go. The horse shook his head, whipping the leather reins around his neck, cracking them through the air and lashing them against the man in the saddle. The rider shifted his weight, reaching out to grab the reins slapping against his skin, leaving bloody streaks in the white mud that covered his arms.

Midnight felt a change in balance and made one last desperate kick, throwing the rider off, sending the warrior crashing into the ground onto his shoulder. The warrior rolled on his stomach and rose up, beating the dust off his leggings. The night air around him moved and shimmered. He cursed the horse, mumbling evil medicine in a low guttural voice as he stepped back, vanishing behind a curtain of night. The stallion turned, spinning up a dust-devil as he charged another man, trampling the horse thief and finding a gap to break free.

The raiders would try to break him if they could, maybe take him north with a herd of stolen horses, if they could catch him. In seconds, Midnight ran at full gallop. The white warrior howled and an arrow flashed by the animal's head. Seconds later, another twang of a bow string, an owl-feathered shaft thumping as it lodged into the saddle horn, the arrow a reminder that the warrior he'd thrown down would rather kill the horse than let him get away. If the raiders caught him they'd spilt his ears and paint lightning bolts down his sides. If they didn't trade him they'd take him on raids, running him until he broke down, left for dead in a place far from green grass and blue water. If they couldn't steal the reins out of dead Bill's hands, they'd see the pony pinned down with arrows and left for the vultures, the way they'd left Old Bill's daughter and grandchildren in the burning house. Midnight turning, ran toward home, Old Bill's farm only thirty minutes away.

Bill had needed a fire to stay warm. The old man crouched and fumbled through his coat pockets. Smiling as his fingers tapped the lid of a small tinderbox. With his other hand, he scraped the ground, gathering scraps of kindling, forming a pyramid out of sticks and sage. He struck a spark and made a fire. The sky smelled like rain. A smart man would cook something and get warm before the clouds opened up.

Bill sat and crossed his legs Indian fashion, his right knee popping, a loud crack as he grabbed the top of his boot and pulled his stiff leg closer to balance his weight. He grumbled as he worked in the firelight, fumbling with his knife and a flat rock, laying a jackrabbit carcass on the rock and cutting it open, spilling its entrails out on the stone. Bill picked up the rabbit's stomach, probing the tiny sack with calloused fingers, searching for signs of worms or disease before he ate the meat.

I don't know about you, Bill snorted, passing his fingers over a tiny liver covered with black spots. You might kill me if I don't cook you right. Best I get this fire hot before you get your revenge.

Bill rolled onto his side and got to his feet, his body feeling the damage of every year of his life as he stretched his back and looked beyond the perimeter of his camp toward the wide-open plains. He stood under a dead mesquite tree, snapping off a dozen brittle branches, enough to make the fire high and hot to burn away any sickness in the rabbit's meat. He bundled the wood under his arm and studied the horizon. Out there in the dark, a glorious horse moved with a speed and grace the likes of which he'd never seen before.

Not once in seventy-years.

Bill had caught mustangs since his father taught him to sit in the saddle, but he had never admired an animal more than the coal-black stallion that led the herd out in the dark distance. The horse, bigger than the wild ponies, black as night and damn fast, moved like a force of nature, tearing a path across the prairie. The other mustangs ran behind it, charging hard to keep up, the lead stallion at least ten lengths ahead. The herd moved like a storm, kicking thunder into the ground, calling up clouds of dust in the wake of their striking hooves. Bill, a good judge of horseflesh, recognized the marks of a Kentucky bred. Settlers had brought them west, Indians

stealing them off the ranches as fast as they could. Sometimes they'd break loose and run with the wild herds. God only knows where this one had come from. Maybe a run-away mare joined up with the herd and foaled a half-wild horse on the plains. Bill scoffed and kicked the dirt. There's no such thing as half-wild. You're either wild or you're not.

The purple shapes of horses running under the moon couldn't be that far away. How far could an old man see in the dark? The black stallion slowed the herd as Bill tracked his silhouette in the blue prairie light. Could the stallion see him too, in the light of the campfire? Did the wild things marvel at a lonely firefly in the black and endless sea of grass?

Bill whistled, a long shrill sound cutting across the prairie. He laughed and called out.

I see you, you beautiful sonabitch. I'm gonna get a rope around your ass for you know it.

The horses turned toward the moon and ran, getting smaller as they put miles between the herd and his campsite.

How long had he been out on the trail chasing those damn horses, three weeks, maybe a month? It seemed like he'd been out on the prairie forever, hungry and lying down under the stars, sleeping with one eye open in case some God-damned Indian jumped out from behind a bush. Maybe tonight he could catch up to the herd and put the stallion's neck in a lasso. Disappointment made the old man weary. Every time he got close, the black horse bolted and the others followed. Bill could glean eight or nine good horses from that group in the time it took him to stalk one stallion. He mused over the idea of cutting out a few mustangs as he roasted a strip of rabbit meat over the fire. His bones were aching from the cold, it was about time to take what he could and let the dream of the stallion go. The horse was too damn fast.

Bullshit, Bill mumbled to himself, spitting out a piece of sinew stuck between his teeth. I'm gonna catch that sonabitch tonight. He laughed to himself and chewed on another piece of the rabbit.

Bill cut the herd's trail easy enough, even as clouds blew in to blot out the moonlight over the prairie. The old man sat by his campfire, chewing on tough jackrabbit meat as he marked the direction that the horses took, fading off in the darkness. He gave the horses enough time to forget about the strange smells of his cook fire and the odd, orange flash of firelight as he finished his meal and rolled a smoke. The mustangs not out of his sight for too long, he kicked dirt over the coals and took up the saddle of the blue roan mare that kept him company in this vast, empty place. He clucked his tongue behind his teeth and the old man and mare followed the mustangs into the dark beyond.

The old man staked the roan mare downwind and far enough away that her scent wouldn't carry and alarm the mustangs. He drove the sharp, wooden peg deep in the ground and tied the rope with tight knots in case his mare tried to run with the wild horses when the herd moved, leaving him alone on the prairie without a horse.

The night grew cold and the sky kept its promise. The weather blew in, shifting the winds and blinding the mustangs' senses with shards of freezing rain. Bill made his move under the blackness of a cloud-covered moon. The herd, massed together, pressing close to fight off the cold. Bill moved stayed low, his rope coiled and ready, afraid of disrupting the herd before he had a chance at the black horse, spooking the stallion and ruining his own luck. His boots sank into the mud. The rain thudded against the brim of his hat. If the horses knew he'd slipped between them, the the stinging cold had been stronger than their instinct to run. He passed over a pair of beautiful paints and a white mare, all fine horses, but they could have been broken down

mules for all Bill cared. He was smitten with the mythic stallion, it was a horse meant for a hero in the bedtime stories his grandmother had told him as a boy.

The stallion moved among the crowd of horses. The old man raised his coiled rope and tossed out a lasso, catching the wild beast by the neck. The horse threw him, kicked and charged, snapping at the rope as Bill twisted it in his grip, a man hanging onto a hurricane. Twice, the horse pulled him off his feet, splaying Bill face down in the mud, losing his hat and one of his last good teeth. A month on the trail. Four weeks of hard living, freezing, eating rabbits and shitting in the bushes. No, he was taking this God damned horse unless it killed him. He hung on to the rope and didn't let go, his arms burning, turning into rubber as the horse fought. The stallion lunged and thrashed, exhausted, the old man and the stallion collapsing together on the ground, their lungs panting dragon smoke into the cold night air. It was just past midnight.

Spring moved on to summer.

He'd lost four weeks, a tooth and his best hat—a cheap price to pay for such a fine horse. Three months passed since Bill lassoed the wild horse and brought him back to the ranch and he still hadn't tamed the stallion. The horse trotted in circles around the corral as he lit the coals and began forging a set of new shoes for Midnight's hooves. The iron, white hot in the furnace as Bill turned the coals with a pair of tongs, waiting then pulling out a strip of glowing metal, laying it over an anvil and hammering it in the crude shape of a horseshoe. The hot, soft metal bent under the hammer, showers of sparks leapt to ringing notes of steel striking iron.

Bucked off enough horses, a sore back and a bad leg, constant reminders that Bill couldn't break a stallion like Midnight. They came to an understanding, a mutual respect between man and beast. Bill could shoe the horse if he gave him an apple before he touched his

legs. He could saddle him if he spoke softly and didn't move too fast or stare the horse in its dark eyes and with a lot of time and apples, Bill and Midnight struck a truce.

The old man knocked the glowing red horseshoe into a bucket of water, clouds of steam shooting up from the wooden bucket as the metal hissed and cooled. Bill left his hammer on the anvil and walked over to the corral. He wiped the sweat off his face with a faded blue handkerchief.

A wooden splinter from the corral fence, stabbed into Bill's forearm as he leaned over and watched Midnight run in circles. The old man's skin like boot leather, he popped the splinter out, rolling it between his calloused fingers then flicking it off in the grass. Bill didn't mind pain. Life in Texas made a man hard, especially life on a ranch. He'd been out here alone for a long time with nothing to do except break horses and feel the hurt.

Consumption had taken his wife Caroline twelve-years-ago. After that, his daughter Melissa went off and got married. A hard thing to sit by his wife's bedside and watch her cough up her life in bloody clumps, he stood by, helpless while Caroline hacked out her lungs and wasted away into something pale, skeletal, half-dead. He considered moving her south, maybe down along the Rio Grande where the air was hotter and it never snowed, but it was different down there, still like old Mexico, thick with Indians and bandits. He considered the move at least ten times as his wife lay prostrate on the bed, calling out to death with bloody blue handkerchiefs and bedpans full of red spit.

Pride tied him to the ranch and hastened the death of his wife. A boy when his father bought the land where the house stood, fifty-acres, thirty-miles due west of Bexar, he helped clear the brush and nail the boards to build the stables. At thirteen, Bill had planted an apple tree in the front yard at his grandmother's request. In the good years it yielded fruit for pies and

autumn feasts. In the hard years it put apples into their hungry bellies and kept their teeth from falling out. Every time Bill mused over leaving, he remembered his bond with the land. Could he really leave? His father had made this place from nothing and was finally laid to rest next to Bill's mother and grandmother under a grove of oak trees at the top of the hill. He'd ridden the fields outside the ranch for years and caught mustangs, breaking and taming them, their offspring filling the stalls. Overwhelmed by the finality of selling off the horses and closing up the house to head south, he'd put off his decision for three winters until he had no other choice. Death pays no mind to procrastinators, Bill understood that when he found his wilted bride lifeless in a crimson knot of bedsheets.

His daughter, Melissa, married her husband the summer after they'd laid Caroline to rest on the hill next to Bill's parents. Bill didn't know if Melissa really loved the man she'd married. He figured that she just couldn't stand living in the same house as her old man and her mother's ghost. His daughter and her family were all Bill had now. His little girl with golden hair had grown into a beautiful woman. She had married a fine young man, a good father and a hard worker. Together they had given Bill three grandchildren and started a homestead about an hour down the road. It would probably take a horse like Midnight half the time to get there if you got him up to speed.

No one else had seen the horse since Bill had brought him back from the prairie or heard the story of how the old man tracked the herd and lassoed the stallion in a storm. Excited to show the horse to his grandsons, to tell a lie or two by the fire, he smiled and imagined spinning yarns about taking the horse for late night rides through the wild country when the moonlight painted the world in deep blue shadows. Happiness crept up from some long-forgotten place.

Bill had an open invitation to dinner at his daughter's house, a fine night for a free meal and a chance to show off his new horse, he saddled Midnight and headed south for supper. The moon full and shining white in the night sky. He loaded his pistol and tied it onto his belt. Dangerous things hunted under the moonlight.

Fire praised the night with offerings of black smoke. Wild marauders yipped and howled after they'd found their ponies hidden in the dark and rode after Midnight, screaming and pestering him with stray arrows, the mud-covered warrior close behind, mounted on an appaloosa that breathed out a wild spirit like Midnight's own. The appaloosa ran strong, hanging onto Midnight's tail as the scorned brave on its back nocked arrows and sent them whistling passed Midnight as they chased the horse through the dark. Midnight's heart pounded in time with the rhythm of his hooves, striking the ground, lifting, bounding and striking the ground again. An arrow grazed his flank and the stallion whinnied and ran harder. Faster than their horses, even faster than the appaloosa, he was lighter, his legs longer and his heart still wild. Midnight gained distance. The appaloosa and the other painted horses tried to catch him. The raiders became wild things thrashing on their horses' backs, desperate to catch the stallion's reins. Midnight stretched his head forward and ran faster and faster and faster until the arrows fell out of range, the screeching threats of murderers lost in the distance.

Thirty minutes later, Midnight galloped passed Old Bill's ranch. The horse turned at the gates and headed out toward the prairie under a canopy of stars strung across the heavens. An hour later, the raiders found the farmhouse and the other horses in the stables. Another fire dotted red under the black blanket of the night sky. Horses whinnied, stall doors broke open and

Bill's horses joined a herd of stolen ponies headed north toward the Red River. Another farmhouse burned in the distance as Midnight ran toward the moon.

Medicine Horse

Twice, Storm Crow sang his death song, loud and unabashed in the presence of his enemies. Twice, the great Comanche warrior survived and walked over the corpses of the men who'd wanted to kill him. His name rang with power, spoken with pride in the buffalo skin lodges of the People. Stories of his raids lit flames in the eyes of young men in camps from the Llano Estacado to the banks of the Rio Grande. Warriors from many bands answered his calls to the war trail. Young men wanted to follow him, fight with him, be like him—the great war chief who painted himself in the colors of death and mourning, the warrior who dared follow the Owl and mark its sign on his shield. He'd taken whatever woman he'd wanted but now had no wife. Owl had taken his wife, the old women said, in exchange for great medicine in the years before the Tejanos came to Texas. The People whispered such stories in shadow-drenched firelight.

In the springtime of his youth, Storm Crow dreamt of a great black horse and a remuda of ten thousand ponies running north from old Mexico. In his dream, he saw praise and glory and the ruined houses of Tejanos and Mexicans left black behind his war trail. Three nights after his dream, Owl visited. On the third visitation, Owl appeared with a dead rabbit in its talons. The bird ate the rabbit's head and dropped the carcass at the threshold of Storm Crow's tipi, a blessing of good fortune. On the fourth day, Storm Crow climbed to the top of the hill to greet the sun. When Father-Sun stretched over the sky, Storm Crow fell to his knees and vomited an arrowhead from his belly. He coughed the notched warhead into his hand and wiped away the bile, reading the sign that the arrow was barbed and pointed south as it sat flat in the palm of his hand. The bitter stench of mucus and stomach acid punctuated the power of his *puha*. No surprise, young men from other bands and even some Kiowa came to raid when they'd heard the tale of Storm Crow's medicine.

Middle-aged men of Storm Crow's tribe still told stories—the men who took up lances and shields in their youth and rode behind the mud-white-warrior. Men heaped the honors of war upon their mantels and brought back scalps, slaves and stolen ponies from deep in Mexico. They spoke of Storm Crow's visions, his power, his immunity to gunfire and the power of his shield to stop enemies dead in their saddles.

For twenty summers he burned, stole and killed so that twenty winters saw his vast herds of horses running circles in the snow, turning up white clouds of snowflakes in the wake of their stomping hooves. Captive women and boys counted horses as the animals snorted steam from their nostrils, running through flurries in icy wind.

After twenty years of war, Storm Crow became feared and loved by many but none more so than Storm Crow's son.

Storm Crow slowed his horse and tilted his head, motioning for Broken Gun to move up beside his adopted father. Storm Crow studied his face. Scars from powder burns still marked his left cheek, discolored patches where his white skin had bronzed in the sun. The women stained the young man's copper hair black with ashes and buffalo tallow, plaiting it into two braids that fell over his shoulders, the copper tint still shimmering through the dark grease. The young man wasn't born a human being but his skin had burned and tanned for twenty summers under the rays of the sun, his ice blue eyes and red-streaked hair the only clues that he had long been embraced by the People.

Tired, his body worn out, dehydrated, exhausted from days of dancing without food or water, the young man held his head up high as he rode next to his father. Stoic, never complaining about his thirst and hunger, Broken Gun had grown strong.

Storm Crow and Broken Gun slowed their horses on a plateau overlooking a box canyon, the setting sun on the horizon coloring the sky in orange, purple and red. Pink clouds broke apart and hung frozen in the air, dissolving into the background of deepening blue fading into black. Night falling, the two men, hungry and tired, still recovering from the scalp dance, stopped and made camp.

Firelight flashed in Broken Gun's eyes as his father skinned and dressed a rabbit, stabbing the meat with a skewer whittled from a fallen branch. The campfire flames stretched up to the spit, licking the pink-red carcass with greedy, dancing tongues. Broken Gun's head throbbed, the heat from the fire and the smoke stinging his eyes as the fire placed him in a heavy trance.

The hymn of the scalp dance still rang in Broken Gun's head the morning after, lingering as he rose from the circle of exhausted warriors slumbering near a bonfire's ashes, raising his sore body to smell the morning dew settling on the dying embers still hissing and popping in a pit of white-gray coals. The song had followed him throughout the day as the two men broke camp and journeyed west alone. It sung to him as their horses moved between fields of rolling grass and miles of cracked earth and loose shale. He remembered the power of the song and how it called to something primal, buried deep inside. The flames had leapt with the drum beats, twisting, turning, ethereal spirit dancers, singing, chanting. The warriors had rocked back and forth as they made powerful medicine, their song moving him, reaching down and pulling him up to his feet, flinging him head first into the shadowy procession circling the bonfire. -

He'd forgotten himself as he danced around the flames. Most of his life, the Comanche had called him Broken Gun. He had forgotten his white name, sometimes a voice whispered it to

him in his sleep, *Wade*, the name drawn out in the breath of whatever invisible thing that whispered his long forgotten name. *Waaaaade*. A raspy hiss. Broken Gun writhed and jerked in the firelight. He looked up at a pole decorated with bloody scalps and found that he had a heart to kill. *Wade. Wade. Wade*. The drumbeats drowned out the memory of his white name, threatening to throw it into the black chasm haunted by his dreams.

Already killing Wade, Broken Gun cut out his heart and wore his skin, stealing his face and coloring it with war paint, twisting his tongue so he could no longer understand white men's speech, washing away the boy he was and replacing him with a human being.

A Comanche, a warrior, Broken Gun danced with the fire, haunted by memories of another father, a white man who loved him before Storm Crow ever took him as his son, his capture and rebirth faint glimmers of an old dream. He remembered a man called Daddy and a woman with yellow hair, he called her Mamma and she sang to him at night, songs about a god named Jesus, their faces gone now, blurring in time, disappearing more each day he spent roaming the Southern Plains. Forgetting the white world, losing it forever to what it means to be Comanche, Broken Gun wanted to remember Daddy and Mamma for as long as he could. He wondered if they waited for him somewhere, but he already knew what had happened to them. A warrior, he knew what warriors do and had seen what they had done to Daddy, he'd heard Mamma's last song carried with her screams and pleas for mercy. Now lived only in his dreams, caught somewhere in the dark mist.

Sleep came and he remembered.

The summer sun burned hot the year the People appeared in the corn, fields of green stalks with yellow tassels surrounded the Vance's cabin, reaching all the way to the tree line of the nearby forest.

We're gonna build a scarecrow! Brian Vance smiled as he raised his son toward the sky, the air puffing out of his chest as he picked him up, holding his boy high enough to look over the sea of cornstalks.

Higher Daddy! Wade's voice carried on the wind. Wade's father placed him on his shoulders and pointed to the horizon.

We've got to keep the birds from eating all this up. And look over there. Brian Vance pointed to a nearby meadow where three of his horses were grazing. Look, you can see the horses from here. Brian's happiness fell out of his mouth. His expression froze on his face and faded, washing over him in a frigid wave that left prickling sensations pouring over his skin, his blood going cold. He watched six men rush from the tree line near the meadow and throw ropes over his father's horses, far away, too far to see much detail, but he saw the men's long hair, none of them wearing hats.

A whisper from the cornfield, then the whistle of an arrow cutting through the air. Brian Vance gasped, the wooden shaft piercing his left lung, he stumbled, his arms flailing as he tried to keep his son from falling from his shoulders. He went down on his knees, about to die.

The boy's fingers pulled at his father's hair as they tumbled toward the ground together. Still the man tried to protect his son, clutching the boy's legs as they fell. Brian's knees hit the ground first. He paused there a moment, holding on to his spirit and his little boy for as long as he could. Like a termite riddled oak tree, he slowly fell forward on his face, dead.

The world upside down, Wade fell off his father's shoulders and rolled into the corn. Dazed, the boy looked for his father and started to cry. A wall of green corn stalks parted and a large man stepped forward with a bow and arrow in his hands, his face painted like a ghost, his hair, long and black, reaching down to the waist of his buckskin leggings. Behind him, a bronze-skinned man broke off ears of corn and shoved them into a burlap sack.

Screams in the distance, then Wade recognized the howls of his mother from far away. Storm Crow, the man who'd just murdered Wade's father threw his bow over his shoulder and reached down to pick up the boy. Wade scrambled back, trying to distance himself from the marauder. Storm Crow hesitated. He looked at the boy with imploring eyes, motioning for the child to come to him with a gentle wave of his hands. He smiled at the boy like his own child and he, the father who had come to take his son home. Wade froze in place and the stranger's benevolence faded. He reached into the corn and picked the boy up, throwing him over his shoulder, the stranger's hands rough like Wade's father's but larger and more calloused. The other man carrying the sack attended the corpse of Brian Vance, stripping off the dead man's clothes and taking his scalp.

Storm Crow ran with the boy in his arms. Hysterical, Wade saw the other man cutting off his father's hair and heard his mother wailing. They were hurting Mama. He kicked and squirmed, but the stranger was too strong, the struggling child hardly more than an annoyance.

Surrounded by a sea of green, corn stalks lashed at his face as the stranger ran away with him. A dozen horses waited for the raiding party just past the tree line that hemmed the Vance's cornfield. Storm Crow set the boy down near a large painted stallion. A man with a black face and feathers braided into his hair sat on the horse's back, the animal snorting and shaking its head, frightening the child even more. The man looked Wade in the eyes and drew a

Bowie knife from his belt. Storm Crow handed the boy up to the mounted warrior, who glared at the boy and spoke sternly in a language that Wade couldn't understand. He pulled Wade over the horse's neck and ripped off his clothes, cutting the tough strips of fabric with his knife. The boy naked, he turned and threw the child over the back of his horse, tying him down at the wrists and ankles. Wade cried louder. The man grabbed a handful of the boy's hair and placed the edge of his knife to his scalp. Wade remembered what happened to his father. The fear of his own death drowned out the despair of seeing his father dead and hearing his mother's cries. Tears streamed down his face and he fell silent.

Wade peeked at man on the horse through tear-clouded eyes. The man shouted sternly to the others, the way a father instructs his sons. He carried a feathered lance in his right hand. He motioned with the weapon, pointing it north as he shouted. The black and white Indian mounted his own horse and rode toward the burning cabin where two men held Wade's mother on the ground.

A black curtain of smoke reached toward the sky. Red light beamed through patches of cornstalks swaying in the breeze. The flames bit down on the cedar logs of the Vance cabin and devoured the homestead. The men left Wade's mother's naked body in the front yard as the cabin burned.

The horse carrying Wade charged north toward the Staked Plains, leaving behind the wreckage of the Vance family. Wade's mother's screams faded just as a Comanche warrior silenced her with his knife. Wade watched the inferno shrink into the distance as the horse jostled him up and down, picking up speed. A black halo of smoke soared over the ashes of Wade's life, painting the sky with clouds of smoke and death.

Wade remembered his life only during sleep. His memories spent the day hiding behind his eyes, showing themselves when he rested and forgot his Comanche name. This night, as the young man slept on a rock shelf plateau overlooking the black-mouthed canyon, new visions danced with the ghosts in his dreams.

Look and I will show you. A voice spoke in the young man's sleep.

A great black horse emerged from the darkness, the rising sounds of men yelling and gunfire, a bright flash. The horse stood behind a curtain of flames, red light flickered in its eyes.

Listen and you will hear.

The horse reared and snorted. Smoke plumed from its nostrils, the ghostly voices of men fighting stifled by the noise of its breath, the rattle of an old man's death groan, the cry of a spirit escaping its mortal form.

See.

The horse bucked wildly, kicking against the flames, on its hind legs, it stood, twisting its head and whinnying—the shrieks of a woman ravaged.

See and remember.

The horse stomped into the ground. The earth wailed against the kicking hooves, the screams of children rising up from the ground. The horse calmed and fixed its eyes on the young man. It moved closer, studying the human face watching it through a dream. The horse drew a breath and the young man felt the air around him pull away. He remembered spiral cloud that touched the earth and killed three of his father's horses when he was a boy, Storm Crow's horses, part of the great herd that Broken Gun tended to as a child. The horse exhaled, choking the young man with a cloud of smoke. Marrow froze in his bones. He saw firelight dance in the horse's eyes and just for a moment, he saw the face of a small boy looking back at him.

Storm Crow only dreamt half dreams far from the village. Years of wandering in the open world had taught him never to give himself over fully to sleep, not when he lay down in lands travelled by enemies and evil spirits. He kept no fires at night, preferring to wake up near a mountain cat over the blunt end of an Apache club, but tonight he avoided sleep altogether and made an exception for fire. He roasted meat and kept warm, watching over his son and listening to the boy moving beneath his buffalo skins. The boy sometimes stirred and had fits, his sleep troubled, fighting enemies that Storm Crow could not see. The father watched his son, taking care not to disturb his dreams. Soon it would be time to let his son become his own man.

Broken Gun had seen blood. He had hunted buffalo and taken part in a raid against Lipans, had moved in his first scalp dance but not yet ready to make powerful medicine. He had no shield, no animal spirit, no medicine horse to share breath with and ride into war. Tomorrow, Storm Crow would ride with his son to the place where he had seen the Owl and spoke to the Four Winds. He would tell his son of the great vision he'd seen and how, on the first night after the vision, he'd take no food or water, gathering the rattles and the skin from Grandfather and Grandmother Snake who had struck without sound, giving over their power. He would tell his son how he cut out the venom sacks of the two rattlesnakes and dipped his arrows into the poison, arrows meant for his enemies. He would tell how he rested with no fire, staring into starlight that burned white hot against the blue-black canopy of the heavens.

When Broken Gun seemed eager for a vision, Storm Crow would remind the boy that on the morning of the second day, he stalked a small herd of buffalo and took the bull with three arrows and a thrust of his lance and how he drew a red line with his knife and ate the animal's liver, still warm and wet with blood. He would recall how he cracked the bull's skull and took

out its brain and spent the early hours of the day stripping the hide from the carcass and taking as much meat as he could carry before the buzzards and the desert could claim the rest, sharing the leftovers with the wolves and coyotes. He would tell his son that as dusk settled on the earth, he cut a swatch of the buffalo hide and heated it over the fire, the East Wind blowing gently on the flames, the coals in the fire pit humming the song of cicadas, radiating an enormous orange glow. Howls and yips filled the air as wolves tore at the carcass that Storm Crow had left behind in a swale of yellow grass, and he rested and dreamt of the owl in the sky. Finally, he'd tell his son that on the third day of his quest he sat on the rocks and made his medicine shield and how he made a hoop out of hickory withy and scraped the hide with the sharp edge of a rock, stripping the flesh until it was smooth, rubbing the hide with the buffalo's brains, making the skin supple. He chewed on pieces of roasted meat as he worked and stretched the skin over the hickory hoop and sewed the hide together with the bull's sinew and stuffed the shield with thick bunches of rabbit and buffalo fur. He'd tell his son that he'd painted the signs from his visions and a map of the stars in red on the face of his shield and after he'd used it to make war, he decorated it with the scalp of a Tonkawa chief and the golden locks of a white woman who his son had seen in a dream. When Storm Crow had told all of this to his son, he'd leave him where the Four Winds talked until the boy found his own *puha*.

The young man rose from his blanket and stumbled off, still drunk with sleep. Storm Crow watched him leave, shuffling toward the ledge overlooking the canyon. He waited until his son's blue-white silhouette vanished beyond the camp's perimeter. He rose from his own blanket and followed.

The young man felt his father's presence, his spirit filled him with a sense of strength. Even as he became his own man, his father still protected him and kept him safe.

Storm Crow stepped closer to his son, pausing just behind the young man's left shoulder. He remained silent, letting the young man decide whether it was time to speak.

Broken Gun looked off in the darkness and spoke, letting his words carry on the wind and fall apart in echoes swallowed by the sleeping canyon below. Father, give me a knife so I can cut the night in two, and keep the stars and the winds that blow underneath the moon. I can give the other part to the voice in my dreams, so he can feed his sadness and drink from the darkest well of the night sky.

His son had seen a vision, yet Storm Crow said nothing. A smart man knew enough to listen when other powers spoke with human beings, a sign of power.

A powerful horse spoke with the voice of a grandfather and a suffering woman. The young man raised his arm and pointed to the canyon below, an enormous gaping-wide maw, threatening to swallow the sky as the sun rose to claim the morning.

Storm Crow saw it first, a shadow moving over a hill near the north wall of the canyon. He had seen ten thousand horses in his lifetime, through the eyes of his people but never one that moved like the half-wild stallion he'd chased and lost so many years ago, the night that he tore his son from his white father's hands before his brothers put the family to the knife. He could never forget that horse from long ago, wild in repose, savage and majestic. It had fought him, kicking and jumping, hurling itself into the sky, crashing against the earth, mad with a dream of freedom so close to losing. There it stood, the same animal he'd chased after and lost in the night, the saddle still strapped onto its back, the leather chapped and dry, scores of white rivulets

branching through the tanned hide. Storm Crow laughed in amazement. He recognized one of his blue striped arrows still lodged in the saddle horn. Broken reins dangled from the side of the horse's mouth. Storm Crow could see the scars on the animal's face and legs, cuts from being harnessed in freedom, a ghost carried on its back.

The young man saw it now. He reached for his father and tapped Storm Crow on the back of his arm. It's there, the young man whispered. The horse from my dream.

Broken Gun set down his bow and quiver, taking care to lay them silently against the loose rocks near his feet. His arms at his sides, the way his father had taught him to approach an untamed horse, he saw the stallion which saw him, too. It ignored Storm Crow, focusing only on his son, whose copper hair glimmered in the sunlight. Broken Gun moved closer. The horse snorted and swung its head but made no attempt to run. Broken Gun inched closer. The horse met his gaze and the young man stared into its eyes, the same eyes from his dream which shined with fire, reflecting the fleeting image of a boy grown into a man. The saddle straps creaked as the horse took in a great breath of air, filling its lungs, expanding its sides until the old, cracked leather strained. The horse leaned forward and pressed its nose against Broken Gun's head. Broken Gun opened his mouth and the horse exhaled, breathing the wild spirit into his lungs. His heart pounded with courage and the rhythm of stomping hooves, and his spirit lifted, untamed and free.

The Ghost

The shade of a boy visited the young man, a spirit torn from the earth, a ghost brought to council that spoke to Broken Gun in the dark. The young man did not fear the ghost-child, even though the child was unnatural. He looked into the boy's cold blue eyes and studied the lines in his skin. The face familiar, so much like the one he remembered looking back from still water the night he ran from Storm Crow. Seventeen winters had passed since his last memory of the boy's reflection on the blade of his hunting knife. Broken Gun's face had changed, hardened and aged as his white skin burned red in the sun. The boy's image remained the same, always the same, forever young, frozen dead without emotion.

He knew the boy's name, *Wade* the voice hissed into his ear. The voice delighted in such torment, creeping into the young man's sleep and whispering the boy's name, summoning the ghost child to appear and scream for a man named Daddy. The voice often showed him two spirits, the ghost child and a giant with an iron beard. The giant had snow-colored skin and eyes made from ice reflecting the winter sky. The young man watched a shadow figure the giant in his dreams. Night after night, the shadow sent arrows into Daddy's chest. The ghost-child Wade wailed in sorrow as the shadow knelt down beside Daddy. Black fingers slipped through the giant's hair. The sound of steel sawing flesh. The howl of a panther. The shadow form arching his back in triumph, shaking Daddy's bloody scalp in the air, somewhere a woman screamed and sang her death song, words that Broken Gun used to understand. Wade sobbed and the shadow carried him away. Night after night, the dream ended the same.

The ghost wanted something this night, he stared back at Broken Gun, blank blue eyes waiting forever. In the dark perimeter, the shadow watched in silence, waiting in the black while Broken Gun studied the boy in the moonlight.

Speak! Broken Gun shouted.

The spirit remained still, his mouth didn't move, his eyes didn't blink. Broken Gun's skin grew cold and drew back as he noticed the ghost's pallor fading and then glowing with the passing of the clouds over the moon. Broken Gun felt fear uncoiling in his stomach just above the groin, an emptiness that spread dimples over his flesh, he tightened his stomach and forced the feeling deep down in his gut, grappling with it and beating it into rage before it mastered him and shamed him as a coward. Broken Gun grabbed a handful of dirt and threw it at the ghost.

Speak!

Broken Gun kicked more dirt on the ghost and thrust his neck forward, feigning an attack.

The spirit turned and stared in the young man's eyes. Remember Daddy. Soft, innocent, the voice shocked Broken Gun. The ghost's mouth opened, the jaw dropping as it spoke again. Remember Mamma, the ghost's mouth didn't move. Another voice came from the chasm between the ghost's pallid lips. The young man fell back and then scrambled to his feet, his moccasins kicking a whirlwind of dust as he heard the voice of a woman singing, the song echoing out from desiccated lungs.

Mamma's death song.

The Abduction

The painted stallion ran hard and fast, its legs lifted and struck the ground in a rhythm that shook Wade's body as he rose and fell on the horse's croup, his head whipping back and forth, turning him into a rag doll. The hot pain in his neck made him feel like his head could snap off and roll free in the grass, his eyes baring witness to a painted man on a painted horse riding away with his headless corpse. He thought about death and escape and thirst and hunger and his mother and father but the constant violence of the running horse suffocated those notions in waves of anguish.

The horses ran on and on, tireless immortal creatures with strange wild men on their backs. Primal magic filled the animals' lungs, flowing out through their nostrils only to be inhaled back again as the beasts stampeded north leaving behind the world Wade remembered and wanted to forget—the house, the farm, his parents, his brothers, his grandfather. The back of the painted horse moved up and down, its stride bucking Wade with its motion, leather straps holding him in place on the pony's hindquarters, the restraints biting his flesh, carving red circles around his wrists and ankles.

The horses ran north as the sun retreated from the sky exploding in streams of blue, orange and purple colored clouds—north as heaven turned black and the stars peered down from the firmament—north where the moon climbed up from the horizon and lit the white backs of a thousand buffalo stirring in a valley of tall grass.

The wild men spotted the herd and stopped their ponies. At last, the horses showed signs of exhaustion, lapping the air with distended tongues, their barrels heaving, their bodies wet and covered with foam.

The men called to each other, pointing feather adorned lances at the lumbering behemoths on the valley floor. They spoke a language Wade couldn't understand. Three of them began to argue, a fourth man raised his voice making an assertion the others seemed to agree with. The four of them rode down into the valley together and culled a calf from the herd of buffalo before sending the beasts stampeding off through the dark. The riders circled the calf, ramming the animal with the flanks of their horses, driving their lances into the poor bewildered thing as it turned and snorted. A man on a bay horse thrust his lance into the back of the calf's neck. The animal squealed and collapsed on its stomach, letting out a chuff and a bellow before it laid down and died.

The men wasted no time in their work, cutting open the calf's belly, taking out its liver and quartering it with their knives, devouring the organ still warm and slippery with blood. The rest of the riders took their horses down into the valley and dismounted next to the kill, taking turns cutting out the calf's innards. One of the men pulled a large pouch from the animal's belly. Wade felt sick, nearly vomiting as the man cut open the fleshy sack and scooped out clumps of congealed milk and partially digested grass. The sharp stench of bile wafted from the substance but the man seemed undeterred by the smell. He ladled the grassy milk in his hand and consumed it with a ravenous vigor that terrified the little boy strapped on the back of the horse.

Wade thanked God or what he knew of God that the horse he laid bound to stood idle and waiting while the wild men feasted on the blood and guts of the baby animal. He watched them from the corner of a downturned eye as they sat in a ring around the dead calf, their hands and mouths covered in gore. He groaned as the horse inhaled, the expansion of its lungs triggering surges of pain in his ribs and abdomen, the boy's body blue with bruises, the skin on his back scorched and peeling from exposure.

The men made no fire, no sign to mark their position and give away their escape in the far-off chance that enemies followed them from the raid on Wade's home. They huddled around the carcass, mostly silent, conversing occasionally in low tones and whispers. Monsters dining on flesh and blood. Wade trembled and tried not to cry, afraid the men would notice him, hoping they would forget him.

The wild man untied the boy and slid him off the back of his horse. Another day gone, countless miles lost between the house Wade's father built and the painted men burned to the ground. Hours of suffering on horseback, the boy's flesh cooked by the sun. Day rolled into night, a hopeless black chasm where the six-year-old boy dreamed about a place his mother called hell and wondered if he fell in through its back door. His body ached from riding nonstop, stowed on the rear of a horse like the carcass of a deer. He knew constant pain from the horse jarring him up and down, his ribs bruised, his lungs gasping for air each time the animal quickened its gate.

Wade's tiny body shivered from the nighttime cold. Too sore to stand, he slumped and fell to the ground avoiding the gaze of the man that brought him so far away from home. The painted man left the boy alone, going off to explore a grove of Ash trees, gathering kindling and nosing around for signs of game.

Other men brought their horses inside the clearing near the Ash trees. A man with three yellow lines drawn down his face and golden feathers in his hair jumped down from his pony. He searched a bag behind his saddle and retrieved a line of rope, a handful of wooden pegs and a mallet. He tied a rope around his horse's leg and looped the other end around one of the stakes, hammering it into the dirt. He tugged the line, testing the security of the peg's seat in the earth

and seemed satisfied. The man with yellow paint felt Wade's eyes on his back and turned, staring at the boy. Wade tried to move but couldn't, his naked body bruised, his wrists and ankles still bound with leather thongs. He tried to speak and choked, his words stopped by the swollen tongue clogging the opening of his throat. Tears shook in Wade's eyes and for a moment the man with yellow paint seemed merciful, a savior ready to take pity on the child and rescue him, a hero to carry him home to a mother and father that might not be dead.

The man with yellow paint watched Wade for a long time, considering a question in his mind that the boy could never know or understand. He looked at the child's face and, in the child's eyes, weighing a decision suddenly decided by Wade's abductor returning to the clearing with an armful of sticks.

The men made a fire and roasted pieces of the buffalo calf they killed in the valley the night before. Each man had his own water skin and they drank from them greedily, washing down chunks of beef torn off in their teeth, their grease covered mouths and oil drenched fingers staining the leather drinking vessels with mouth marks and fingerprints. The man with the yellow lines on his face addressed Wade's captor. His voice calm and understated like the tone Wade's father used whenever he told his mother that his food was cold or he'd have to leave home on an errand. The man with yellow lines on his face gestured to the boy with a casual wave of his hand that resembled a man waving off a mosquito, a motion that made the boy seem of no real importance. Wade's captor listened as the man in yellow paint spoke and then turned and looked at the tiny boy shivering naked in the firelight. The captor sighed and turned his water skin upside down, pouring a trickle of water over Wade's mouth. The water stung as it splashed over the boy's cracked, blistered mouth, wetting it enough to flush off bits of skin, dead and paper thin, moistening his lips just enough to make them bleed. The water trickled down

Wade's throat and he choked. The boy coughed and closed his mouth, afraid to spit the water out on the ground.

The men laughed as the boy coughed, hooting and pointing, one of them grabbed his own throat and made choking sounds until the amusement of his friends overwhelmed him and he fell back on his ass, laughing and looking up at the stars with tears in his eyes. Another man gestured to Wade with his water skin and pretended to drop it before he could pass it to the boy. When that joke lost momentum, the man corked the water skin and tossed it on Wade's chest, the boy still bound and unable to move.

The choir of insults went on until the man in yellow paint stood up. He picked up a bota bag and crouched down next to the boy. The laughter slowed and died with a few grumbling complaints as the other men turned over and prepared to sleep. The man with the three yellow lines on his face pushed the water skin off Wade's chest and lifted his own bota bag to the boy's mouth.

Jibito. The man motioned for the boy to drink but Wade didn't move. *Jibito.* The man spoke again, this time placing the tips of his fingers to his lips. *Patzohuip.* The man padded his mouth with his hand. Wade nodded back and the man smiled and let the boy drink, pulling the bota bag away occasionally to keep the child from choking. Water became the only thing Wade knew and ever wanted to know in that sweet, fleeting moment when the cobwebs washed out of his mouth and his tongue soaked in the damp stream. The man lifted up the boy's head and let him drink until his tiny belly bloated and threatened to burst.

At first light, the men broke camp and the man with yellow lines on his face rode ahead with three others. Wade wanted to go with him.

That morning, Wade's captor showed mercy for the first time since he splashed the trickle of water on the boy's face, he cut Wade's bindings and placed him upright in the saddle behind him. Together they rode for another half day before finding a camp waiting in some green, savage place in the Texas hills.

One of the wild men waved for the riders to stop. They slowed their horses and the wild man pointed to the tree line.

Bunitó. The man pointed to a thin wisp of smoke twisting up through the trees. The men talked and the man that spotted the smoke cupped his hands around his mouth and howled like a wolf. The others waited a moment and took their own turns howling. They stopped and listened and another howl answered them from somewhere behind the trees near the smoke. The men smiled and laughed, one of them made a challenge and they spurred their horses to gallop, racing up the hill toward the phantom snake crawling to the sky.

Just beyond the top of the hill, a clearing of trees hid on the opposite slope, a space large enough to gather a hundred warriors and the women that followed behind them dragging travois. Scores of tipis arranged in even lines hemmed the hillside. Cones of taugh buffalo hide stretched twelve feet high, their apertures puffing plumes of smoke as women cooked over kettles in their bowels. The smell of horses and roasting beef perfumed the air. The women of the camp greeted the newcomers with strange cries, shrill enough to send shivers down Wade's back. Little girls followed their mothers, carrying water and doing chores. Naked boys streaked through the camp laughing and playing war.

Wade's captors rode through the tipi alleys, greeting other men that called out to them in warm, familiar tones. An occasional hoot from a young man prompted a smile and a friendly taunt, usually shouted back with the same bravado.

At the center of the camp, a rider sat on a spotted horse. The man's skin coated in white mud, black hand prints covered his mouth and shoulders and a black band lined his eyes. The horse he rode matched the colors of its rider, its white hair dotted with black circles from its nose to the sprout of its tail, owl feathers dangled from its mane. Red rings circled its eyes and three, crimson, horizontal bars marked its nose. Smaller, saffron markings surrounded the pony's nostrils. Jagged yellow lightning bolts decorated the horse's legs and its neck and barrel wore barbed arrows declaring victory over its enemies. Dozens of crimson horse shoe shapes adorned the pony's flank. Wade stared at the mythical beast, a hornless unicorn, the animal side of a centaur with a black-eyed demon rider growing from its back. Terror punched Wade in the heart, thumping inside his chest, escaping his body through electric currents running cold through his limbs and dissipating in the palms of his hands and feet. He recognized the man on the horse, the man that came out of the cornfield and shot his father with an arrow. Wade's captors lowered their heads and avoided the man's eyes, their postures more akin to fear than fealty. One of the men quickened his pony's gait, eager to move away from the fearsome war chief and the speckled medicine horse that possessed the same hollow stare as its master.

Wade wanted to look away but he couldn't. His instinct to turn and bury his face in the back of the rider that carried him instantly stifled by the memories of the same man taunting him by the camp fire and the realization that these men had taken him from his father's arms, killed his family and burned his home. Wade locked eyes with the ghost from the cornfield. The man stared back, his head slowly turning as the riders passed by. A haze of smoke hung in the summer air, framing the black and white rider and the painted horse against a backdrop of hell on earth.

The Escape

Two boys ran through the night, the sounds of their naked feet bending the grass boomed loud as drumbeats. Their hearts fluttered as they ran, their lungs heaving as they sucked in air through their nostrils and lost it again, struggling to reclaim it in deep gasps and gaping mouths.

Maximiliano ran faster than the other boy. He pulled Wade by the hand, forcing the younger child to keep up. Wade stumbled and Maximiliano dragged him back on his feet. They couldn't stop. They had to keep running.

A darkened tipi disappeared behind them, growing smaller the further away they ran. Inside the lodge slept another boy, older than Maximiliano. The boy's skin pale like Wade's but he spoke in a different language that neither Wade or Maximiliano could understand. He acknowledged commands that the wild men gave him and he appeared eager to please them, to be like them or be one of them. He watched over the other boys, shouting orders when the women instructed him to. He abused the children if they didn't comply, his blue eyes blazing with all the hate in the world every time he got the chance to beat them. At night, the older boy slept near the entrance of the tipi. Any child tripping over his outstretched legs or stepping on his feet doomed to wake him and suffer his wrath. Wade and Maximiliano lifted off their blankets and crept through the darkness, tip toeing over the sleeping boy. Shadows in the darkness, the runaway boys pushed aside the buffalo hide flap revealing a portal to freedom and the starry void hung low in the sky.

They ran.

Maximiliano pulled Wade into a grove of chaparral. He pressed his hand against Wade's heaving chest and tried to calm the younger boy before he spoke.

Necesitamos un caballo.

Wade's wide, empty eyes made it clear that the child didn't understand Maximiliano's words.

Un Caballo. ¿Entender?

The *Indios* kept a huge herd of horses at the base of the hill below their village. If they could get one of those horses and get away before the morning came they might find a way back home. The little boy didn't understand but that didn't matter. Maximiliano knew that a horse was the only hope for escape.

Green Flashes in the Dark

A multitude of ponies stirred under the black sky. Horses captured from *haciendas* in the south mixed with mustangs and Texas thoroughbreds—shining stallions liberated from Mexican breeders courted wild mares as they turned about in a vast, slow moving circle. Four slaves stood guard atop horses broken by the *Indios* and held watch with slumped heads and half-closed eyes. One of them carried a rifle, his head raised and alert but he rode far away and kept his attention on the dark regions beyond the camp. Maximiliano picked a spot hidden from sight, a black corner where the boys might poach a horse from the herd and slip off without rousing one of the guards.

The runaways moved quietly and stayed out of sight. They skirted the edge of the herd, moving closer to the spot that Maximiliano chose to hide in and wait for the chance to steal one of the stolen horses.

Wade followed the older boy. He didn't know the boy's name and he couldn't understand anything he said but the boy was kind and he took Wade with him when he snuck out of the big tent where the older, cruel boy slept. The boy looked at Wade and pressed his finger against his lips and Wade understood that he couldn't make noise.

The air stank with the scent of animals and dung. Wade recognized the smell of horse apples and remembered his father grumbling about cleaning shit out of the barn. The memory stabbed him, a sad feeling dug a hole in his stomach and for a moment, sorrow was more palpable than fear. The child savored the acrid smell, hanging onto the recollection of his father's voice. He breathed in the gamey fragrance of horseflesh and detected a scent in the air of another wild thing, a musk that reminded him of the tomcats marking out territory behind his father's stable.

Maximiliano looked for a small horse. He had no tack or rope and his only chance rested in his ability to jump on a pony's back and hang onto its neck. He searched for a horse with a brand, one with shoes nailed to its hooves, an animal trained to carry a rider, one less likely to throw him down. He waited and watched, so hard to see any details in the dark as horses crowded together and moved like a slow rolling river.

A bay mare with a star shaped mark burned in its flank passed close to Maximiliano. The boy rushed out from his hiding place and leapt on the animal's back. The startled pony reared and kicked. Maximiliano reached for its mane, his fingers pulling out a clump of the horse's hair as the boy slid off its back and fell to the ground. The movement frightened the wild horses running behind the mare, the ponies already alarmed by something they smelled in the air whinnied and stomped, kicking at the boy scrambling to get up off the ground.

A deep, rumbling sound raised the hair on Wade's neck. The heavy feeling of staring eyes burned a hole in his back. The rumbling sound grew louder and a vibration carried through the air, a reverberation that took his mind back to the tomcats behind the barn and the sounds they made when they fought each other. He turned his head and saw two green eyes peering back at him from the black recesses of Maximiliano's hiding spot.

Maximiliano rolled away from the striking hooves. A piebald mustang reared up and stomped the boy's leg. Maximiliano cried out, the pain caused by the horse's kick too much to bear behind closed teeth. The horse struck him again and again he screamed and a stream of tears flowed from his eyes, running down his dirty face. He cried in fear of the wild stallion trying to kill him and the pain from his wounded leg and from the horror of the horses speeding up to stampede and from the understanding that he might die amid the stomping herd and that he would surely die when the *Indios* captured him and dragged him back up the hill.

The slaves guarding the herd called out to each other, pointing to the spot where Maximiliano sobbed and fought to escape the frenzied horses. The guard with the rifle fired a shot. Dogs sleeping in the hillside camp above the field of horses woke up and barked out alarms that rang through the avenues of a tipis, echoing between the trees and over the tops of nearby hills. The jade eyes watching Wade blinked and disappeared and the boy felt the muscled form of a giant cat brush passed him in the darkness.

The Sadness of Broken Gun

Hands slapped against tanned animal hides stretched over wooden drums. Painted warriors gathered around the children. Men and Women sang together, the high-pitched trilling of female ululations rolling over the deep voices of the men.

The ghost from the cornfield stood in the center of the people, his face still adorned with the black hand print and the thick black bar painted over his eyes. Wade looked at the man that shot the arrow through his father's heart. The man felt the boy's eyes and stared back, watching the boy with indifference, his expression cold and empty.

Wade and Maximiliano stood side by side with a hundred warriors, children and women behind them and surrounding them on the left and right. An open path from the edge of the camp to the tree line laid before the two boys and the instinct to run and escape tugged in their bellies, urging them to move in the direction of impending freedom. The black and white man called to a teenage boy and the boy ran up to him carrying a large black revolver. The man took the pistol in his right hand and pointed it at Wade and Maximiliano, closing his left eye as he moved the gun slowly from side to side, setting his sights on one boy and then the other.

¡Corre! The man called out and Maximiliano's head raised up. The boy's expression changed from a downturned face of gloom to a look of sudden optimism, as if he discovered a way the boys might survive their apparent execution.

¡Corre! The man shouted again and nodded his head sideways, gesturing for the boys to go. Maximiliano's eyes lit up with hope.

¡Andale! Maximiliano grabbed Wade by the hand and started to run. The older boy forgot the pain in his legs, forgot the trampling horses, forgot the bruises on his back, forgot

everything except the memory of life before the Comanches killed his mother and carried him north. He pulled Wade behind him, the two boys stumbling and righting themselves, moving as fast as their raw feet could carry them.

The sound of an explosion cut through the chanting and the noise of drums. Maximiliano tripped and fell, letting go of Wade's hand as he fell to the ground face first with a hole in his back. Wade felt him fall and remembered his father and remembered falling from his father's shoulders. The same man that shot the arrow through his father chest had just shot his only friend. Maximiliano's eyes stayed open wide and dead, watching the world and everything in it; spirit, man and beast as Wade ran crying toward the woods.

Storm Crow pointed the gun and pulled the trigger. A roar of fire bellowed from the nine-inch barrel of the Walker Colt. The warrior smiled, savoring the smell of gunpowder hanging thick in the air. The gun felt good in his hands and he rejoiced taking it from the enemy *Tejano* called *Cap Tain*. The smoke cleared and Storm Crow walked over to the dead Mexican boy, kicking the child over and laughing in surprise at the size of the exit wound in the boy's chest. The war chief shifted his attention to the white child running for the tree line. He raised the Walker Colt and watched the boy over the back of the barrel. He timed the child's movement, leveling the gun, pulling back the hammer, the weapon sounding with a loud click as it cocked. Storm Crow fired again and another blast of smoke and fire erupted in the morning air. The East Wind blew the smoke away and the form of the boy manifested from behind the black curtain of gunpowder, growing smaller the further the boy ran.

Storm Crow cursed and spat. Some of the men muttered, laughing under their breath but none of them foolish enough to let Storm Crow hear. Storm Crow turned and walked back

through the crowd of people that parted before him, afraid to touch him or stay too long in his path.

Wade ran, his legs moving as fast as they could. His feet hurt and a lump of terror stuck in his throat, gagging him when he tried to swallow. He heard the sounds of hooves punishing the ground and looked back as the man covered in white mud with the black handprint across his face rode toward him on a charging horse, closing the distance between them in seconds. The horse collided with the boy, sending his tiny body hurdling in the air. Wade landed on his back, looking up at the man pointing a gun at his face. He heard the pistol cock and closed his eyes, waiting for the gunshot to tear him apart. The man pulled the trigger and the hammer fell, slamming home with snapping sound. Nothing happened, no explosion, no smoke or fire or lead ball tumbling through the air. The man cocked the gun and fired again and again nothing happened. The boy and the man looked at each other once more, this time their eyes both wide, dazzled and amazed.

Puhakut

Storm Crow pulled the boy down from his horse. The child turned his head, listening and trying to make sense of his surroundings, an old flour sack pulled down over his face and tied at the neck with a length of baling twine.

An early fog rolled over the ground. The old woman waited for Storm Crow, standing in the morning mist before the entrance of her lodge. She watched the great war chief and listened to the faint whispers of *Piamupitz*, the old one who spoke secrets in the warrior's ear.

Storm Crow looked at the old woman but didn't speak. He had seen her once before, her shriveled, skeletal body naked, tattoos covering her draping skin, spiral ink marking concentric circles over her belly and breasts, bones pierced through her lips and ear lobes. She painted her face with the same white mud from the place where the lake drinks the river and she wore a large headdress fashioned from elk antlers with pieces of mirrors dangling down from the points on long pieces of string. She smiled and her chapped, pierced lips revealed a mouth full of sharp teeth. Her yellow eyes gleamed as she motioned for Storm Crow to bring the boy inside the lodge.

The medicine woman cut the bailing twine around Wade's neck with a rusted knife. She tore off the sack on his head and shouted, shaking a gourd-rattle in the little boy's face, his expression frozen in the moment as she shouted and scolded him in words he couldn't understand. The old woman craned her neck forward and studied the child's face, the antlers on her headdress grazing his hair. She leaned in, turning her head to bring her ear close to his lips. The *Puhakut* listened to the secrets of the boy's spirit and placed her rattle on the floor.

A mound of gray-white stones laid over a bed of burning coals in the center of the lodge. The woman loomed over the hot rocks, chanting and turning her hands, her fingers twisting into

claws that resembled gnarled tree limbs. She kneaded the air, working something invisible to Storm Crow and the boy but visible and tangible to her and her alone. She stopped knotting her fingers and ladled water over the hot stones. The rocks hissed, spitting out white clouds that filled the interior of the lodge. The woman retreated, vanishing behind a curtain of white vapor. She reappeared, muttering an incantation and carrying a small wooden bowl in her hands. She placed the bowl on the ground and sat on the floor of the lodge cross-legged, staring Wade in the eyes.

Nacútsi. The old woman glared at Storm Crow, extending her arm and making a grabbing motion with her talon-like fingers. The warrior reached into his belt and handed the old woman the Walker Colt. She held the weapon in her hands, fumbling with the cylinder, running her claws over the mechanisms until she broke the gun open, dumping loads of lead and gunpowder into the wooden bowl at her feet. The *Puhakut* whispered over the contents of the bowl, reaching into the mound of hot stones, picking up two of the burning rocks in her naked hands. The woman called out and struck the stones together. A trail of sparks flashed over the bowl, igniting the gunpowder. Storm Crow turned away from the explosion, expecting the projectiles to come hurtling through clouds of vapor and gun smoke.

Bunitó. The old woman pointed to the contents of the bowl. Three conical shaped bullets remained, one pointed to the east, one to the west and third toward Storm Crow's heart.

Wade saw the shadow of the woman's face and the silhouette of her antler headdress through a haze of steam and smoke. She reached out, touching the boy's chest with her talons.

Toyarohco. The woman's eyes flashed green and she made a sound in the back of her throat like a growling cat.

Falling Arrows

A spider caught the North Wind blowing through the branches of a Live Oak tree. Silver threads flailed as the wind tugged against the trap, the spider's construction failing and tearing against the gale, the web tangling and turning in a cold breeze that smelled like rain.

Across a field, atop a hill, a stag moved over the ridgeline, the eighteen points of its antlers formed a crown of twisted bone pointing up to the darkening sky, its silhouette framed against an atmosphere of clouds turned gray and black with the burden of rain. The buck bounded along the crest of the short hilltop, pausing to look down on the three riders following at a distance.

Storm Crow turned his head, looking back at the two men riding behind him, staring at them from the corner of his left eye as he hissed and made signs to stop moving and be silent.

Storm Crow spoke in a whisper, his words caught up and snatched from his mouth by a sudden gust from the east. The winds betray us.

Storm Crow looked back at the deer on the ridgeline and nocked an arrow in his bow.

He can smell us. Storm Crow spoke to the men behind him as he gauged the distance between his bow and the stag on the hilltop.

Broken Gun brought his horse close to his father, as close as he could without the animal stirring and pulling away. The large, black horse snorted in protest, turning its head to the left as it backed away from Storm Crow's side. The old warrior watched the horse with contempt as the stallion whinnied and stomped its hooves. He marveled at the pony's bright eyes and powerful neck and he resented it. The black horse had a strong spirit and Storm Crow knew that the stallion would never be his, no matter what medicine he made or how strong his *puha* had been in raids and battles of the past.

He's too far. Broken Gun said as he steadied his war pony, keeping the animal clear of his father and the appaloosa that carried him on its back.

Your horse has no respect, Storm Crow sneered. You haven't trained him well.

Broken Gun smiled at his father's insult. Your arrow won't strike in this wind.

A smirk crawled over the side of Storm Crow's face, turning the edge of his mouth upward and showing his teeth. He raised his bow and let his arrow loose, the wooden shaft climbing high in the air and falling in an arc, directly in line with the stag's flank. A rush of wind swept over the field and leapt up, chasing the arrow through the sky and knocking it to the earth, laying it down sideways in the tall grass. The sky darkened and the stag watched the hunters, indifferent to the men in the distance.

Counts-Many-Coups brought his horse alongside Storm Crow, aligning the three riders in a horizontal row with Broken Gun's horse standing several feet away from the others.

Let me try, Counts-Many-Coups nocked an arrow, raising his bow toward the sky.

Broken Gun shook his head, amused by his father and the other old hunter lobbing arrows at a buck standing out of range in high winds. You won't hit him. Do old men still know how to hunt?

Counts-Many-Coups raised his bow and fired, the winds caught the arrow and carried it off, losing it far away in the field. Counts-Many-Coups swore and turned his head, spitting on the ground.

Now you've lost an arrow. Broken Gun leaned forward in the saddle, peering around Storm Crow to see the look on Counts-Many-Coups' face. The deer is mocking you. You see, he has no fear.

Young men shouldn't laugh at their uncles.

Uncles shouldn't shoot their arrows into the wind.

Perhaps you should try? Counts-Many-Coups challenged Broken Gun, amused yet slightly insulted by the young man's taunt.

Why would I waste an arrow?

Counts-Many-Coups laughed and nodded his head. I will give you a horse if you can hit that deer.

He's too far away.

Perhaps you are too afraid to lose.

Storm Crow listened to the men banter, interjecting before their argument tarried too long and the stag ran off and disappeared in the wilderness.

I will give you ten horses if your arrow strikes the deer. Ten of my finest.

The winds ripped through the tall blades of grass, filling the air with a whistling sound that carried subtle intonations hidden its pitch that made the men think of laughing women.

Ten of your finest?

Storm Crow nodded his assent. Broken Gun thought of the leopard spotted pony that his father brought back from a raid last summer. The horse's coat bright white with black and golden spots that looked like pieces of gold and coal spread over a snow field. The pony's nose and mane colored bronze with tints of yellow that glowed in the sun.

And the spotted horse from the summer raid?

Storm Crow bit his bottom lip and nodded, concerned by his son's desire to take away his newest war horse in a wager.

Nine horses and the spotted pony. Broken Gun waited for Storm Crow to agree and nocked an arrow. The young man raised his bow and fired without thinking or aiming, fully

aware that his arrow had no chance of reaching its mark against the winds and the distance. The arrow climbed through the air, a black dart shooting toward the sky, rising to the bottoms of the gray rain clouds hovering over the horizon. The men watched the arrow fly high and straight, undisturbed by the turbulent winds pushing through the grass and tangling their hair. The North Wind climbed up and grabbed the arrow, moving through the fletching and turning it downward in a fast dive, striking its mark and pushing the dogwood shaft through the stag's neck.

Damn your luck! Storm Crow cursed the winds and his son's good fortune. He yanked the reins of his horse, startling the pony with the snapping leather and the sudden jerk of its neck.

Spirits of wild things will not suffer. The hearts of beasts have no room misery. Fear and pain are things meant for men, burdens a man's soul must bear and struggle to overcome all the days of his life. The stag refused to grunt when the arrow fell and struck. The deer ran with the arrow lodged in its neck, its only purpose to run, survive and remain free.

The stag's blood seeped from the wound, staining the shaft of the arrow a deep crimson. Red flecks spattered the tips of the turning grass, marking a trail that turned like a snake bending back and forth in the winds blowing across the prairie. The blood called out to the winds, the sky and the earth below. In a far away den, Coyote caught the scent and dreamt of the wild hunt. In a distant cave on a cliff, Piamupitz stirred in her nest of bones.

The men followed the line of blood shifting in the vegetation, riding to the west, climbing a hill far away from the field where Broken Gun shot the deer. Their ponies slipped a dozen times as they dug their hooves in loose shale, kicking up clouds of dust as the men leaned forward in the saddle urging their horses to climb the slope. The ponies scrambled over rocks and patches of yellow flowering Huisache, bending their necks forward as they charged upward,

refusing to rest or surrender until they reached the top of the hill where the blood trail disappeared beyond the slope. Together, the men and horses crested the hill and paused to survey the surrounding country, hesitating at the sight of smoke rising from a small cabin the distance. The billowing black stream winding a bridge between earth and heaven.

There. Counts-Many-Coups pointed to a brown shape disturbing the green grass in the land below, just behind the cabin in the distance. The old man's eyes lit up. In his youth, he ran his horse against seven Utes, moving between his enemies, reaching out and touching them with his bare hands as the Ute warriors swung at him with tomahawks and fired their guns blindly in the air. Counts-Many-Coups rode through clouds of gun smoke, turning and circling, striking three of them down with his axe before his Comanche brothers fell upon the rest of the enemy braves. The prospect of sneaking down into a valley behind a white man's lodge and slipping away unnoticed filled his heart with joy.

We will have to be quiet. Counts-Many-Coups spoke, still working out the best angle to approach the deer unseen. He called Broken Gun's attention to a stream running behind the cabin and noted that the tiny house appeared to have a blind spot on the south wall.

Now let us test your courage and see if it matches your skill with a bow. Counts-Many-Coups brimmed with excitement. Storm Crow remained silent, his concentration settling on the cabin and who and what waited inside.

Counts-Many-Coups led his horse to the dying deer. He crept through the grass, the horse's reins loose in his left hand. He stole toward the stag's carcass, crouched and silent. Broken Gun followed, leading his war pony in the same fashion.

Broken Gun knelt beside the buck, marveling over the enormous antlers protruding from the animal's head. He placed his hands under the animal's neck and felt the matted blood next to his arrow.

Take out your arrow first. Counts-Many-Coups whispered and made a pulling motion with his hand. Pluck it quickly or the flesh will hold on to it.

Broken Gun wrapped his fingers around the bloody shaft and tore the arrow free, sliding it into the rabbit hide quiver tied around his waist.

Help me lift it.

Counts-Many-Coups nodded and took up the hind legs of the deer. The men fought with the carcass, struggling to manage the dead weight of the enormous stag.

Ask your father to help. Counts-Many-Coups huffed under his breath.

My horse is afraid of him. He'll make noise if he gets too close.

Counts-Many-Coups responded with a string of whispered obscenities and a push lifting the carcass over the croup of the black horse. The two men tied the deer down with leather thongs, pausing every few seconds to look over their shoulders in the event that someone in the cabin would see them and come out shooting.

Storm Crow sat high in the saddle, the fabled war chief a shade of his former self. His face washed clean of the white river mud and the black streaks of war paint that marked his eyes. The hand prints numbering the men he killed in unarmed combat wiped away from his mouth and shoulders. The owl feather in his hair no longer pointed to the sky, it rotted from the vane, falling off in patches tenuously clinging to the hollow shaft. The aging warrior sat atop his dappled war pony, musing over the days when his arrows stung the sky and fell singing over his enemies.

Nine horses and the spotted pony. Storm Crow repeated his son's words as he stared at the settlers' cabin, the small homestead alone, isolated on the prairie. Ten of my finest. The old war chief thought about the white-haired horse with gold and black spots. In all of his years and hundreds of raids, raids spanning throughout Comanchería and deep down into the heart of Mexico, he had never seen a pony with spots like shiny gold and black patches of night against a field of virgin snow. A creature full of beauty, strength and spirit—lost to an adopted son over an impossible arrow shot.

Counts-Many-Coups smiled and patted Broken Gun on the shoulder. The old hunter alive with the rekindled spirit of his past exploits. Memories of midnight raids and horse thefts brought to life from the thrill of sneaking behind the sleepy cabin and stealing away with the deer's carcass. The sky grew darker and thunder rumbled above the black clouds. It would be dark soon and the men faced the inevitable circumstances of finding their way home in a storm with no moon or stars to guide them.

Counts-Many-Coups and Broken Gun mounted their horses, turning the ponies back in the direction of the hill overlooking the cabin. Counts-Many-Coups signing for Broken Gun to walk his horse before letting it out to trot. When they had climbed back over the hill and were out of earshot from anyone inside the white man's lodge they would put their ponies into a full gallop and make their escape.

Counts-Many-Coups reached the hilltop with Broken Gun trailing close behind, blood still dripping from the carcass tied on the back of the young man's horse. The men stopped on the ridgeline.

Where is your father?

Broken Gun turned his horse and looked back on the small valley and the settlers' cabin. He's still down there.

Storm Crow sat waiting for something to happen; a noise from the cabin, a light in a window, someone to step outside to watch the weather. He waited for anything to present an opportunity for fresh glory, something to keep his name in the mouths of his people and obscure the stories of Broken Gun's arrow and Counts-Many-Coups stealth at absconding with a dead deer. He heard the door of the cabin swing open and a woman's voice call out against the wind.

Joanie! Jim! The woman's voice called to an absent child and husband.

Storm Crow's neck snapped in the direction of the shouts. A short distance from the cabin, he saw a small girl running toward her mother's voice. The child's yellow hair bright under the black clouds of the gathering storm. Her indigo dyed dress matching the bouquet of wild blue bonnets in her hand, flowers plucked for her mother to set the centerpiece at the dinner table. A man followed behind her, fumbling with a cedar wood fishing pole and a pail of water, the man's beard tangled from his daughter's fingers tugging at his whiskers. The wind blew his hat backwards and it flapped like a sail, choking the man's neck with the thin black hat string tied in a knot underneath his chin. The man dropped his fishing pole, reaching up to grab his hat before the North Wind snatched it away. His other hand wavered with the bucket, splashing water over the wooden brim. A fish jumped inside the pail and the man swore, his cheeks turning bright red as he realized that his daughter was in earshot of his profanity. A chuckle of embarrassment obscured by the high winds lifted from his lips and blew away. His hat whipped and tugged at his neck the way a child pulls at a parent, distracting him, demanding his attention, causing him to look the other way and take his eyes off his daughter.

Storm Crow moved the way a killer moves, fast without hesitation, with no concern of circumstance and consequences. He leaned forward and his horse sprung into motion, moving from a standing position into a full gallop prompted only by Storm Crow's weight shifting in the saddle.

The little girl ran toward her mother's voice. She smiled a child's smile, an expression ignited with recent memories of playing with her father on the shore of the creek and the anticipation of helping her mother cook the fish she helped her father catch. The light of innocence faded with her smile as she heard her mother scream and looked up to see a strange man on a spotted horse charging toward her, the horse's eyes wild and crazed. She wondered who the man was and why the pretty horse was angry and then she screamed her own scream as the man grabbed her by the hair and pulled her over the horse's neck.

The water bucket fell to the ground. A dozen fish slapped their tails in the grass, their gills flaring open, exposing red and pink layers of soft flesh as they struggled to pass through water no longer there.

Joanie! The man let go of his hat and ran toward his daughter. His heart raised up in his throat and fell back down in his chest as it thumped hard and sent tremors through his body, the sensation akin to chopping wood with an axe.

Storm Crow held the girl against the horse's neck and spurred the pony on, charging the man running toward him. The horse struck the man, spinning him around and dropping him in the grass next to the flopping fish. Storm Crow smiled and noted in his mind to mark another hand print on his pony's side the next time he went to war.

Broken Gun and Counts-Many-Coups looked down on the valley. They watched in disbelief as Storm Crow picked up the girl and trampled over the man with his horse.

He took the child. Counts-Many-Coups' words had an air of surprise tinged by an undercurrent of exhilaration. The old warrior had not seen days like this in many years. First, his nephew struck a deer in high winds from an impossible distance, then he led the youth down in the valley to steal the carcass underneath the white man's nose. Now Storm Crow took a girl out of her father's hands, taking the child without firing an arrow or thrusting a lance.

Counts-Many-Coups' let out a war whoop and turned his horse charging down the hill, following the direction taken by Storm Crow and his Appaloosa. Broken Gun followed, the blood dripping from the stag's carcass marking the trail of their escape.

Broken Medicine

Storm Crow's medicine was broken. He saw the signs of his faltering power in the winds pushing aside his arrow and heard it in the ring of the gunshot that reached out and pierced a hole in Counts-Many-Coups' back. He felt his *puha* slipping from his grasp as the little girl thrashed against the neck of his war pony and tore herself free, sliding down the side of his galloping horse and rolling in a ball like a tumbleweed in a blue dress, clumps of her blonde hair still knotted in Storm Crow's fingers.

The blood of the stag flowed from its dead, still carcass—flowed without a beating heart pumping it out as it painted a long red line from the grass behind the cabin, over hills and fields, across many miles to the Comanche village that waited to receive the three hunters under the gray, tumultuous sky. The red trail complimented by crimson swatches spattered over bunches of Ashe Juniper and Foxtail Ferns. Counts-Many-Coups marked his last hunt and his path home with his life blood spilling out of his back. Shot dead by a woman, a woman that disappeared inside a log cabin, running back through the frame of an open door with a Sharps rifle in her hands. A woman screaming for her daughter as she raised the weapon and fired the death blow of a storied warrior as the scent of baking bread drifted out from the doorway behind her.

Storm Crow's fortune continued to sour as a party of *Tejano* rangers discovered a little girl with a bruised face and a torn dress wandering through a field of wildflowers. His luck turned further down as the *Tejanos* found the red trail, picking up the sign splattered through the tall grass, smelling the iron in the air like starved dogs.

Coyote smelled the blood of the stag and laughed, rolling on his side, watching through a wet, squinting eye as two *Tejanos* split off from the other riders. Coyote followed the two

rangers carrying the recovered child home and laughed again as the riders signaled a troop of soldiers patrolling the frontier, encouraging the Americans to follow the red trail and join up with the other *Tejanos*. But no misfortune or turn of ill luck proved more bitter than the moment Storm Crow entered the Comanche village leading Counts-Many-Coups' pony, the old hunter dead on its back, his head rocking side to side with the motion of his trotting horse like man riding drunk in the saddle. Storm Crow's medicine finally broken by a memory stirred in his son's mind, a remembrance buried in the youth's dreams, conjured up and brought to life by a phantom kinship with the girl Storm Crow snatched from her father and a familiarity of circumstance known only to captives and slaves.

The woman screamed and fired the rifle. The hot lead tumbled through the air, whistling passed Broken Gun's ear and landing into Counts-Many-Coups' back as the old warrior whooped and waved his arms in the saddle, celebrating the child's capture and Storm Crow's impulsive bravado. His cries of elation stumped as the .50 caliber ball punched through the muscle in his back and burrowed into his lungs. His last shouting taunt stopped abruptly and turned into a grunt followed by a sudden gasp for air.

Broken Gun's stomach dropped as he watched the old hunter fall forward on the neck of his horse, his arms flaccid and swaying with the movement of his pony. Ahead of them, Storm Crow fought to hang on to the stolen child. The girl shrieked and flailed her arms and legs, scratching Storm Crow's wrist, kicking him with the heels of her little black shoes. The child twisted around and ripped out her hair, setting herself free to slide off Storm Crow's horse and roll away in the grass.

Broken Gun heard the screams of the mother following them from the doorway of the cabin. He smelled the gunpowder in the air and recognized the desperate stare in the man's eyes as he dropped the pale of water and rushed toward Storm Crow's horse. He remembered his dreams and the ghost that visits him and the black shadow always looming just out of sight, close enough to feel but never see.

Daddy! The girl screamed as Storm Crow laid her on her belly in front of his saddle. Daddy, Broken Gun remembered a man holding him in a cornfield, laughing and hoisting him up on a pair of broad shoulders, lifting him up to show him the world and all of the things the man waited to share with the boy in his arms.

Daddy! The girl cried out again.

Broken Gun remembered Storm Crow's arrow hissing through green corn stalks, a venomous snake striking the man through the heart.

He remembered Storm Crow, covered in white mud with a black hand print painted across his face and a black line marking his eyes.

He remembered being stripped and lashed to a horse and a group of men taking him north.

He remembered fire and fear and pain and suffering.

He remembered the sounds of his mother screaming.

He remembered the name Wade.

Toyarohco

The Appaloosa split the night, riding the trail from the village, galloping through the southern hunting grounds, crossing the valley between the cliffside caves where bygone people left their dead under piles of stone. The horse came to a place of death and slowed its trot, meandering beneath a canopy of starlight that tilted and curved with the spinning of the earth, languidly moving toward the land of the dead where the spirits of Storm Crow's woman and child entered the afterlife.

High up on a flat plane where no trees grew, the bodies of a woman and child looked up forever at the star filled night. Somewhere on the surface of the creviced canyon wall beneath that barren graveyard, a cave hid behind a toppled bolder and a crag of rocks. Inside the cave rested the last, most powerful piece of Storm Crow's magic. Below it all, the lake drank the river in a deep basin ringed in by a semi-circle of canyon walls, purple in the night hours before the sun woke up to reveal the yellow-brown surface reflecting back the sunrise with flecks of quartz and feldspar.

On a plateau overlooking the lake, Storm Crow pulled the Appaloosa's reins and sat the horse near a pile of stones. Below the rock mound, the remains of Dreaming-The-Sun laid cold and undisturbed. Next to the cairn, a smaller grave sat in disarray. Dozens of stones littered the ground, scratched at and moved aside by the claws of a hungry animal. The bones of Storm Crow's son stolen and devoured. The old warrior sat on his horse and felt his face burn red. He turned his horse and rode away.

An ancient trail wound down the cliffside, linking the plateau of burial cairns to the lake at the base of the canyon wall. Storm Crow followed it, aiming his horse headfirst in a steep descent. The Appaloosa slipped on rocks and shifted its weight backwards, at times resembling

a stubborn mule sitting on its haunches as it fought to keep its balance and avoid slipping off the narrow path. No room for mistakes, a slight misstep or piece of loose shale would be enough to topple the horse and rider. Halfway down the cliff face, Storm Crow stopped the skidding horse at the mouth of a small cave.

The entrance of the cave was too small for a man to enter on his feet but large enough for a big animal to maneuver over the block shaped boulder that partially obscured the hole. Storm Crow dismounted and crawled on his belly, squirming through the hole in the cliff face, disappearing inside the spiderwebbed black, hoping that he might encounter a pair of wild eyes belonging to the beast that defiled his son's grave.

The air inside the cave vibrated. Cobwebs trembled and a thousand spiders scurried over the stone walls. A weak gust of wind came out of the black and a sound of a dying man's last gasp drifted over the fetid air. The hair raised on Storm Crow's arms and bristled on the nape of his neck. A wave of nausea struck him in the gut. He shook his head, trying to push off the sudden sickness and the dizzy feeling hanging over his head.

A faint glow grew in the blackness of the cave, revealing a large piece of buffalo hide fastened on a hoop and propped up to rest on a wooden tripod. The circle decorated with snakeskin and human hair. Before him, in the dark, he saw the red shape of an owl. The incandescent eyes of Piamupitz glowing on the face his medicine shield.

A shadow slipped over the canyon wall. An old hunter leapt across rock ledges, drifting through patches of night, hiding from shafts of moonlight that vainly sought to reveal a pair of shining eyes. The hunter's padded footprints left no sign on the dusty sandstone shelves as he bounded over outcroppings and catwalks, places too rugged, too narrow, too dangerous for men

to climb. On a mantle above a small cave, the hunter stopped and crouched down. His green eyes studied the movement of a spotted horse standing on a dirt path, the trail too narrow for the horse to turn or angle sideways without falling. The hunter inhaled the equine scent and bared his teeth. His stomach rumbled and he moved his ears back, bringing his weight over his hind legs before he wriggled and pounced.

The Appaloosa had no room to turn. The weight of the mountain lion falling on its neck brought its head to the ground. The cat bit down and the horse righted itself, shifting its weight and slipping in loose rock as it bucked and tried to throw off the lion. The horse whinnied and the whinny became a scream as the pony shook the cat out its mane. The cougar's claws leaving long, bloody gouges in the horse's neck. The lion spat, hissed and growled as it crouched and rebounded, barring the horse's face with white claws flashing in the moonlight. The horse spun around to kick and the precarious circumstances of the trail became realized as the pony lost its footing and toppled over the cliffside, turning and falling and dying on the rocks below by the water's edge.

By the Water's Edge

It was over before Storm Crow emerged from the maw of the cave with a knife in his right hand and his medicine shield on his left arm, thrumming for only him to hear. His war horse fell into the night, the only signs of its killer revealed in the echoed growls Storm Crow heard reverberating through the cave.

He walked down the trail to the place where the lake drank the river, far away from the screams of his dying horse and the growling panther. Far away from the grieving women in the village and the indignant eyes of young warriors staring through his back. Far enough from the village to evade the lamentations of maidens and grandmothers wailing and mutilating their flesh over the anguish of Counts-Many-Coups' death.

Storm Crow stood by the water holding a bundle of arrows in his left hand, listening to the nighttime sounds of the wilderness, watching the rippled reflection of the moon shimmering on the surface of the lake. Storm Crow laid the arrows on a large, flat stone and left his breechclout on the shore. He crouched down by the water's edge. Black waves covered his feet and ankles, the coldness of the water and the smell of fish and algae covered rocks reminded him that he still belonged to the natural world, the world of men where men live and die and mark their names in blood.

Storm Crow called out to the old owl. For the first time in his life he spoke the name of the ancient, winged demon that visited him the night his woman and child died. The spirit feared by the People, the eater of men, the thing that blessed Storm Crow and blew its breath into his medicine the way the wind breathes life into a fire, feeding the flames and growing the blaze into a great inferno hungry to burn all it touches, all it comes near.

Piamupitz! Storm Crow shouted the name. He felt an unfamiliar sensation, a cold chill at the base of his spine. The hair on his arms stood up and his skin turned to gooseflesh. Piamupitz! He called the name again and received no reply save the monotonous noise of waves splashing against the shore.

Storm Crow sang, conjuring any trace of his medicine that might still linger. He scooped out handfuls of white mud from the water's edge and swathed it over his naked body. The mud gleamed white under the moon, clothing Storm Crow in ghost light as he knelt and chanted. When the moon reached its highest place in the sky, Storm Crow made a nest of dried prairie grass and horse hair. He struck two river rocks together, red-orange sparks rained down on the bundle of grass and animal hair, smoldering and growing into a flame as he sang and blew his breath into the fire. He took the bundle of arrows from the flat rock and snapped them into kindling, letting the flames gnaw on the blooded wooden shafts until six arrows that had pierced the hearts of his enemies were blackened, charred and crumbled into bubbling ash. He reached in the firepit and laid his hands flat on the coals, making his palms and fingers black. He touched his black hands on his shoulders, marking the deaths of the enemies he killed without a weapon. He laid a black hand print over his mouth and painted a line over his eyes to recognize death when it came hidden and wandering among men.

Death Song

Aheya aheya aheho

Aheya aheya aheho

Mother Moon

Look down and see me

And know that someday Storm Crow must die

Aheya aheya aheho

Aheya aheya aheho

Father Sun

You burn bright in the sky forever

Mother Moon

Your light will never fade

But today Storm Crow must die

The morning sky illuminated a bright blue heaven full of orphaned clouds destined to wander and drift forever above the world of men. A restless quiet haunted the Comanche village, seeping in from the vast and empty plains, filling the void left after three days of continuous wailing as women mutilated themselves and young men cut off their hair, mourning the death of Counts-Many-Coups. They laid the old warrior down with his feet facing toward the east and surrounded him with weapons and tokens of his most cherished plunder, then the young men slaughtered Counts-Many-Coups' herd of five hundred horses, immolating the ponies in scores of bonfires that marked the land in ash and smoke.

The foul work had been done and men and women greeted the new morning with somber faces and few words. Three boys sat in a circle near their father's lodge striking wooden dowels, making music with the rhythmic knocking, the sounds chopping apart the silence hanging over the village. The sharp, incessant beat woke up a dog, the animal squinted and raised its ears and began to howl. A sparrow sang from the branches of a far-off tree, its whistling pitch sad and forlorn.

Aheya aheya aheho. A guttural chant joined the rhythm of the wooden instruments. A horse with black and golden spots painted on a backdrop of porcelain-white hair crossed through the symmetrical formation of tipis lined up in avenues. A gilded, leather saddle lined with silver conchos and tooled with a scene of Spanish conquistadors crossing a river was strapped on the horse's back. A shield marked with the symbol of an owl and two crows facing to the east and west, dangled from the saddle horn. A mask of sun-faded buffalo skin covered the horse's face, adorning the pony with the scalp of a horned bull, painted with red symbols, decorated with dyed feathers and leather tassels. A pair of eyes looked through two round holes cut into the buffalo scalp, the horse's eyes wide and shifting focus as the pony learned its surroundings.

A rider covered in white mud with a black line drawn over his eyes and a black handprint covering his mouth, chanted as he guided his mount through the center of the encampment. A buffalo robe settled on his shoulders and he wore a headdress with two horns of gleaming black. He carried a pair of tomahawks in each arm, crossed over his chest and he sang his death song as he slowly rode through the village, forcing the anxious horse to walk while the rider looked down on men that once feared his name, slowing to spit curses in deep, guttural grunts through clenched teeth. Young warriors recoiled from the maledictions, avoiding the rider's stare and retreating from the taste of bad medicine dripping from his mouth.

Storm Crow, the war chief that once stole a thousand horses, tarried amid the faces of men that had followed him and women that had served him, looking down on those faces, some confused, others sad or indignant. Storm Crow, the great warrior rumored to push bullets aside with a breath, looked down on them and cursed them with grating oaths emanating from his belly and sliding out through his lungs. The horse whinnied and shook its head. Storm Crow sank his knee into the horse's flank and the animal righted itself and galloped forward, crossing the path through the village, riding out to the fields beyond the last line of tipis hemming the settlement. The rider turned and sat his horse, singing his death song to the four winds.

Toyarohco! Toyarohco! The *puhakut* called out the word for *cougar* as Broken Gun sallied past her lodge on his black war pony. He heard the word and remembered the woman speaking it to him as a child, the day Storm Crow visited her to learn her wisdom. The medicine woman pushed aside the buffalo hide flap covering the entrance of her lodge and Broken Gun marveled at the ancient, tattooed crone creeping out from the darkness. The woman moved toward him, her bent legs shuffling over the ground, her hunched back turning her arms and shoulders forward, forcing her to watch her feet as she walked, pausing every third step to raise her neck up and mark her direction. She clutched an object in her right hand, holding it close to her naked, sagging breasts. She approached the black horse and reached up with her left hand, caressing Broken Gun's leg with long, boney fingers that made him shudder at her touch and gave him a sensation in the base of his pelvis that tingled and momentarily made him feel emasculated.

Your father is not your father. The *puhakut* smiled as she spoke, her face mirroring an internal joy at the recognition that the signs in her dreams would soon manifest. The old owl demands her price.

The *puhakut* lifted the object she concealed against her breasts. She reached up and placed a large revolver in Broken Gun's hand. The young man felt the weight of the pistol. He lifted the weapon, seeing the light dance down the nine-inch barrel and fall into the shadowed recesses of the chambers and rise and fall again over the magical symbol of snakes and lightning bolts that the old woman scratched into the steel and carved in the walnut grip.

Your name is Broken Gun. *Toyarohco* has seen you. Give the old owl what she wants. The *puhakut* patted Broken Gun's leg and waved him off with the familiarity of a grandmother sending a child to play. He held the pistol in his hand and let the black horse run through the village toward the sounds of Storm Crow's death song.

An owl screeched. Storm Crow heard the cry and stopped singing, his eyes scanning the blue morning sky. Circling vultures diving in to feast on scraps of buffalo left to rot outside the village made claim to the air beneath the clouds. The sound of the owl unnerved Storm Crow and he tightened his grip on the twin tomahawks crossed in his arms. He looked and saw a rider on a black horse coming from the village. Broken Gun pulled the reins of the horse, stopping directly in front of his adopted father.

That is my horse, Broken Gun said, raising an empty hand ready take the reins from his father's grasp.

Storm Crow smiled, amused by the off-handed challenge. Have you come to take it?
If there is no other way.

There is no other way.

I have seen the truth.

What have you seen?

Visions of a boy with my name. A ghost and a man that was my father. Your face behind stalks of green corn. Your arrow lodged in my father's heart.

Who was it that taught you to hunt and ride horses? Who taught you to speak like a human being and live as people live? If I have taught you these things, how am I not your true father? If you have come for the horse than take it but I will not give it to you easily.

Without warning, Storm Crow shouted a war cry and the spotted horse reared up, kicking the air with its forelegs. Storm Crow brought his right arm back, lifting the blade of an axe close to his ear and then throwing the tomahawk, sending the weapon spinning in a tight circle as it whirled through the air and struck the earth inches away from Broken Gun's war pony. Storm Crow tossed the remaining tomahawk in his left hand over to his right, replacing the axe he threw to the ground. With his left hand free, he reached across the saddle and grabbed up his medicine shield as it dangled from the saddle horn.

The black horse remembered Storm Crow. The animal knew the sound of his war cry and the sensations in the air when the old warrior raised his shield. The horse lowered its head and charged, rushing the spotted pony, crashing hard against the untrained mare, knocking the horse and Storm Crow down in a whirl of dust and kicking hooves. The black horse raised up and stomped into the cloud of dirt, again and again, striking the earth, chasing Storm Crow as the spotted pony lurched up from the ground and Storm Crow rolled back on his feet.

Broken Gun hung onto the reins as his war pony bucked, nearly throwing him as the stallion jumped and kicked. A dust devil conjured from the prairie floor rose up and blinded

Broken Gun with debris. He looked through the haze, searching for Storm Crow when the whipping sound of a tomahawk split the air. Broken Gun cried out, the blade of the axe digging into his left shoulder, the force of the throw knocking him off his horse. He landed on his back looking up at a blue sky full of drifting clouds. He felt the weight of the four-and-a-half-pound revolver still heavy in his hand. Somehow, he hadn't dropped the pistol in the fall.

Without a rider, the black horse frenzied and spun around in circles before driving off the spotted mare, chasing the other pony over the open planes.

Storm Crow found the axe he'd thrown in the dirt. He pulled it from the earth, his right hand wielding the tomahawk and his left carrying his shield. He moved without thought, the years of fighting and killing trained his body to act without hesitation. He stood over Broken Gun and lifted the axe, the blade gleaming in the morning light. Storm Crow cried out for Father Sun to look down and see his victory, to witness the death of his enemy and bring new glory to his name.

Broken Gun looked up at the man that raised him, the warrior that taught him to ride and hunt and speak the language of the people. He saw the man that he loved standing over him with a raised axe.

Father Sun. Father Sun. Storm Crow will never die! Storm Crow raised his shield on his left arm, moving it in front of his chest, his body coiling like a snake as he prepared to deliver the killing stroke with the axe in his right hand.

Broken Gun looked up at the man he called father and saw the black and white war paint of the man that killed Daddy in the cornfield. Sunlight flashed on Storm Crow's medicine shield, illuminating strands of golden hair, the flaxen scalp of a woman sewn into the buffalo hide an inch below the red lined image of an owl and two outward facing crows. Broken Gun

remembered his mother and the screams of a woman near a burning house the night he was carried away. He raised his arm, and pulled the trigger of the Walker Colt. The hammer snapped and there was no sound except the still silence and then a spark blossomed in the gun's cylinder, burning rose red and coming to life with an eruption of black smoke. A piece of cone shaped lead spun down the barrel and ripped through Storm Crow's medicine shield, tearing through layers of buffalo hide, animal fur and shredded wadding, shooting a hole through Storm Crow's medicine and laying him down in the dirt.

Broken Gun crawled up on his knees and pulled his knife from his belt. Storm Crow laid on the ground bleeding, a dime sized hole punched through his chest. Broken Gun wrapped his fingers in Storm Crow's hair and held the edge of the blade against his forehead. He cried out and traced a red line with his knife, pulling away Storm Crow's scalp with a tug and dropping the old warrior face down in the dirt.

Broken Gun pushed aside Storm Crow's breechclout with the tip of his knife, slipping the blade between his legs and cutting away a small bag fastened to a string. Inside the bag where Storm Crow's sacred things: an arrowhead, the fangs of a rattlesnake, a piece of desiccated umbilical chord. Broken Gun cut open the bag and spilled the contents on the ground. Without words or further ceremony, he turned his back on Storm Crow, leaving the warrior breathing raspy breaths and choking on blood.

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