

The Borders:
a novella
by
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Abstract

This creative writing thesis, a novella, investigates the borderlands of the Canadian West during the frontier and settlement periods. This novella aims to unsettle settlement, to confound narrative cohesion in settlement space through an abundance of voice and language, of conflict and narrative negotiation. It incorporates Southern Gothic elements and fragmented narrative, using William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* as models, in its representation of erasures of race, sexualities, and gender in settlement space. It sees prairie as constructed space where representations of open-ness figuratively clear the land of subjectivities and conflicts which complicate myths of peaceful expansion. It sees such erasure as never total, that those who remain speak from their ephemeral positions, haunting the cohesion of nation-building narrative.

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For my sister, Jen.

“At the time we took the vote last year I went, at considerable length, into the subject of destitute Indians, the utter disappearance of the buffalo and the action of the American Government which formed a perfect cordon to prevent buffalo from crossing the lines . . . I am not at all sorry, as I have said before, that this has happened”

—John A. MacDonald, 1883

“She had simply disappeared from his horizon . . .”

—Frederick Philip Grove

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Prologue

Waiting until the candles blow out and crouched over her husband, Alice would seem like anything to someone walking in: an urgent lover stirring her man, a crone bent over someone dead, a mother wishing it back to life. But what she's most like is a child.

And like a child to what might be her father's sleeping body, Alice leans in as close as she dares, her hands above him, trembling, scared to move them any closer. Not at all like the wife she should be, she thinks. She worries her shaking will wake him, that it'll spread from her hands to her arms, taking her over completely. She breathes, willing her fingers to reach, but there's no contact. They don't move. He's still just as far away. Then, as if in obedience to a charge in her own body, her hands begin to pulse, they circle rather than shake. Alice watches them, powerless, wondering how he doesn't wake, how he doesn't sense the electricity in her fingers so close to him as he dreams.

She becomes something else, no longer a child, but a woman casting a spell. She doesn't touch him and the undisturbed blankets above him are like a border between them. This is as close as she ever gets. He is a stranger to her. The smell of his body shocks her. His weight is a presence every night as he climbs in beside her. For a month after the ceremony, Alice has laid awake beside her new husband, his unfamiliarity keeping her from her sleep. He never touches her—not since the first night when he found on her a scar and read it like a sign auguring him no children and turned away silent. Now she imagines his hands, cold on her side, his callouses rough on her skin—she shudders, pulling the blanket closer.

Years later Alice will wonder why she never ran: took a horse, a bag already packed, her pretence of sleep no different to him than any other night. She'd be gone, miles away before he woke. But it never occurs to her. She never even thinks it. Always she merely sits there waiting

for morning, the nothing sounds outside her window. Feelings of smallness. Fragile. The immense winter quiet all around her, immovable. If she were to move inside it she'd break she thinks, like a snapped winter branch.

Then one night, fingering the bedsheets, a sleepless month weighing on her like a heaviness she can't get free from, she hears it. Beside her, amidst his breathing, like a shadow shape, a thing to pluck from his lips: the barest trace of words. She waits for it again but it's gone, as if never there at all. All night she listens, but nothing. By morning, she wonders if she ever heard it at all. Tonight she'll be ready, she decides. She'll catch it from his lips. And she does. There again, the words few, making little sense. Night after night she begins the same way: the involuntary movements, the ritual gestures, ear to his breath, coaxing the words, stitching them like quilted pieces—a picture forming: a fire.

The days become months. Time to her becomes a thing to slip in and out of—a blanket to pull round her, become enveloped by, then discard at her feet. Mornings, she watches him rise from bed, heavy and slow as if filled with stone. This is the only time in the day she ever sees his body. It seems smaller to her than it should. He's a secret to her. Whoever he is in this minute, naked and frail, in an hour he'll be different, another man entirely walking out onto the field with his men. By then he'll heap his robes—his kilt and Scottish fabrics—over his frame like a saddle over a horse. He'll stand changed, sure. It'll be this man who seems every bit the one he should, not at all like the man so vapid when he wakes. He looks at her as if he can't place her, his eyes glassy, reaching, a piece of his memory confused. There is something missing in him, she thinks.

Boy

Because he didn't ask. And later when he did I wouldn't tell. Because he'd rather call me Boy. And I didn't want him to know. I hid my name. I hid it like the stories you'd never tell. Not because they say bad things. But because you don't want them inside some people's mouths.

Because to him I'm the dream returning that can't be shook. Because I appeared. Emerged from the mist and wouldn't go back. He bought me with whiskey. When? Before there was hair on my lip. Or hair down there. It was the fall of the fires. The year of smoke. But on the morning he first saw me there is no smoke. Just the mist and rain. Heavy wet. Cold. And both of us out there on the plain. Alone. He and I coming upon each other like animals.

And these are the minutes you live again. The ones you feel always. That inside them never seem to end. That come round and round again. How hunger comes back. The way you feel pushed to the edge of a clearing by other eyes. How as you hunt you're always hunted too. And can you read the signs? Like the broken branches along a trail that remind you. That just like the animal you track you too are followed. And can you know this is the minute you'll live again and again? How more than anything you want out of that place. But you forget you'll just return again. That the words you say the thoughts you think the names you're given just make you forget. That you're always just naked in the woods.

But on that morning it's me in the fog and him that's watching. I'm walking through the trees with wood for the camp because the men are still drunk. The leaves break beneath my feet making noise. But I'm cold and shivering and not caring. It doesn't matter to me if something knows I'm there. If a rabbit or bird hears me and runs away. I don't want to dress it. I don't want to cook for the men. But it's not a bird that hears me. As I step from the woods I know I'm seen. Already watched. I feel his looking on me. Like a sticky thing. And I don't want it there. I want

to be back at the tents. But there's no getting rid of it. To him I know I'm getting more real. Less a ghost with every step I take from the fog. He's between the camp and me. So I'm walking to him and not away. I don't want to be. He's like a hunting thing watching. And when I'm close enough to see the drops of wet fall through his stubble like ants in tree bark he isn't saying anything. I let down the firewood and he's looking at me as the thing he wishes would go the other way. That'd disappear. But I'm not disappearing. I'm still there.

He's on foot then. Before he stole the mare. And before he stole the foal from her. And me too. I'm on foot. I don't have a gun and can't tell where his is. I don't have one because the men won't let me. And because I don't have money to buy one. I'm thinking this as I pick up the wood and start toward the camp. And I know he's following me.

Later he tells the men at the camp that he found me. I'm in the tent mixing bannock when he says this. Here I can listen and no one'll know. He's speaking to them in English and they're listening in French. But I'm understanding both. He's trying to buy me in money. But they say whiskey only. I think then his words sound like they're from somewhere else. That they're not made for this place. They say I'm Sioux. A boy and not for money. Only whiskey. This what I am. Traded back and forth between the camps for whiskey. Breeds with it trading it to ones without. They're the ones naming me. Boy they shout when they're out of whiskey and too drunk to be thinking of calling me anything else. Then I'm supposed to be coming. And I'm always cooking and cleaning and doing other kinds of things for these men I don't know.

When he understands this he nods. He tells one of the men to leave with him. They take a horse and cart when they go. And all day I'm wondering when they'll be back. Back then I'm always wondering and never knowing. Who will the next camp be? What will I be to them? What will I dream? What new thing won't I forget? Will I sleep outside or in? But this time isn't

the same I think. I've never been bought by a white man before. And don't know what this means. I am wishing there is somewhere else I want to be. But I can't think of any place like that. I want to run away. To hurt them. But I know I'm small and can't. In the evening when he returns with the man from the camp they have a cask. And then I'm leaving with him. Not to be traded again.

I can hear him. His heavy breathing through his nose. The kind of breathing belonging to a man who you always know where he is. I'm cold and wanting to be close to the fire. His staring won't leave me. And then we're leaving. Him leading and me following. And I still can't tell what he's thinking. Now I know. Now I'm always knowing what he's thinking.

Nina

Liam Gale was too big for this prairie (which would later swallow the rest of us because we were so young to think it new). He walked out onto this geography like another man would've entered a sod house when they were all anyone built here. And if he'd been only another kind of man you would have heard him before you felt him—his boot sounds on the stones outside, his shape blocking out the sun in the doorway, the smell of horse on him. Children inside shifting to fit the sudden quiet. The women paused, looking up.

But he was bigger than that. They called him the Wheat King. When he entered this territory he set the ground on fire, one of those men who in 1879 came up from the United States to mile by mile torch the border, to throw the match and chasten it.

And when he left, having never lived in the great stone house he dredged from the same river that drowned his wife, he left us all scrabbling to know the thing that had just happened. All we knew was that nothing was ours. Alice mute and crazy in the attic. Boy still out in the cold.

Men without fathers. You, Billy, there still—lost to me. And me gone.

And all of us as though woken up next to something other than what we thought we fell asleep beside.

Marie

Alice stopped talking that day. For seven years she lived in that house with him. With Gale I mean. Then another nineteen with me. In all those years she told me hardly anything of what happened before. Before he disappeared. I think she stayed with me because I let her alone. I didn't ask anything of her. But the truth is I liked her there. We each had secrets and didn't ask. He came back later—for reasons no one then really understood and I think even Alice didn't fully know (she probably hoped him dead). But until then we had our quiet. She and I down below. The other girls upstairs.

She was there when I bought the place. A fierce territorial thing. A thrown out cat that had to find her fight before she really knew what fight was. I worked around her. For months we moved opposite—wary, suspicious. A barbed wire dance between us. Each aware of the other but living as if the other didn't exist. I don't know what she wanted then. Probably for me to leave.

She nearly saved the place when he left. She kept all those men paid and fed. This was before me. After the frost killed everything two years running and Gale lit those incredible straw fires to save the wheat. When the banks sent messengers twice each week looking for money and his house not even built yet. And then with everything all in ruin and Gale vanished and she alone in that big house with all those men looming outside in the bunk she one day crossed the yard for all them to see and nailed her tenets to a post.

The men were angry. Wages were owed. They hadn't been paid for the last year. Some wouldn't work for a woman and left. But most came around. She promised them pay after harvest plus fifteen percent. So they did it. They took all the seed that survived the frost and planted it. They did like she said. They elected a foreman who earned double. That was the Indian. Boy. He received his directions from the notices Alice posted outside her door.

She rode to town that year. Hadn't been back since she was married there. On that day no wedding dress. Humiliated. For years she wouldn't go back. Not to show her face. She wouldn't endure that again. But then the bank threatened.

She hardly knew how to ride a horse and sat on it like a man because there was no sidesaddle. She had to be helped off the horse after. Wouldn't come down alone. She'd rode so hard she couldn't get off. Her fingers gripped the reins. Her legs the horse. She hadn't realized it was she who'd made the horse move so fast. Thought it'd merely intuited her need. She got what she wanted though. She'd pay from the coming harvest. The bank got their money and she kept the house for a while longer. But they foreclosed the next year anyway. A marshal had been seen hunting Gale. A crime from a past Gale thought he'd lost. The bank worried the law would seize the property and they'd not be able to collect their debts.

The house never really stopped being his. We knew it but kept living there anyway. As if all those secrets wouldn't someday be made known. As if they wouldn't all unravel monstrously as we watched too frozen and astonished to stop it.

It was Alice who found Boy bleeding in the grass behind the house. Gale's old rifle in his hands. Stolen. Alice knew what that rifle meant. There was always something between those two. Boy and Alice I mean. I never knew what. They didn't talk. Wouldn't even look at each other. But she carried him inside and laid him on the table. Dressed his wound best she knew.

She never called for help.

Alice had a strange way of talking I grew to love. Maybe it was from being silent too long. Her words came without a container. They spilled this way and that. The last thing she said was: *“These words love, law, existing only for the moment when they might be forgotten, given breath only to later be stifled, and when laid out, these words, like a dead thing on the table, the thing which most violates them will be done in the name of their departing spirit.”*

They were still hunting Billy when Boy was shot and Alice carried him inside. Men across the countryside with torches so he could not reach the border. Searching him out whether he did the thing or not. And maybe they didn't even want to know if he really did it because they needed to be right. But by and by I knew they'd chase him down. Make him slump from bullet or whatever's done to wanted men. These lines that men draw.

Marie Devine's Snowflake Purchase

Gale's Furrow is a house with its own designs. Up close it seems misshapen, as if its stones once tried to buck the frame. Even before there are shovels in the ground or stones dragged from the river, the house seems to twist away from what its builder meant it to be. Stubborn, petulant—like a tree that won't grow straight or a song refusing the voice it's written for.

Dressed in yellow and black against a backdrop of dirt and grassland, Marie is like fire. Her dress on the ground behind her is like a trailing blaze catching straw and bramble. There is no shade and everything in the heat is brittle. Straw snaps beneath her feet like ice.

In town, Marie's presence had been like something in the air, like humidity baked out of the mud. Stopping at the bank to sign papers, she sensed it—men and women in the street eying her passing as if it were weather. Now, at the end of the lane, Marie asks the driver to wait. She'll walk up alone. She wants the solitude. Her things will arrive by wagon later, and the girls in a week, but right now what she craves is the distance of a treeless skyline: a sepia-toned world before there are even photographs old enough to colour it like that, a place called Snowflake on the bottom edge of a country barely named.

In 1894, when she buys the house, Marie knows nothing of its past. She doesn't know the women here before her and she knows little of the man Gale who built the house. Later she'll learn about Isa, Gale's first wife found dead in a river, that there are those who believe he put her there, even if he was never charged. Some of this she'll learn this from Alice, Gale's second wife, who never learned how to be anything but a ghost of the first.

Other stories she'll learn from men visiting the girls in her house, her brothel. These will be men who pause before leaving, who think to say a thing casually but look at their boots when they say it. They'll tell her Gale cheated his wealth out of other men but lost it before he finished

building his house. They'll speak of frosts and fires, that it was the land itself that pushed him back, how he built his house like a cairn for one wife then asked another to live in it. They'll say it quietly, envy in their voices, as if they couldn't help but covet what they outwardly detested. Years from now Marie will hear from these same men how Gale died fighting the Boers.

They'll leave these stories with Marie like a tip on the dresser. Marie will gather them like another woman would keep letters in a drawer. She'll do it for Alice. By then it will be for Alice that she does anything: Alice who teaches Marie to remember, who becomes for Marie a road back to everything she left behind.

In this moment though, walking up the lane, Marie cares nothing. She has little interest in what a man might have done. The thought of life as a vagary makes her wince. To her it is like a smell she can't separate from a childhood anguish she no longer remembers. It is a thing to make her shudder without knowing why. Right now, more than anything, what Marie wants is to get outside of loss, to get as far away from it as she can. What she sees in Gale's Furrow is a great stone house where time is a thing that happens far away.

*

Before this, Marie lived in Winnipeg. Her husband, Rhys, had died. From what, Marie never knew. The doctor wouldn't tell her. She found out later about Rhys's debts, and his other betrayals too. Whimsical girls, Marie wanted to believe, not at all like her. Girls weighed down less by gravity and more by a casual commitment to the earth, yielding and without Marie's sensuousness, certainly without her love of rye whiskey and cigarettes. All the same, it was to girls like these Marie decided to rent the rooms of her house.

Looking back, Marie would never have called it that, a *brothel*—though she knew other people did. It happened by accident, grew out of circumstance: an arrangement developing

between she and her girls. The girls were many, indistinct as a brood. They came and went. Their lives were accidents, moments tumbled into the next without cause like catastrophe sprung from itself. She envied them their abandon. Their poverty was a surrender she could not have.

But while the brothel gave her a kind of freedom, these were nevertheless years of listlessness for Marie: of feeling without locus, desire without a tether. She took on lovers, men she singled out from lists she kept at the door. Directing them up to her own rooms instead of someone else's, she contrived herself into a mistress. Men adored her and she came to forget her gloom. Her love was water spreading. It seeped. It overran. Like a river carving its path, she left her contour on men, unhid them, made them naked beneath the sun. But she herself felt nothing.

Manuel was different. A glassmaker by trade, he followed the cities west, building coloured windows for the new cities. He didn't seem to need anything from Marie. Together they were like birds in sky pitching without consequence. But when Marie told him she was pregnant, he told her about the wife he refused to leave. In the end Marie gave the child to Manuel and his wife, refusing to carry yet one more man's burden.

When the child was gone, Marie couldn't name all the things she didn't feel. There was nothing to account for the missing weight inside her, no one to hold: as if the heaviness she'd carried to term had birthed itself as weightless air. So she left the city and took her brothel with her.

*

Rain sounds through the open window at night. Surrounded by crates, Marie lifts objects from their packing, setting them here or there, never sure where they belong. A photograph by the window, a bracelet on the mantle: she moves these things carelessly as if to contrive an unconscious gesture, wanting to know what a casual moment here would look like.

In this new place, her things are suddenly strange to her, different without the world they came from. She moves through the house learning the different smells, sipping wine because she can't make the stove work for tea. She wants to believe she is new here too. She closes her eyes, touching a wall as if it were a thing to induce sleep by, as if she could draw in its quiet.

She walks out onto the porch and sees across the yard a woman squatted against the barn, soaked through and staring back at Marie. Neither move. For a second they're each exposed, as if their secrets exposed—the two of them like a concord, coordinates at the ends of a taut line. Alice, the runaway, Marie realizes. She'd been told about Alice, a woman who refused to leave the property. She'd spent part of the day looking for her, but hadn't found her.

Now, when Marie looks back, Alice is no longer there.

*

A week before she runs, Alice learns Marie's name by listening through the floor. Accustomed to solitude, the voices through the floor don't seem quite real to Alice at first. They come slowly, imprecise. She moves across the bed and leans her neck out to hear. There's a woman, a man. She recognizes the man from the bank. He's selling the house to a woman he calls Mrs. Devine.

Alice has the look of someone hungry too often, like a creature who's had to claw for everything but not had the claws to do it. When she enters a room she measures the distance to leave. She counts exits in heartbeats. For Alice, distance is a measure of her own body. She sees her own skin like the parchment for letters never written. At night she runs her hands over her skin imagining all the words never said there.

She keeps to only two rooms: the kitchen and a bedroom above that, heating only these two in the winter. Even in summer, she avoids the rest of the house. This is as much of the house's geography as she can abide. She skirts objects like a cat, never seeming to touch

anything—as if she doesn't quite trust them, believing them irresolute like anything else. For Alice every space has its ghosts: every room, every square inch of dirt. So there are rooms she never enters, floors she never visits. She reduces her travel in the house to a well-worn path.

Later, noting this, Marie will imagine Alice's steps over the years wearing through the floorboards, the grooves becoming like a shadow of where she's been. When she tells Alice this Alice will say it's true, that she has no wish to be anywhere at all.

Alice's two rooms don't belong to her, nor she to them. She lives in them only because she doesn't know who else would. The floor is an expanse she can't always bear to cross. The house has an air of abandonment as if a war had crossed its territory leaving everything empty. But the truth is, the house has only ever been like this and though Alice believes it's never really belonged to anyone, there are more lives bound up in its walls than Alice will let herself know.

Through the floor Alice hears herself talked about, the man telling Marie all about her, especially how one day in his office Alice begged him to let her stay. It's a scene Alice cringes to remember. "She wanted me to put her down as a condition of sale," the man says. Alice feels the shame, a turning in her stomach. Remembering embarrasses her. Having it spoken is worse. It happened when Gale was gone. He'd left her with nothing. The bank wanted everything. Alice thought if she relented, the bank would be lenient. She'd heard that the new owner would be expected to take the animals along with the rest of the property. She wanted to be cared for like this. She'd work and they'd feed her. It could go on the bill of sale. She didn't know what kind of work she would do but she didn't see the difference in being one kind of animal rather than another. "They could keep me like a horse," she said. The plan made sense to Alice. She hadn't known how foolish she seemed.

"I pitied her," the man says. "It's ridiculous, but I'll leave it up to you what to do with

her.” Alice sinks. The conversation sickens her: these two downstairs trafficking her back and forth like the care of a child, speaking as if consequence was a far-off thing. She wants to run, to disappear. She pushes her body flat against the floor. Marie’s voice is casual: “She can stay here now,” she says. But Alice doesn’t know what this means—*for now, from now on?* Words are tricky for her. They turn on her. They hide and betray. But they’re also what she depends on. She grips them tight, as a drowned man might clasp the shore as he crawls from the water, wanting to hold it all. Her thoughts spill. They fall in cascades, one into the next. She can’t think one thing without also remembering every other thing. Words become a marker for what’s missing, a face in a dream she chases, a stone in the hand to remember by.

She’d begged that man to let her stay and she hated herself for it. Now it makes her feel meagre and desperate. She resolves to be gone when Marie comes back. A week later, she runs.

*

All week Alice tries to leave but never manages it. Standing in the doorway to go, everything feels enormous—she like a small field creature exposed to too much sky. She has nothing ready, not even shoes, and doesn’t know where to go. When Marie comes, she can only think to run for an outbuilding across the yard.

The grass needles her feet as she runs; the air burns her lungs. From the loft that afternoon she watches Marie’s things brought into the house. She feels pushed from a place she never wanted belong to. At times she hears Boy beneath her. Through the boards she watches him enter or leave, his presence catching her unawares at first, like something she forgot she had. She doesn’t call out to him. She lets him believe he’s alone, not wanting him to know she’s there too. There are two houses in the yard. When Alice moved into the stone house a year before, Boy took up in the smaller one Alice abandoned. Before this Boy lived in a shed, one he stacked bales

around in the winter. He never asked if he could live in the smaller house. He just did it. So they are, in a way, both squatters here.

Later, in the outbuilding, when it rains, the roof drips and Alice's clothing becomes damp and cold. She thinks she can sneak back into the house unnoticed and leave in the morning. But when she climbs down and her clothes catch on a nail, she knows Marie has seen her: both, Marie and Alice, caught in the lightning. And then, just as quick, the yard is dark again.

*

For a year until Marie comes, there is only Alice and Boy. Alice alone in the big house, Boy in the little one. Only Boy ever approaches the stone house. Firewood, water: he leaves these by the servant door. Alice never lets him past. He knocks and leaves. Only then does Alice open the door. There is never any contact, no words shared, only a tacit understanding: a refusal in each to come nearer the other's different world. Though they'd once been hostile to each other, their feeling simmered into a begrudgement rather than a hatred.

There used to be others, the seasonal workers, but ever since then the yard has been derelict. It has the look of wildness taking over. Nature enters the house through broken windows (shattered when the men got angry), leaves and branches blown in, swallow nests in the rafters. Still only a few years old, the house looks as if fifty years of dust had come through.

Alice and Boy share a ragged independence—like peasants waiting for a country to come back from war. Only once has Boy entered the house. That was a year ago. Alice had waited for Gale after he disappeared. Hearing nothing, not knowing if he was alive or dead, she stopped waiting and carried her things from the little house, where she lived, to the much larger, and still unfinished, stone house that didn't even have furniture or wallpaper on its plaster.

The house wasn't meant for her. Gale built it for Isa, his first wife, whom Alice was

somehow to replace. A house meant for a ghost. But with Gale gone, it was hers as much as it was anybody's and she wouldn't be kept from it. But when she entered the house, having never before, she found Boy there already: a body where it was not supposed to be, a shadow in the window. He turned, moving towards her. She halted, hesitating. There was no threat in his approach, no menace, but there was some risk. When he paused in front of her she felt their closeness, could smell him: barn, sweat, animal. She felt the dry air rushing in through the open door behind her.

In that moment, they were both changed. The rules which had thus far governed their interactions were gone. It was a moment making little sense (and wouldn't until years later). Yet as penitents entering a chapel they were new, reverential. Their hush reverberated and for a second they were the sudden unburdening of old selves. Though neither of them understood this, they were each there because of Isa. She was the shape of the space between them—a palpable silence, like a river bed emptied of its water.

And then Alice reached to touch him. She'd no idea why she wanted to, but when she did she was stunned by Boy's shock, his recoil, the surprise in his eyes for her having touched him. Each stepping back, the moment lost—the sadness in Alice wanting to call him back.

*

The sound of Alice's sleeping is what Marie imagines air from a bird to sound like: light, barely there, breath moved through the warmth of a creature that is itself like air. Air itself breathing, Marie thinks. A kind of cannibalism. A quiet dissolution between self and world.

She watches Alice asleep on the floor, her back against the wall. They sit across the room from each other, a pool of water collecting beneath Alice's wet clothes. Marie had wanted to say something but didn't know what. Alice shocked her. Hours ago, Alice had walked through

Marie's space not even glancing at Marie. Dripping from rain Alice had moved through the room touching Marie's things, picking them up, handling them abruptly, jarring Marie every time she set something down. Uncertain, Marie left a towel, but Alice only ignored it. She sat across the floor sensing Marie: listening, waiting. Alone, each of them might lay claim to this space, but here together they displace each other. They're caught in a kind of shared unbelonging. Later, this cast-away feeling will become a security to Marie, a togetherness for she and Alice.

*

There is no moment when anything changes between them, no before or after, no time when they cease to be strange. Together they are like light entering a room from a window, imperceptible in its changes as it gains or diminishes across the floor.

But Alice never feels for Marie like Marie does for her. In many ways, Alice is barely aware of Marie. Even later, when their lives take on a strange quiet, Marie's presence remains a kind of shock to Alice, as if Marie were always jarring her from sleep too suddenly, calling her back after days and nights of fever to find that world too changed. In these moments, they'll come upon each other accidentally. Startled or confused, Alice will look up at Marie in the stair and not recognize her. For a moment Marie will be a stranger, someone who doesn't belong. Then suddenly Alice will remember in a rush, reaching out to touch Marie to be sure she's real.

At night Marie will wake to find Alice missing and she'll know Alice will have slipped from the room, or left the house completely. From the window, if she's not gone far, Marie might catch Alice behind an outbuilding or amongst the strange pieces of machinery. Alice will enter a small thicket of trees and Marie will lose sight of her. Here, Alice will have found a spot to perch and sit silently. On some rock or tree limb she'll wait for a feeling Marie cannot name.

In the morning, Marie will wake and find a small collection of pebbles on the sill which

Alice picked the night before. When she asks Alice about them Alice will push her shoulder blades together and stretch her arms, saying nothing, as if referring to a time and place to which Marie could never belong. The stones to Marie are like signs of a world she does not know.

And it is in these moments that she feels Alice could simply vanish, drift off as in fog where voices do not carry.

*

At first Alice is an intangible Marie longs to be near. To Marie, Alice seems as if she were always leaving, an exile without ever having fully left or having completely arrived. She's always a little more than a breath away. Alice alters a room, makes it foreign, uncommon. But what Marie loves about Alice is that with her, she herself, Marie, is also different.

Marie's days become for Alice, for their life together. She devotes herself to Alice. She becomes to Alice like a plate of food outside the door to be taken or left. And in this Alice gains a confidence. She forgets to live in only her two rooms, even coming to leave the house. But Marie understands this is fragile, that at any moment a word, a tone, a way of touching or not touching, will set Alice off and suddenly Alice will be elsewhere, retreated. Then Marie will spend days reestablishing connection.

Marie never notices it when it happens—Alice's absences. She looks up and Alice is gone. She'll search the house, calling Alice's name, hearing nothing. As if Alice were with another lover, Marie never knows when Alice will return: the next hour, the next night.

So Marie becomes wary of frightening Alice, of hastening some departure—that Alice might run away like she did that first day. In this, as if by osmosis, travelling from one body to another, Marie takes on the uneasiness of Alice. Marie is no longer the woman who arrived at Gale's Furrow. To her girls she brought from Winnipeg, she is a stranger. She becomes a glass

for Alice to sip at. So Marie's love is at odds with her devotion. It is a thing carrying inside itself the seed of its own end.

*

The river runs close to the yard, a half mile out where it touches the field just enough to change its square shape. From the window, Marie watches Alice cross that distance in the dark, her body half-hidden by the still-green stems of wheat or barley. An hour later, she follows. Though she expects to find Alice, she's startled by Alice's shape by the river—a silhouette, motionless. At first Marie thinks she's seeing some kind of statue left behind by Gale. She moves close, approaching from the side, afraid to alarm Alice, hesitant to disrupt her solitude. When Alice changes her breathing, Marie understands this is an invitation to come close, to remain with Alice silent by the water.

Marie waits for the moonlight to cross Alice. She has a habit of searching for scars she cannot see. She knows light reflects differently off a scar than other kinds of skin. So in the dark by the water she waits for a silver gleam to be reflected back to her, hoping for some trick of the moonlight to pass over Alice's face and illuminate the history she knows Alice must carry with her. There is only the quiet between them, the watery crash of some animal entering the water.

Marie reaches across the rock to touch Alice's arm. Alice turns away, says nothing. In other moments, Alice will be the one to ask Marie everything. Alice wants everything known. Privacy, Alice knows, can be like a weapon used against her. So she asks Marie everything.

“What did it smell like?” she will ask.

“What?”

“Death,” Alice says.

Marie tries to find the words, as if reaching in the mud to find what she's dropped there.

*

Death keeps age at bay. Like land emptying at plague, age vanishes with settlement. Gun fights, and infections keep the population young. Women wake covered in sweat, unsure if their dreams were dreams only or the fevered memories of real madness from days they can't quite remember, fearful they were seen in such a state.

Marie's house, miles from town, is not immune. One day a man, shouting, comes charging from a room wearing only boots and a sheet pointing to where the girl still is. In the bedroom, Marie finds Flo, a girl she employed after bartering her off a Winnipeg police officer she saw arrest the girl. Marie watches Flo on the bed, on hands and knees, shrieking, the bed sheet wound around her nakedness like a serpent. For three days Marie devotes herself to the girl. But after only hours, Marie gags the girl so her screaming won't be heard by the other girls in the house—fear, she knows, will spread quickest, leaping from one girl's thoughts to the next. Flo sweats through sheets and Marie changes them. She feeds the girl an elixir which a man once sold to her at the door. When that fails, she spoons bourbon until Flo passes out.

It's Alice, however, not Marie, who never leaves Flo's side, staying close, waiting not for the girl to get better, but for her howling to return. To Alice, Flo is a vision of herself, a portent of her future, her own self carried to its furthest. For the first time in her life Alice prays. She does it in the darkness, begging not to become like Flo, seeing death instead as a way of escape.

Though Flo returns eventually to an approximation of old self, two other girls leave in the meantime and Marie has to spend the next months rebuilding her reputation.

*

Amongst Marie's things is a phonograph. When Alice finds it, the player is a strange piece of machinery she doesn't understand. She's never seen one and she has to ask Marie how it works.

The phonograph teaches Alice to dance. The tinny sounds of an orchestra, or a trumpet coming through alone, is like the voice Alice never had. She traces her fingers across the cartridge grooves, unsure how those marks could produce such a sound. Alone in a room, she becomes consumed with the machine. The phonograph to her is a parallel for her own life: both she and the needle caught in the track of memory.

Marie tells her she'll lose the song by playing it too often. The cylinder is changed every time it's played, she says. She sets herself on the window behind Alice, Alice's body bent over the player as if working at a loom. She watches Alice speak into the horn, then play back the recording, shaving the wax cylinder down with a knife each every time she's dissatisfied with how she sounds. With every try, her voice into the machine becomes more exaggerated, more stretched—a magnification of herself.

“There are performers who re-record their music every week,” Marie tells Alice. Alice looks up. “There is a limit to how often you can reprint a recording. A new sound has to be made for each new batch. So for every artist, if they're popular, there are many versions of their songs. One day there'll be people who collect these versions, tracking each change, how a voice will try to find that first sound, but not find it. Small changes accumulated like another kind of wealth.”

Alice hates Marie for saying this. Her eyes drop and she walks away from the machine.

Boy

In a hundred years a man'll kick dirt and still see arrowheads in the ground. When the bones and blood are eaten by worms. Beneath lives of grain. Below our knowing. Pieces of flint still there.

How I kick ash from the dead fire to cover the hole I bury her in. The horse. The mare. Then I see how he sees. How the world breaks apart into the pieces of his seeing. How I'm made a thing for his moving. Between Wood Mountain and here. After he's buying me and before we stop. We're walking east. Not knowing where we're going or when we're stopping because he isn't saying. Hungry. Shooting to eat. Stealing. We stop on a hill. He's staring down a ranch. His chest against the fence. I'm not seeing what he's seeing. He's not looking at the things we might eat. His eyes aimed through to something else. And then he's turning round. Moving deeper into the woods until we find a place to sit. We wait for dark. Then wait some more. Still I'm wondering but not asking. We're not making camp and not building a fire.

When I wake he's gone. It's cold and dark. I wake again. I hear hoofs behind my head. Animal snorting. My eyes change to the dark. Then I see what he sees. Not the horse. The thing he would do with the horse. The horse beyond the horse. And I'm wishing I'm still sleeping. Seeing anything but this. The thing past sight. But I'm not and we're leaving quick. For three days we're walking fast. And all the time he's testing her udder. Making her eat. Moving behind her. Feeling with his hands for a change in her heat. Careful to watch for the first milk he knows will come at night. Checking her teats. And he's watching for the men he knows are hunting us. His eyes looking for trails and roads he doesn't want to cross. We're staying hidden in the day and walking at night. Until he finds a spot. Behind a hill in trees where a fire won't be seen. Then we're waiting. Careful for sounds.

He lets the colt suck for two days after she foals. On the second night he walks the mare

away from the fire. Away from the colt. The sound of their steps in the leaves until it's quiet. After the gunshot when he comes back I'm already knowing what he wants. He just nods and I'm getting up. Walking to where he's lit a small fire a mile away beside the dead mare. When I get there blood is pooling. Spilled like the blue sack that cased the colt. Blue like an ocean I've never seen. A seeping I can only see with the fire.

I skin the horse. My knife carving into the animal we'd led for three days. That I'd slept beside. Its blood sticky on my arms. The smell of iron. I'm cutting the meat we'll carry in strips. Building a rack to dry it on. I bury the bones near the fire and burn the hide so it won't be seen. The scar saying whose horse this is. The reason she died. The smell of burnt hair everywhere. Me. There. By the fire. He and his colt a mile away. Not beyond my seeing.

Alice

Because I live with ghosts my thoughts swirl and eddy. They plunge and rise and cannot but whirl desperately about for a piece of solid to fix themselves upon, as if they were the same seeping riverbed thoughts of now dead Isa—that first-wed wife of his who sought reprieve from her own turning mind in the murky dark prostration of her own death at the bottom of a river. And the speechlessness of it all makes it seem unreal, nebulous and insane to a gyring mind without another to speak it to.

And for me there is only this reaching in the dark, which is not unlike that other kind of nighttime reaching—the body's burning want—desirous, that when unfulfilled and unappeased becomes only an appetite for want, no longer a reaching for him, for his shape, a shape which never reached back, but a cold and clammy mucid desire to be desired, a grasping to be known, to know a self that's real and not the mere churning thought of ghosts. And though I know there's

no fathoming or knowing this man, that I yearn to perceive him only as a man so I might know I too am not unreal—and though there's only ever dissolve and shadow, the ephemeral he and (in my obsessions for him and her and me) I as well—my mind, like his, will bend itself upon its desire until it breaks.

And what I know I know because of a husband who wouldn't speak, and because the one time he did, his used-to-be wife stole his words and scribbled them down onto whatever paper she could find on the morning their child was born before throwing herself in the river. And these are the letters that churn my thoughts and molest my quiet, for the only other mind, but for my own whisking one, I've ever really known is that female one which wrote those letters, who slipped them between the boards of a cellar wall.

And for me those two mornings are bound—the morning I found them and the one five years earlier when she wrote them—as if they were the same morning and she and I somehow the same person, that the she (Isa) who wrote them did so for the same she (me) who'd discover them. And from the moment I first grasped those letters, though I'd never met her, did not know her, and neither she me, did not even know her name because he wouldn't speak it (a refusal which left her only with un-name and me as the diminished recurrence of someone who'd come before), I knew who'd written them, and more than this I knew, as I might recognize that sky or this earth or this mind's unquiet, that once I'd read them there could no longer be any distinguishable she and I.

And didn't I already know? Before I'd even held them, those letters in that cellar with its rain-smell and peaty-wet earth, amongst the barrelled vegetables and winter-salt meat and the fetid wood-rot of planked walls holding sepulchred Isa's letters in that earthy dark those five years since her death like the relic of a woman-saint nobody bothered to remember, where odour

trails hung in the air like the want of love or gardenia petals putrid at the end of their season? did I not also recognize, as I would my own smell, the scenting musk of her, Isa's, fear and dread? of her disquiet and end-of-life resignation as well which must have lingered in that stale air? Did not the waft of her panic (when she for the last time climbed down those stony stairs to hide her letters before he could see what she wrote or before he himself could do to her what she must do alone, or even worse, before he could stop her from doing it at all), did not the scent of her last life lead me, even five years later, to the far corner of that subterrane where I, while reaching behind a crate for some root or vegetable, brushed and clasped with my wanting fingers a tied bundle of letters in the dark?

So there on that morning, when I'd not yet dwelled in this house a full season (and so could not yet know how the seasons here would accumulate in ceaseless progression without halt or abatement or how the work they'd wrench from my not-spirit and not-body but that part of me that endures without will or volition like the animal dragging its own gaunt and would-be carcass bleeding across a clearing to no discernible end but the knowing that there is no end), on that morning as I carried up the cellar stairs those letters bound with a torn strip of cloth, a soft red strip ripped from what could only be a woman's dress, and it torn ragged, and so torn in haste, as I untied those letters and they spilled out across the table (the very same table on which they'd probably been written), their ink smeared by a pen-hand too hurried to guard against their smudging, before I could even fail to recognize the handwriting or search for the signature that wasn't there, I knew already who'd written them.

Yet even this, the knowing of that mind (Isa's) contained in those letters with the impossible conviction or degree of knowing it (she) in its (her) entirety (of grasping its hollowed affections and guarded nooks and all it tells by not telling and what it secrets away by feigning

intimacy), and even more crucially, the mere certainty of knowing it was her mind and not someone else's, of even this I'm unsure. Because she wrote what he told her and so what he wanted her to know and I'm therefore unsure which are even her thoughts and which his; or which are that-which-he-really-was rather than that-which-he-needed-her-to-believe.

Yet she must have thought of me—not me as that particular me, peculiar and singular with all my knowing branded on my skin (and streaming in my veins like a caustic bloodline of remembering), but that other me which is Gale's wife and therefore not me, which could have been any woman but which she (Isa) knew would inevitably be that one chosen by him to be his wife. Because only a wife would enter that cellar where she hid her writing. She knew my fate would be her fate, so she could not have ignored me then just as I can't ignore her now. So, me whose dream-image would've halted her when what she wanted most was a river bottom's quiet.

As she ran, she paused at the threshold. If anyone had seen it, it would've seemed the house itself had stopped her—halted her there in the doorway—undoubtedly speaking Gale's own rebuke. But it wasn't this. When she knew there was no living left, that her life with him would only be a pitiable and mewling whimper, a life lived only as a feverish longing for life (his mate, his child-bearer, his replete and uterine promise for sons, his betrothed hollow), it was me, her sister-same self she'd not leave alone. Because on that day, ending for her at the bottom of a river, and ending that way perhaps because of her own doing (her action, her legs, her feeling which threw the rest of her in), but not of her own choosing, if choice she had, it was only in what she left behind.

And those letters I have read and re-read. I've spread them out before me, searched them for what they contain of her and him and me. I've seen her life unfold, watched imperceptibly her world of rivers and child born into awful be replaced by my own dreaming, dreaming to

inform the pieces of her, these splinters of biography, like the quiet dialogue of an impossible romance. And so with all that I feel more wed, more spouse, to her than him.

Yet later, with the pages too fatigued and tatter-ran with my handling to discern, so I could continue to read and not only remember them, I copied them. And when even those grew soiled I copied them again. So with all those years of writing and rewriting, of tracing her words and absorbing them, I cannot say any longer which, if any, are still her words and which mine. I do not know which are my own thoughts and which became mine. And I cannot know that if she were to somehow read them now, all those pages of hers which are no longer really hers anymore, she would not say, I do not recognize this Isa and that Gale.

Marie

Alice once asked me what it was we were bartering. She'd lived with too much quiet I think. She wanted things spoken—even if she wasn't sure she could bear to hear it. She was wrong of course. There was no barter between us. With Gale she grew to distrust the quiet. She said with him she never knew what she was giving. She couldn't touch what she gave. Couldn't mark it.

Alice and I lived together a year before she came down and asked me. She hadn't slept. She'd lain awake for hours waiting for me to wake also. I just watched her there. Her eyes red. Waiting in the doorway. Wanting to say her piece badly.

We believe the ones closest to us know us. See us most clearly. And we them. So no one asks these things. And we say this is what love is. But it isn't true. We don't know at all. Alice was right to want it spoken. It needs to be. But she was wrong in what she thought I'd say. Standing there she reminded me of men I've seen waiting at the bed's edge after having paid for their time with a girl. Feeling something they'd not expected. Wanting to tell the girl but

dreading her reply. That she'd tell him it was her job to make him feel that way.

This was I think in a way what Alice expected from me. Despite our closeness and because of the kind of houses I ran Alice must have thought I'd a shrewder worldview than I did. She must've thought it all exchange and barter for me. That a man pays and a girl offers. Each what they have for what they don't. The value of what each wants not quite equivalent to what the other thinks it worth. Loss and gain. But it isn't like this. It wasn't like this for my girls and it wasn't like this for Alice and me. It wasn't even like this for Gale.

Men and women are not so different. For what they want they'll pay anything. As long as they have it to give—and sometimes when they don't. But with Alice I stopped wanting. That was something I thought I'd never have. For me the two of us alone in that house was like a stone in my pocket. Something to rub between my fingers to keep the world from turning. It was quiet. I nearly forgot about my girls upstairs. Barely knew they were there. And if the price I had to pay for what Alice and I had was managing that house . . . well that wasn't nothing at all.

She fell back against the door and wept. Wrapped her knuckles against the wood. She told me then of Isa's letter written long ago which she'd found somewhere in the house. She went upstairs for it, came back down and read it to me. Page after page of that woman apparently just before she killed herself. All that sorrow. This is what Alice fought in her mind not to become. When she found out by accident she was only the replacement wife for a love that had sunk itself into the water, she suddenly understood what she'd long felt. "And now," she said to me, "after all my wanting isn't this just another river?"

"It is a river. We've always been a river," I said to her. Isa's pages in my hands. The story of Isa and Gale and Boy and where they came from. But I could see that though those letters in my hand were undoubtedly written by Alice. Copied and recopied. All those pages of Isa's last

thoughts with Alice's own scribbles and scrawls on the side. Not only a story about Isa but Alice as well. The loneliness of each scratching at the paper.

“It's always a river” I said. But not all of us make it over, I thought.

Nina & Billy

Marie dreams of her house becoming naked again. The wallpaper curling off the walls, the furniture sinking through the floor, hers becomes a house without windows, of broken glass, of Alice gone.

The girls went slowly, years ago and one by one, always at night. Stuffing their bags with whatever they could take (a necklace, a bit of money Marie forgot to lock away), they slipped out quietly to meet men down the road or in town promising new lives—lives Marie knew they'd not find. Every few months Marie woke to find her house emptier and each time she felt hollowed out, like a tree gouged by the animals living inside it.

She wanted them to see her as a mother and they hadn't. For a time she brought new girls in, but they stayed less and less. Eventually Marie gave up. Snowflake hadn't become the major border crossing it was supposed to. A political decision made elsewhere moved that crossing thirty miles east to a different town. Snowflake baked and shrank in the sun, withering like a crop meant to grow elsewhere. The house grew lonely, empty. The men stopped coming. Rooms were shut, forgotten. Marie and Alice grew apart. Their world shrank and so did their love.

Long ago Marie filled the house with bodies and motion, with sound and sex. In doing so she transformed Alice's world. Alice let go of her pasts. With Marie she forgot all that. They lived in a kind of reverie. Hardly apart, they acted in concert, Marie tending the men, Alice the girls. They existed as if of the same breath. The house became an extension of their will, an expression of their spirit. It sulked. It glowed. In moments it seemed as if to sing. Nothing entered except as they wanted it. Their sex was palpable, a presence in the room. They lived in it like weather, a thing changeable and moody. It moved like seasons do. Every touch became a part of a greater touch. They created a home out of forgetting and becoming.

But the border traffic slowed and the men stopped coming. When Marie closed off parts of the house, she closed off parts of Alice too. The dazzling person Alice had become diminished. She grew pallid and inward, accusing Marie of selfishness, of secluding her from the life she wanted. She looked at Marie as the cause of her new isolation. Throwing perfume against the wall, shattering it, she shouted, “You guard me obsessively. You lock me away with you!” Marie explained to her about the money, the customers who’d gone, but Alice understood little. She’d remained innocent of the money that shaped her world. It was then Marie realized Alice had never stopped being like a child. And like a child wounded too early, Alice punished Marie. Her mood enveloped the house like a suffocating vapour. Her silence, punctuated with unruly weeping and shouting, was a pestilence, an unforgiveness that frightened Marie.

Desperate, Marie bought Alice presents she couldn't afford—music and clothes—but they only revealed her desperation. To Alice Marie seemed hopeless and awful.

So now, wanting a new seclusion, Marie hides anything that might remind Alice of their old life. As if to make the house bare for Alice she removes furniture from the house, throws out photographs and things the girls gave her: a necklace, a doll, gloves. But this only affirms for Alice the distance she wants from Marie and she dreams of ways to have it. So, in 1913, she writes to Marie’s daughter, using Marie’s name, asking her to come live with them.

*

No one greets Nina when she pushes past Marie's front door. She enters the house alone, hurrying past the front rooms, shouting into the upper floors. The excitement she feels rips at her chest. She looks around the room, wanting to touch everything that’s Marie’s. She runs her hands over Marie’s books—holding them, touching them as she thinks Marie might. She is movement and desire. Everything here is a discovery for her.

Nina has never met Marie, though she's wondered about her all her life. She doesn't yet know Marie is her mother. Marie has been like a character in a story, someone who long ago shaped her family in ways she doesn't understand. Marie was a name that moved through the houses Nina lived in as a child. Arriving suddenly, boldly, it changed a room, entering like a rush of heat. Her father livened every time he heard it. Her mother did not.

Now, alone in Marie's house, no one answers and Nina swallows her disappointment. She doesn't want to lose the thrill she feels being here. In her bag Nina has the letter Marie wrote her, urging her to apply for the teaching position in Snowflake and so also to come live with her. Nina had leapt instantly at the chance to be near the woman who'd existed for her only in her father's stories, but now, here, the house doesn't feel as she thought it would. For an hour Nina waits at the bottom of the stair. When she finally hears Marie behind her, she turns to find Marie staring down anemically at her. There is no recognition, no exchange between them, only distance. When Nina tells her who she is Marie only looks at her dejectedly, unable to face what Nina has said, and turns back up the stairs.

*

At first, the three women of the house (Marie, Alice, Nina) avoid each other. They are like women of a convent, devout in their silence. Their movements synchronize like a choreography. They enter a room only if empty, eat alone as if obeying a secret calendar.

Nina's presence is a quarrel between Marie and Alice. She hears them at night through the walls. The house becomes like the sickness of a friend Nina can no longer manage to be near. Marie's connection to Nina's life has always been unclear, like a current without source, an electric remembering of her father's, but now, she and Marie are like different kinds of animals sharing a geography but living as if the other doesn't exist. Nina spends her time at the school

wishing she could leave, but knowing she has a contract to teach for the year. She decides to look for another place to stay.

Returning home one night Nina feels a hand slip into hers. It's dark and Nina can't see. The figure leads her through the house past Marie's bedroom. They move like in a dance, Nina being led as if into a game. Later, outside on the balcony, laughing, Alice and Nina's voices trail off. The night is a vessel for their sound, a thing to be filled by their talk. They lean against a railing high above the ground. Beneath them everything is moonlit and still, the warmth between them a slow-burning light Nina wants to pull close to. Nina doesn't know what to make of Alice. In some silence or unexpected laughter Nina feels the connection but senses too the contrivance in Alice, that she, Alice, metes out her closeness, touching and flirting, yes, but shy also—a design in her affection. Alice tilts her chin, rebukes Nina only to charm her again. Gestures of intimacy, Nina thinks, pieces of closeness.

“You're like Marie if everything was different,” Alice says. “Her heredity in a new body with new lease.” There is a kind of war between them here on the balcony. Neither wants to say what they need—Alice revealing little, Nina wanting what Alice won't tell her. “They were close once, your father and Marie,” Alice says. Stories like this are why Nina moved to Snowflake. She moves close to Alice, cornering her against the railing. Their bodies are near, tight. “Tell me,” Nina says. Alice steps away to the far edge of the balcony, defiantly.

“Your father always wrote, but Marie never answered,” Alice says. She looks like a child who can't see its own greed, Nina thinks. Alice continues, “Letters meant distance to Marie and distance only apology.”

“For me?” Nina asks.

“Marie would never be like that—suppliant, regretful. She never would've written you,

no matter what.” Nina looks at Alice. She can't tell who is getting what they want here.

“So you wrote me instead?” Nina asks.

“Yes.”

*

From her room with the window open Marie listens to the two women outside, her once-lover and this daughter she doesn't know, strangers both. Hearing them, Marie feels deferred, pushed to the edges—a pencil note in the margins of her own life, a kind of marginalia for a story she doesn't see clearly. She wants to be close to both of them, but she has too much hate—Alice for asking Nina here, and Nina for coming. It's a feeling in her belly she can't get rid of, a thing that won't digest. She doesn't want Nina here, not when she's trying to find her way back to Alice.

Their fights are tremendous. Though she and Alice are rarely in the same room anymore, when they are they only fight over Nina or some other thing which is never what Marie means to talk about when she enters the room. But a gesture is made, a short word said, then someone is spitting a meanness across the floor like a dart. It never matters who. Words become like objects for the other to choke on. A pit in the mouth to keep the other from saying a word back. All the things Marie means to say withering in her throat like sour air. She cries while Alice looks at her with pity and disgust, a broken feeling Marie cannot contend with.

The sound of Nina and Alice through the window makes Marie want to climb out. She wants to sit and laugh, but she knows she'd only spoil their talk, sour their lips. They'd see her as a beggar, blighted and septic next to their laughter. She walks to the window and puts her arm out into the night, reaching her fingers into the dry air as if to catch rain.

*

They arrive within weeks of each other, Nina first and Billy after, each from their different

worlds. They drift separately across a continent, drawn like rivers and arriving like children: errant, orphaned, returned without ever having really left. To Nina it seems they fall together with the certainty of gravity, distance and difference a measure only for their eventuality. But to Billy this way of seeing will never fit. It'll feel ill-adjusted, like boots made for different work.

In twilight Billy sets his things down at the bottom of a gully, someone's pasture. He falls asleep hearing water and the sound of cows like the earth groaning. A deep arthritic thrum to lull him. In his sleep a water rises, the creek flooding the bank. For miles there is only the flat milky plain of a land covered. Everything is still and there are no sounds of birds. In his dream he wakes to find himself drifting. The current carries him until he has no idea where he is, the landscape changed. For Billy this is a time of stillness when even the moon seems not to change and there's no sun at all. Over the next days in his dream the water recedes, mile by mile back into the creek. But what he finds is a land not at all returned to what it was. Everywhere there are dead cows sideways on the ground. Their bellies bloated in the grass like blisters. As in all his dreams there's no smell, though he knows an odour of sickness must abound.

The dreams are always with him. They enter his days and his wakefulness takes on a magical quality. He is not always sure what's real and what isn't. To those he passes he looks as if having seen something he can't describe, or having lived through what he can't remember. Everything is charged and bright. If he knew what atoms were he would tell how he sees the light streaming between them—streaks of light burning through like sun ripped through clouds in religious paintings. And what he sees is always changing. Things shift before him, one thing into the next, so he is never sure. He seems drunken to the people he meets on the road.

Wherever he goes, people see him as suspect. As a fugitive wanted somewhere (a run-in with the law he refuses to speak of), he is an exile, a strangeness. He carries a small bag, in it a

bundled stack of loose pages he's had since a child. Though he can hardly read, they are for him a compass, a map. They are both where he's going and where he's from. Written by a mother he's never met, the pages, some now missing, are the only thing he's had his entire life. He wants, more than anything, to find the place he belongs to.

Through state after state he walks. In Utah a dog finds him and together they turn north to Canada. He sees in the dog a reflection of his own itinerant heart. He thinks they're together in this but when he does the dog vanishes. He then thinks his first thought was right: that all things vanish the moment they're known. Though the dog reappears, days later, surprising him, Billy learns to look sideways, know everything by its silence, miss it before it's gone.

*

As if she's sensed his coming, like one does a change of wind or the smell of rain, Nina lifts her head and watches him in the distance. In the garden she lifts from her knees, already moving. She crosses the yard and climbs the verandah by the side of the house. When she rounds the corner he is already there. A man and his dog.

Nina doesn't know who he is or what his relationship to the house is. She has little sense yet of who belongs here and who doesn't. This is new country to her, a place that swirls with a terrible and private beauty. She falls in love with strangenesses like this: this stranger like a memory of a place she doesn't yet understand.

Covered in dust—his clothes, his arms and face—he seems to her to wear land like cloth. She sees him unclearly, and her attraction to him is perhaps cast in this first misperception. There's a long silence between them. He reaches for her hand. She thinks he wants to touch her, but to him it is an abrupt need to steady himself. He wants to know the point where one human being begins and he ends. He has lived without these kinds of definitions. When he tells her,

“My mother lives here,” she thinks he means Alice.

*

Marie watches him coming up the lane. She knows he feels meagre, watched. From the window she sees for miles. She’s like a hawk, a snake—a creature sensing movement like mood. She waits for the knock and counts to twelve, the time it takes a pair of boots to walk the verandah.

Marie hadn't answered when Nina came but she will now. Her refusal to let anyone else answer the door is a habit from when the house was still a brothel. Then she would greet everyone at the door. This was her house and she wanted to show it. She was proud when everybody else thought she shouldn't be. “A rooster in a dung heap,” she’d heard a woman say once. Marie had been indignant then. A rooster? What did that woman know?

She met every man with a single purpose then, to show him he was being welcomed into a space above his station. Marie's house was like a temple a man could never be clean enough for. She chose everything with this in mind—the furniture, the drapes, the rich textured wallpaper, deep reds and blues, greens, everything soft to touch, something to sink into. No matter how often a man returned, he’d understand here he could never belong.

But this man, this boy, outside her door, won’t get in at all. She knew who he was before he even reached the steps. A man in town had told her. For years she knew he’d come, but never told Alice. Alice wouldn’t have believed her anyway. He was beyond her, what she couldn't see, the nearsighted blotch at the side of Alice's vision. A shadow walking down the road.

Marie saw straightaway there are lines love will cross that Alice won’t. Alice could never see the Indian lover Isa’s letters were written for (Boy was the only one around)—and the baby they had, now at her door. Only once did Marie bring it up. Alice had then turned to her, daring her to say it again. What Marie saw was a sacrilege to Alice. It stunned her like a profanity she

wouldn't admit to knowing already. But to Marie too this boy is a worry, someone who puts her life here into question. Marie eyes the door, the knock not coming, the sourness in her stomach giving her fight. She clenches the chair beneath her, picturing him outside, his back to the house, scanning the yard (her yard), measuring it with his eyes. The feeling in Marie's stomach festers like an ulcer. It throws a panic in her gullet. Then all at once she is up and to the door as it swings open. There, this breed leading her daughter in by the hand.

Marie looks back and forth between the two, Nina and the boy. He isn't tall, not big either, not muscled as he looks he should be. But to Marie he is heavy, immutable. A brick. He doesn't need to say anything, his presence itself like an interrogation of her life, an insinuation that what she thinks is hers is actually somehow his. And then, in a second, Marie is like a cornered animal. Her glare is mean, her sound wild. She grabs him by his shirt front and forces him back towards the door.

*

He moves a tent into the yard, not fully understanding Marie's rage, nor even really why he's here or what the letter he carries with him means. At night Nina brings a plate of food: apples, a half-loaf of bread, a bottle of chokecherry wine she's taken from Alice's cellar.

He crawls from his tent. She passes the plate to him and they eat walking through the yard, the dew wet against their legs. There's quiet between them. Though he doesn't know her, he senses their closeness—like a former lover who can't align the person before him with the person he once knew. She asks nothing and he's grateful. He doesn't know how to leave the solitude of the road behind. When she tells him he's not allowed inside the house she looks to him as if he might give her a reason. "Marie won't say why," she says.

Billy watches the moon move across Nina's arms like a kind of cloth he's never touched.

He becomes aware of his clothes, ripped and dirty, how his boots are like ruins. She suggests he find work on the yard and he nods. She tells him there are men who work in the fields. "There is a man named Boy to talk to," she says. "He's in charge, I think."

*

Billy will always be a labourer; he knows this. It's the only way he passes. As a child he'd try to wash the sun from his skin, not understanding. But in the field with the other men, white but darkened by in the fields, he becomes almost the same.

His first memory is working in a kitchen: scrubbing, mopping, living in a shared second floor room. He has no memory of what city this was, only that when the woman accused him of stealing he began his life elsewhere. He became someone who walked. There was a ranch. He worked in the sun all day. After that all the places were the same. Work, meals, a bunk.

He took his mother's letter everywhere. Unable to read, he could only touch the undecipherable marks on the page as if they were glyphs on a wall, the shapes as elusive to him as the mother who wrote them. They might have been another language. He, young still, thought if he concentrated the letters would become clear to him, like a code or a memory of a dream. At night the sound of their rustling would wake the men in the bunk. Once, a man trying to sleep above him climbed down. In the kerosene light Billy watched the older man, naked to the waist, take the pages from him, fold them in two and nail them between two pieces of board. "You'll wear em out before y'even know what they mean," he said, throwing the now protected pages back at Billy. There were lessons like this, about the motherliness of some men.

Later, he found a woman with whom he bargained for reading lessons, giving his labour in return. In this way, he learned how to trade himself away.

*

Nina refuses to make love inside the house and so they find corners of the yard to meet in, buildings unused. Here, they lie on a bed of tarps in an outbuilding. Through the window, filmed over with field dust, light enters as into a church and Billy listens as she tells him of her father.

"He is a manipulator of light," she says.

She turns on her side, touching Billy's shoulder absently. She trails her finger across his body as if in water. She tells him everything of herself, all of what Alice has told her: who she is and where she came from. Each word a hunger for the next as she sinks into her story. With his head on her chest, her breath pushes at her ribs. Though her attention seems elsewhere he knows she is always aware of him. Her arm slips beneath his as he drifts, a reminder to stay awake. Her hands are always moving, expressing. They flex and spread, their movement like an instruction for her voice, a baton to conduct an unremembered past.

Like any storyteller, Nina desires connection. She sees it everywhere. She tells him there is picture of herself in him, and he also in her. He wants to disappear in her romance, to wrap himself in it like a blanket, but these are moments of terror to him. He feels stitched into her world like a patch on a blanket. Her stories are an invitation into her own life, a place where he too might belong. He becomes lost in the world Nina wants to believe in—placed in it like an object. She puts something between them, a line, something he can't see though he senses it, something he'll have to cross again and again. "You were born in a whorehouse?" he asks.

"A brothel?" she says, correcting him. "Yes I was."

*

The coming of Billy has the effect of revealing the closeness between things. Like the paths of rain down glass or sentences bleeding into the next, lives which seemed separate become bound, mingled. It becomes impossible to speak of one without speaking of every other one too.

For decades Boy has been like an island to Alice and Marie, a half-remembered territory to their capitol, cut off and in defeat. He hasn't felt like this though. He felt like water, like movement and motion, memory without being. But with Billy now, he feels even more changed. He has pangs of uncertainty, the want of connection, the pain of distance: all the trappings of love. He is overjoyed when he recognizes Billy in the yard, standing by his tent.

When Billy comes to Boy, he recognizes Billy by the ghost of Isa in his face. He can't make the words to tell Billy who he is, so he only stares while Billy asks him for a job. The disconnect pains Boy, but he also cannot remember being happier. At night he sees Billy and Nina from the window of his cabin—Billy crosslegged in the grass, Nina beside him, a candle between: their nearness plain to Boy.

Boy has always felt invisible. To the men in the yard, for whom he is foreman, he goes unseen. Mornings, he assigns them work and they stand grouped in front of him, hearing but not seeing him. They resent him, mistrusting his knowledge. "What does an Indian know about grain?" To keep their anger at bay they come to see their orders coming not from Boy, but as though through him from somewhere else, straight from the horizon behind him. As if he were only a voice in the wind, some dust kicked up for a second.

There are cracks in his hands, agedness in his voice. Boy was young still when he took Billy away—stole, some would say. Not even guilt-ridden yet (too soon after Isa's death), he panicked. He had to get Billy away, and only that one thought in his mind, not even a thought but an instinct, a burning in his blood up and down his arms and legs: save Billy, ride until there was nowhere left to ride to. He rode for weeks holding the baby close to his chest, stopping everywhere on the road, having to search for mothers he'd beg to feed his child. And then he just left Billy there, with a woman, never returning—too afraid to face his son for what he wasn't

able to do. And now Billy back after all these years, not even knowing who he is.

*

When Billy hears Boy's voice it's like a song before it becomes a revelation. All afternoon they've worked alongside each other—silent, awkward. Between them is a rusted machine half-hidden in the grass. Mounted on a platform to be pulled by horse, it was a way of launching seed into a field.

To Billy it's both arcane and imaginary, not altogether real, as if the artillery for a war not yet fought. There are rusting machines like this throughout the yard. Strange structures set up on blocks like skeletal beasts seeming to belong to some past age as much as a future one. In the days and weeks since he arrived Billy has walked past them, even touched them, unsure of what they are. What Boy knows (and Billy doesn't) is that they are Gale's inventions, some even with patents, the contrivances of a man obsessed with yield. There are echoes like this of Gale everywhere. Boy hopes to use this machine in the next season but is hesitant too—as if fixing it means resurrecting more than just a machine. The two move about the machine without comment, disassembling, cleaning, contorting their bodies to make it work. Billy scrubs bearings with a steel brush, trying not to lose the small orbs in the grass. He turns them in a dish, removing their rust. Here, they are both mechanics and archaeologists.

All afternoon Billy has felt Boy's eyes on him: glassy, bound. Billy disappears in this. He shrinks into himself and Boy follows. He turns, putting a distance between them, the back of a shoulder becoming a wall, a rudeness to hide in. It's a scene that won't finish, an intimacy that won't arrive. Billy feels like a man embarrassed in the sight of a child—an always child, this is how Billy sees Boy. And it isn't just the name. It's a view that enters him from the other men—their way of seeing he can't get outside of. When he tries to shake it loose, he still only sees Boy

as a child not wanting to be a child. So he looks away.

Earlier in the day, Boy had reached for a tool but touched Billy's hand instead, lingering before pulling away. A uncomfortable moment. A wound for each of them. Billy doesn't understand it, but he feels it. Every time he turns away it is a knife in them both, a line from the gut of one to the other. It preoccupies their hours together, this nameless feeling lost inside them.

So at first Billy doesn't hear what Boy says. Instead, it's a song in the back of his head. A thing to hum. Not even fully aware he does it, he repeats the words until they become familiar, like a melody. And then suddenly he hears the words in his head, the voice there too: Boy.

Billy looks at Boy, uncertain. "Those letters I am seeing you reading always. I am the you in them."

*

There is only rain through the last week of August and the three women hardly leave the house. The air is wet, the light dim. These are days lit by lamp and candle, quiet except moments when Alice's music moves through the house, distant like a draft.

Mornings Marie will come into the kitchen and find Nina working. New tasks every day. Since she decided to stay, Nina has insinuated herself into the labour of the house, work Marie barely understands, has hardly herself done (the girls having done it until they left and Alice since). This embarrasses Marie. Reaching for a kettle, she's suddenly aware of her hands, the labour they don't show. Next to Nina they seem pale, incapable. She slips them into her pockets.

Nina moves indignantly past Marie. Her mood is brutal, a stiffness in her wrists as she sorts jars roughly. Her contempt pushes Marie into the corner like a shadow. Here, there's space only for Nina's anger. Billy is a thing between them, a stone they can't see around. Marie knows this. Yet in moments Marie has also thought that they, she and Nina, are getting nearer. She

doesn't know this is true but she wants it to be. Last night sitting on the steps their wordlessness had been like a kind of conversation, an exchange of silence and breath. They were, Marie thought, like animals getting used to each other, measuring movement, sensing change in the air. Now, in the kitchen, Marie has to fight to stay. She feels small, like a bird in the palm—the lack of control, her life so much changed by this daughter she once tried to give away.

She thinks maybe she made their closeness up. This is silence and that was silence, but this feels different, jagged and hurtful. She watches Nina pulling jars from boiling water with tongs, setting them to dry. This is a new way of being for Marie, like the clothes of a new country. She holds back, careful not to overwhelm the space between them—a territory of unknowing where Mother and daughter are wild to each other. Eventually there'll be words, closeness even for a time, but for now there is only the sound of rain.

Alice

In the imagination of my remembering, in this dream I blow like flame, I see him crouched low near the ground like an animal. My whispering husband. This man who could not cross into this country, which was not yet a country, without then lighting it on fire.

I want to say what was true of him then is still true now, or if not that, I'd say how he was gaunt, wraithy, cadaverous—hungry without knowing what for—waiting for hours in that North Dakota bar (eager, restless waiting), elbows on the counter, lingering there doubtfully for a purse or billfold, eyes moving quickly into the corners of the room (the men ferocious then, sniffing each other out). I'd tell how he doubted the officer who approached him to show (or the whole thing to even be true), but that still he waited for the weight of pay to fall in his pocket, the whisper in his ear to tell him the rest would follow when the thing was done. I want to say it's true because I won't be beholden to him like poor dead Isa (and since she eventually wouldn't either), and because words grow like weeds where nothing else will and all I have is a thick of them to crop. But I can't. I can't even say with anything like certainty that he even did the thing.

This I know: *Because the buffalo*. This he rasped through all the nights I knew him, those empty sleepless whispering nights which were his nights, but never my nights and certainly never our nights, lying in that bed (that cold linen distance), with he a stranger, whispering of buffalo and Sioux and a burnt border in the way an outlaw might secret to himself the things he's done in the moments when he thinks his mind alone.

Because a ghost lingers where you wish it wouldn't.

Because the border will burn and the buffalo will stay south. Won't cross where there's no grass to graze. His words quiet and barely there so I had to move closer: the words strange in his mouth, like an ill-fit truth caught between tongue and palate, a thing that won't swallow, a

breathy tumult to keep me in my un-sleep beside him. *The border will burn and the buffalo will not cross the ash. The buffalo will not cross and the Sioux will starve, starve and go to where the buffalo are.* Because the Sioux would go south. They'd leave and return to America.

The dry-whispered night terrors of a once-husband. A night I never witnessed but cannot forget. A swirling gleaned-only memory, where my mind-spun lonely words pile up on each other, tangled and hard to read—esoteric like omen shapes inside storm clouds on the horizon—where no longer sure of what I see or that I ever did at all, I return to things I know are true—that it isn't mine at all.

So there those thirty years ago, on the southern flank of this border, with his hair smeared to his forehead with the grease of heat and poverty and that sweaty drip the only damp on a dry prairie once called The Great American Desert, there amidst the autumnal dry he bent his body into the shape of waiting and held. The dim slight of match-flame between his crouched thighs burned ginger across his chest, and even that light swallowed by dark each time he let the flame burn out before striking another. Waiting, waiting.

1879, the year the border was lit afire.

In the thirty-some years since, I've known the way he drives breath deep into his lungs in the same way that mountains screw coal into their dark. And I wonder if he already did that then or if it was that night and the thing he did then that changed forever the way he breathed in this world, as if refusing witness of his own breath in the same way he could not admit the separateness of himself and the self he thought himself to be on that night when he committed a nation's arson. Because a man becomes that way only by being something else first, by looking into the fire to see what he hasn't before. And on that night his eyes stared north into an Indian dark he goaded his mind into believing was a vacuous nothing, but knew to be no vacuum at all.

For a nation that cared for them as might any God they'd imagine, that would love them no more and no less, he and those other men (whom he did not know) followed their orders that night to ignite the border. They, decimated along that parallel, that line decreed between this nation and that, where no line lay before and no America and no Dominion pushed surveyors to move its taut stretch North or South with the wrought ambition of garnering some piffling measure of dirt; he like all those other men, with quiet solemn as though acting out an ancient rite crouched and halted before touching flame to a drought prairie caught between the ambitions of two white nations and a red third which had been so crude as to make manifest God's un-will by making victory over the army of one white nation then lying hid within the bounds of the other. They, knelt in the grass towards the night horizon with a mile between each man for as long a distance as no one but the last man knew—a distance to be marked beneath the morning sun by a swath of charred borderland reaching from Wood Mountain to the Rocky Mountains—, waited to set flame to the dry grass of this borderline at the secret behest of some American captain they'd never met.

But those other men were not like him, because they'd turn round after and walk south to forget the thing they did, were not like him because their moral accounting could not accord or imagine a redemption to balance out the ledger of a life's doings that included the thing they were doing.

All these men and yet I dream memories of this one man: so I might impel the beast-space he occupies in my own mind and therefore redeem my years, those years spent burdened to him, a man I know only as Gale and nothing more familiar as would befit the private hush of woman's name for her mate, but only that surname, Gale, inherited from generations of what unspeakable I won't say, a name distant, howling with the gusty intimations of the ephemera he

bricked his life against: a life of his own ambition and hunger he visioned in the fire that night.

So in an instant I might discern, but cannot ever really know, he paused before lighting the land afire, halting then not out of some half-breasted hesitating attempt at manufacturing a kind of action-appeasing guilt—No, he halted to know the complete awful of the thing he was about to do, to do it wholly, become it, and so to circumvent the yoking weight of knowing a self that'd committed flame to earth yielding Sioux starvation for the pittance of a fee handed down by a U.S. Army official seeking a nation's revenge for a red man's victory.

Because he whose body is pitiless and brusque, as if only the hard and cauterized scar of what it was before, must've known. There in the dark he must've recognized the line which should not be crossed. In his mind he knew—the wrong of it—; he did, and then he did it anyway. And he did it not by washing his hands' reluctance of their wilful doing, or by turning an abjuring mind from an acquiescent action. And he did it certainly not by conceding to that unforgivably meek self-voice every man knows and that whimpers: *This is I and this is the thing I do because another's commanded me to do it and that action can't contaminate me because I know the pangs of protestation and do it only because that other who commands me doesn't also hear it in his own cautioning deep*; no he did it by annulling the self that knew not to.

So he lit the ground afire, moving quickly, touching flame to grass from one dried stalk to another, smelling without snort or cough the noxious and baneful smoke of the thing he did. And when he finished, to see what he'd done, he turned round and stared north across a line scorched between two nations, a great burning strip of no man's land which had until then remained only an invisible line (a line only the purveyors of government really believed existed), but now burned for miles north and south and for the length of a nation what could no longer be doubted by any man on this side or that.

And yet how comes it not to be? That even as I approach the man as blood and sinew he becomes only un-thing (a beast, a devil, a shapeless disquiet); that in my apprehension of what happened, and not merely so accidental as *happened*, but the thing he *did*—that which was and is and continues to be the match-holding-hand in the grass, and the thought that stays the hand and the mind that bends the thought to its will so there can be no question that the hand does only as the mind commands. And so not just the apprehension of what he did but he himself as well (who he was and who he is and why one expunged the other), there is only and ever (in lieu of fact and gospel) miasma, fetor and question, a trailing ellipsis. Ether shadow.

So these the knowns: two nations. One north, one south and the third. Always the third. That red third which is nation without territory, which is bodies in the grass, which is the hardened and trampled ground of an encampment in exile and in that exile restless immobile too long, which is nowhere expatriate because no surveyor or cartographer ever marked their name or tract on any map, which was Sitting Bull's Sioux in ebb at Wood Mountain after Black Hills and gold rush, after the Great Reservation and their refusal of that, after Sitting Bull's visions of victory and banished enemies and then Little Big Horn and Custer's ambush and a purged cavalry, after a reddened America in defeat (embarrassed, bewildered, angry) would not pursue a Sioux retreat north into Canada because it would, as all white nations must, bend its knee to the sanctity of another white border.

Yes, this red third, impertinent and audacious even to the far-reaching frontiers of civility and decorum, their stay on the northern side of this border unwanted and un-indulged by this country (who refused to pay for yet one more treaty) and their return wanted only by that southern nation so that they, Sioux, pugnacious outlaws repudiating that parcel of land designated favourable for them by a United States government, might be corralled and

photographed and newspapered about as the surrendered proof of nation upon this continent. They, bodies and not citizens, with their husking refusal to leave, for years abiding and enduring the push-and-pull of state and race in the same way I abide and endured my years here with Gale, then, with the buffalo all but gone and only deer and small animals to eat (and even those dead when the winter grew too cold and the snow too deep), they sat in the listless cold and winter-buried tipis with their twisting hunger and clenched fury and babies crying to the echoed mechanical sounds of Winchester rifle chambers loaded and unloaded in the restless dark.

And then the fires.

And so on that morning when the fire burned low but still festered in pockets like abscesses, he, Gale, my husband, in arrogance to or deference for what he did that night, stood and crossed that line, that line which had until then been only an imaginary one evanescing through the grass like the phantom hollow of dried snakeskin in the dirt, a line now laid out as a strip of cinder and ash which no buffalo would cross but the starved-out Sioux would have to, a line which he crossed with ease (of his own volition and choice) while the ash of the thing he did that night dolloped with the dew to his boots.

Nina

Billy, their coupling was quick, furious. Witnessed by no one. A prairie thunder, the storm gone by the time you reach the window. They met once then married a day later then Gale disappeared and Isa didn't see him again for a year. The wedding was secret. No one but Isa knew until he came back, announcing himself to her father who'd no choice but give his blessing to a stranger.

Strange now to think how a woman might love a man like him. But, Billy, for a time she *did* love him. I think now maybe she was a fool. Because what woman here (then) could love

anyone like that? That intensely with such desire? Who? But she was that rare woman who in 1882 on this prairie you could still call soft. Soft enough to love, soft enough to want. And however much she feared him later, for a time it was only him. So yes, whatever she was later, I think Isabella was a fool—one whose dreaming we should've had more of ourselves, Billy, you and I.

Isabella Hood was a woman never really seen. She altered herself to fit whatever space she was in. She was lover in a world that didn't need one. In another place, some other time, she would've been anything else—a poet, an actress. She'd walk into dark places if there was someone to witness her light. Here though, on this prairie, being a woman meant nothing if didn't mean work. Whether one kind of labour or another, that was what killed you: not grief, not despair. She was a thing that burned, Billy. And for a time with him she burned even brighter.

But on the morning she first saw him, until the horse broke free of its stall, there was only the cold. The Winter Fair swirled around her, a heave of people, a flurry of accents, bodies warming each other, the smell of animals and garlic, her father somewhere, Ellen (her sister) beside her. But only the cold touched Isabella. At home the cold lived inside her like a barely remembered melody, a dull echo reverberating distantly, a thing to feel while pulling sheets from a dying woman's bed. Here though, she felt it as something beautiful, something outside her she could move through, walk on, and touch. She took her glove off to be sure of it on her skin, listened to the sound of it beneath her boots, and felt for a moment like she was something coming back to life.

I blame that beast of his, she wrote. Isa said it in that incredible letter she wrote when she'd nothing left but a river to hide in. *I loved it. And though I didn't know it then, he bought me with that love.* She fell in love with his horse first, Billy. She watched it push past the stable and

charge the field. A half-wild look in its eyes—anarchic, like you, like Gale. It circled, making marks in the snow, steam surging from its nose. It wore no saddle, a bridle only. It seemed strange, like it didn't belong: a thing made real only by her dreaming. An unbroken sovereign, where nothing as real as it was. It rushed a fence, then another, and each time it charged Isabella thought it would break the slats. She watched it for an hour, none daring to approach it.

Home for Isabella was a cabin with a father, a half-sister and a woman who was her sister's mother but not her own. Yet Isabella was more mother to her sister and more wife to her father. To the aunt she was nurse-maid, refusing to be anything else when she found her father's secret. But all of this was just a vagary to the life Isabella really lived in her head. Her father believed she was the one thing he hadn't corrupted, but actually she existed so distantly she became like a dream he never got to touch.

The Winter Fair in Brandon had been a way to step out of this. There, feeling the cold, partially, slightly, but feeling it more and more, and also, slowly, at the same time, feeling a little of herself too, this quiet was taken from her by Gale's rushing horse: a moment of especial aliveness Gale interrupted by mounting that horse, his horse. For this she immediately hated him.

She'd seen him earlier, moving through the crowds like some figure out of time. Even then Gale dressed in an extravagant way: incredible fabrics, Scottish robes, hat, stockings, and those shoes. Years later, married to him, Isa would find bills in a drawer and discover how he specially ordered these things from Scotland, finding out too how he sent his laundry there, not believing an immigrant here could clean it right (seeing himself neither as an immigrant, nor a descendant of one). It had to be a true Scot, he'd say. In those later years, Isa would watch him in the fields—even in the wind and dust, stooping to correct his men's work, dressed impeccably. All those men out there, dirt and sweat covered, and he seemingly untouched by any of it.

Do you know why he did it, Billy, why he dressed that way? Because once when he was poor and still wandering the South, a drunk in bar told him his name was Scottish, and not Irish. The man who told him wasn't anybody in particular, nobody he knew. But what the other man said cut through Gale's inebriation and stuck. It sobered him. And though untrue, he clung to that idea. It became for him a rung on a ladder he could use to pull himself from the mire his life had so far been where he knew nothing of who he was or what he wanted.

Isabella later overheard men talk of Gale's wealth and how he got it—that he was a criminal, a gambler who won at cards, not because he was a great player but because men were afraid to win against him—they'd rather walk away than face his meanness. But the thing was, nobody knew for sure he had any money at all, but he lived and dressed in a way so as to challenge any scrutiny before it was spoken. He was a bewilderment, inexplicable. I think over the years Isa grew to expect these stories, even ones much more incredible, far-fetched. At some point she began to fear them, would be made lonely by them. She'd hear stories how he'd been a captain in a war she knew he was too young to fight in, that he'd gained his rank because of who he'd said his family was and lost it when the truth became known, that he was a whiskey trader, or made his early fortune killing four Indians who'd themselves stolen the money from wealthy travellers. And when she heard these stories she was never sure if their unbelievability made them more true or less.

On that first morning Isabella watched him touch the horse deliberately, quietly, as though he understood it in a way Isabella thought only she might. He mounted it as if all that wildness wasn't anything, and he did it for everyone to see. She cursed him silently, him riding up and down as if the horse was only some muscle for his willing, an extension of himself he'd command like a hand or leg. She left the fairgrounds furious, hating him for his display. But as

she went, he rode up close and saw her as he passed.

She was still called Isabella then. Not Isa. Gale changed her name later, calling her *Isa* in every letter he wrote, though no one ever called her that before. I can picture her then, anxious for his letters. Hungry, reading them when they arrived. She'd reach for them tentatively, hoping his voice would be like how she remembered it. *Isa* . . . she'd wonder, his letter in her hand. This strange new name for her. *Is a what?*

They were already married then but she wouldn't see him for a full year after their wedding. To prevent their discovery, Isabella (quickly becoming Isa) had Gale's letters sent to a friend's address which she'd given Gale the night before their wedding. A year later, when Gale returned, it was to this other address he arrived, expecting to find Isa there and not some other family. Yet neither did Isabella know where Gale's letters came from. They had no return address: only, simply, *Liam* in the corner. Their letters were aberrant, without receipt or departure—his arriving elsewhere than where he imagined them to, and hers never written at all because she had no place to send them.

All the adoration and desire Gale imagined Isa to want, he poured it into those letters. His letters would surprise you, Billy. They changed her. They were all the things you wouldn't think him capable of. Wanting, fierce, tender. They dripped with desire. Once per month and for the length of a year he wrote Isa. One letter for every month after his disappearance. Devout in this ritual, he pledged and promised her. He wrote how he felt—perhaps the only time in his life he spoke like this to anyone—his love, his adoration, his need, his worry: All these things he put down on paper for her.

A strange dialogue emerged where she read and he wrote. Gale, who was so silent later, would write as if Isa were actually writing back to him—as if he had stacks of her letters beside

him as he wrote. Between the words he wrote were the inferred letters he imagined her to send. A romance emerged which never existed. Living alone for that year after their wedding (halfway across a territory that wasn't even a province), all he had was the memory of their brief time together. I think he was afraid of her rejection. If her letters could never arrive, then the picture of their love he had in his mind could never diminish. This was why he couldn't bear the thought of her reply. He believed in his love so much he silenced her to protect it.

For twelve months (from their wedding day to the Christmas following) Gale shaped Isa's voice into the one he imagined her to have. But Isa believed in becoming, in possibility. It was how she survived a childhood and, for a time, it was how she survived Gale too. So she wouldn't feel quite so erased by him, she made herself fit the shape of his love. She became the person he wrote about. She softened her speech. Her breath became a kind of considered restraint. She moved through rooms differently: slowly, thoughtfully. The air around her stilled, no longer a frantic tumult like too many stones thrown in the water at once. With each new letter she adapted herself further, and came even to look forward to these changes, as if each new alteration was a signpost to her new life with him. By Christmas, there was little left of the person she was.

Boy

Rain follows us to knock at her father's door. December rain the long ride. It pocks the snow. Goes on ahead. Follows us behind. Stops when we sleep. The horses half dead. Shaking when her father answers the door. He lit by firelight. Peering out at us in the dark.

Later when the horses are fed we're inside and I'm smelling it. How air changes before death. The Indian woman no one will name. Pale. Coughing in candlelight by the window. Her breathing like water in the drain. No secrets in a dying face. You can see them. Shadows beneath

the skin. Like the hand's pump and throb through drum leather.

Gale and Thomas sitting across the table. A lamp and bottle between. Rain pools from the rafters and spits on the hot stove. A year since the wedding Gale is come to take what he can from Thomas her father. Always to be free. House land land horses wife. Retribution for the something someone put inside of him. For the things he couldn't name. I'm by the wall. Crosslegged on the floor. No one asks me who I am. I'm not there. I'm disappear. Who are you? I've already said. Your daughter's husband. Quiet.

Four of them plus us. Isa Thomas the old woman sister hidden in the room we can't see. Isa carrying a pot from the fire. Dips a bowl and spoons it past the woman's mouth. Doing this all night. Checking the aunt then leaving again. Both women kept awake by the men's talking and drinking. Not looking at each other. The whole family not looking. A room full of secrets. But not me. I'm not a secret. I'm not even here. I see the story but can't be in it. I'm disappear.

Gale takes his whiskey. It isn't right, Thomas says. Right? Gale scoffs. Since we come in Thomas is feeling pushed to the sides. Like he has to stand at the edge to make room for Gale at the centre. Has to work hard to be the same. To be heeded in his own house. Gale puts down his drink without sipping. Running his thumb. He wants land. Thinks he can get it from Thomas because he married Isa. His building and growing hasn't gone in the last year like he wanted and he needs money. A thing in his pocket. But Isa won't look at him. And he isn't knowing what this means. One thing means the other. Has nothing if he doesn't have her. So every time she enters he's looking for the thing he has or doesn't have.

She's different than a year ago. Isa. Driving her to the courthouse I could tell it on her. She felt where she belonged. Now she isn't knowing. Gale as if he doesn't see her. Hardly even recognizing him from who he was. To her it's as if he hasn't been writing all those letters. She

not wanting to show her feeling. Hiding from his looking. Keeping what she doesn't want him to know. She's like me I'm thinking. Knowing what I'm knowing. How to keep that secret part. To sneak it away and have two selves. In neither man finding what she wants. Her father heavy lidded. The same defeat in him all her life.

She pretends not to be hearing the men. Their exchange and refusal leaving her forgotten in the room. Where she's neither the thing to buy nor the thing to pay. Only the language for barter. In the morning she'll stay or leave. No choice in either. Her distress growing. All night moving like waiting for news not arriving. Rubbing palms against thighs. Lifting the kettle but not pouring. Gale seeing this too.

But in his worry he's not seeing the woman in the corner. Her weary for Thomas. The betrayal she is. Waiting like a fire in her heart. More and more making noise for his attention. Her voice poor but rasping. Then Isa beside her to keep her quiet. Stuffing food in her mouth. Keeping there what not she's wanting said.

You can't say no. It's already done, Gale says. We're married. I say no to this says Thomas. Neither man says anything for a while. Then Gale speaks again. Dignity. You'll do it for dignity. For hers you'll give it. Make sure she's provided for. Expend this to save that. All night the two men like this. Trading displays of honour and offence back and forth like cards at a table. This stranger married to his daughter and telling him like it's a courtesy. He won't give Gale what he wants and Gale won't leave with less.

Thomas wants Isa to be leaving with Gale. I can see this. But he's not wanting to show eagerness. What I know later because Isa tells me is how no one wants his family. Gale is the best deal for Isa. But he's not wanting to lose what he doesn't have to. So he's playing like Gale is. All night the men drink and drink and the sounds of them keep sister awake in the next room.

Listening at the door. And every time Isa pushing her back before she's seen. Gale staring cruel the whole time. Looking for what's hidden. And she turning from his searching. Back and forth across the house. Sister to aunt. Keeping one hid and the other quiet. Her wrists trembling. Spilling on the woman's chin. The woman cursing Isa in whisper and Isa throwing it the floor. So everyone looking at her.

And now Gale finally seeing the old woman making for his attention. So he walking across the room. Bending low so she can be whispering to him. And Isa gathering herself. Straightening her dress. Making to leave. To run. Pulling on boots. But realizing nowhere to go. So Gale watching and not even bothering to stop her.

And Thomas now turned to me. Glaring. Slow burning anger. Growing rage for one who hasn't even spoke. Me who isn't anything in the room but witness to his misery. Hate that wasn't there before. Something changed. Me uncomfortable in his stare. No longer disappear. The breed in me. Despised. What Thomas hates inside his doing. What Gale is trying to understand. What is being whispered to him.

Nina

Something unclenched her fists, Billy. She unclenched them and so quickly those same hands of hers reached for him: that night at the Winter Fair dance when he proposed to her, the night before their wedding and the same day she saw him on that horse. Was it the same as when you, Billy, first saw me? All that desire, all that mystery and unknowing? Did she see something in him then she missed before? Something to make her forget, make her heart pound and whirl? That improbable thing, Billy?

I can picture her standing at the room's edge, watching the dancers, wanting fiercely to be

among them. She's quiet, shifts in agitation. From her spot on the wall she imagines she hears them: the secret conversations between dancers, quiet words up close no one else hears—not husbands, not anyone. The hush, the swirling public. Just being there thrills her, livens her even as it pains her to stand apart. Wanting, wanting.

He sees her there. He knew he would—it's why he came. She's facing the other way. He says a something to make her turn. She rebuffs him. He says another thing. It catches her by surprise. She wonders. Does it take her imagination in some way? What is it? Does he simply walk up to her and they dance and dance and know? She near his shoulder, his chin above her head. Their scents strange. That push and pull. The music. Perhaps he just tells her what she wants to hear—the night wears on, and they talking or holding their silences, when he whispers into her ear dear words, open words, something in his voice to let her know with him she might feel something new? Does he seduce her with this? Is it only escape? Maybe she chooses him as much as he does her, sees in him what she might be free of. His great plan. That house, that land. What was it Billy? She, that dear romantic soul. Why? You too must recognize that desire. I know it in you. You have that part of her. Did it have nothing to do with what Gale said at all?

Whatever it was, Billy, I know they felt loss later. She drowned herself and after that he was never the same. So they must have been close then to feel all that distance later. What was it that changed them? What sweet dream did they let rancour?

They married in secret a day later. One day since she saw him on that horse and hated him and only twelve hours since she saw him again at the dance and agreed to marry. A romance of fire and torment for both. A play of seduction and denial lasting a year after their wedding.

And in that year she'd not see him. She risked everything for that meagre wedding, to stand beside him before a magistrate in a courtroom with no dress, no priest and only Boy there

to witness. But she had that kind of want, call it love, that makes you forget how things really are. This is what made her happy on that day, not him, not the ceremony. The forgetting. She believed in it so much she couldn't see there was so little in him to hang her belief on.

When they walked down the court house steps he told her she'd go back to her father's house. He said he didn't know when he'd be back. He had plans to build. A house, a vision in his mind with children to pass it down to. And he wanted it set down right before he showed his world to Isa. And so he was gone, like a dream before you quite know you it was there at all.

Later Isa realized she couldn't remember anything about the ceremony, not what the magistrate said, nor even, when he was gone, what Gale's voice sounded like—that even if she were to hear it she'd recognize it.

Boy

Morning sky dark and snow blue. Beneath still moon I hoist Isa's things into the cart. No one slept and only Thomas to bed when too humiliated to stay up. All now with eyes looked down. The night before a taste no one now can spit out.

He tried to hide her. Ellen. The sister. Half the story plain on her face. Darker than Isa's pale. Same as the dying woman's. One sister white and one Indian. But not just that. What the woman is whispering to Gale. What Thomas did. His shame and her shame. Why Thomas wanted Isa married. To know the limits of his trespass. That he didn't sully her too.

When the woman is finished telling Gale. He's standing. Crossed the room to where the sister is. Not Isa. Ellen. Opening the door. Disappointment for Isa as he passes. Then back with Thomas at the table. Not even waiting for sister to come out. Not to see her.

In his think silence Gale making Thomas do all the talking. Thomas like a man talking to

his worry. Eyes hung not raising his head. Gale saying only he'll take Isa still if Thomas gives the land. A charity Thomas has to take. Cheated. Like a man losing at cards. Playing to win back the dignity his gloominess keeps stripping him of. Telling Gale he can have what he wants. So he can keep his lie.

And that night or ever. Gale isn't telling. What the woman said. Else it becomes his shame too. Because shame is spreading. Like sickness. And I'm only knowing because Isa is later telling. Why Thomas wants her wed. To prove her clean. And the woman wanting the same. Isa gone. But for different reasons. To be sure of Isa's leaving. So she be free of him. Because though it's also what Thomas wants. Isa married. It's not how Thomas wants it. The marriage proof of his befoulment. Not proof against it. So the woman helping Gale. Telling him what he needs. To have what he wants. And take it from Thomas.

So everyone soured in the morning. Isa for being took like that. And Gale for being dirtied by how he has to think of Isa. And Thomas losing all. The woman now left with him. Me for having had to see this. As we're readying to leave. Thomas is next to Isa. Turning in to whisper. Saying stay with him always. Pressing a bible and box of cutlery to her. But she turning away. And Gale not looking at her. Not looking back at Thomas either. Only waiting for Isa to finish. As if a child he knows will come eventually. And when she's on the cart we're riding. Off onto ice. Into still winter dark.

The Crow's Nest

There are parts of the house never finished. There are others completed so long now they're in disrepair. To Nina the house feels like a thing caught between states of becoming and undoing, of dying and being born, as if it's relation to time were not quite clear.

At the top of the house Nina follows Marie up a wooden ladder. Marie stoops to open a small hatch, and they enter a little hutch above. Here they're above even the attic. A hard wind pushes them back. "This is the crow's nest," Marie says. "The wind always blows up here. It's like a second weather." Nina looks at Marie, hearing the agitation in her voice.

Not at all like mother and daughter, they're like estranged sisters thrust into a life together. Surprised at their similarities, paralyzed by their strangenesses. Time, Nina thinks, is a thing that bends you back to what you were, like a wind that won't let a tree grow straight.

"This is Alice's space," Marie tells her and Nina suddenly understands Marie's agitation. They're children snuck into forbidden space. Marie, nervous, listens for Alice in the house below. Nina moves to the edge of the perch, which opens up to an entire horizon. There's no railing, no safety, but if she grips the frame tight and leans out, she thinks she can see all the way south past the border. The distance between them, she and Marie, is the length of Nina's own life from one end to the other—it's what Marie long ago gave away, what she didn't want. And then there's Billy also, who Marie wants to be rid of. Nina's sensed in him too how he thinks about leaving, how he's being pushed away, how she, Nina, finds herself doing the pushing.

From a corner Marie drags a trunk, leaving a trail in the dust, Marie's movements wearied, as if having dragged the box too many times. She lifts the lid. Inside are notebooks, dozens, different colours and bindings, some leather, others only loose paper fastened with metal hooks, all of them yellowed. Nina reaches to touch one, but Marie grips her hand, a kind of

warning. As if even entering Alice's space is one betrayal too many already, Marie doesn't open the journals, doesn't even touch them. She only tells Nina what they are.

"They're Alice's versions of who Billy's mother was," she says. Nina looks up at her. Marie tells Nina about the letter, how Alice found it, how she obsessed over it, copying and recopying it until she herself entered it. Nina thinks about the letter Billy carries. "So they're bound up together, Alice and Isa. These journals, Alice's madneses, are like a calendar through the years of who Alice needed Isa to be." In this moment Nina realizes Marie is choosing her over Alice, betraying Alice's secret as a kind of offering to her.

"This is why Alice wouldn't tell me about Billy's mother," Nina says, "despite how much it meant to me, to Billy."

"Alice can't admit to anyone else being hurt like she has," Marie says. "She needs that dead woman to speak for her only. Boy and Billy, they're invisible to her."

But Nina sees what Marie won't quite admit: that Billy is an inheritor to a place where he isn't wanted. Because while Isa's letter doesn't make Billy a legal threat to Marie, as Isa's son he does threaten her in other ways.

*

Afterwards, Nina feels like a dust is lifted, the air emptied so she's finally able to see Marie with clear eyes. It's what brings them together.

In the days that follow, Nina and Marie become inseparable. They immerse themselves in one another, finding in themselves an extraordinary newness, as if small parts of themselves had long ago walked off to lead distant lives and now suddenly returned. They speak easy—having little in common, yet finding themselves strangely understood. Nina sees little of herself in Marie, not finding there her own love of art or music, but she knows if she, Nina, were to write

something now (a story, a play, a song), it would have to be about a woman exactly like Marie.

They say-ask-laugh without guile, and when Marie touches Nina's arm Nina feels electricity. Their conversations are whispers erupting in wild laughter. This gets them noticed in the yard. They become aware of themselves being seen. Though they live boisterously for a day or two, they learn to make their new friendship secret. Always they feel their betrayals. For Marie it is Alice. For Nina it is Billy. They cannot hold their different loves at the same time. Their lives won't allow them their contradictions. Nina knows Marie would banish Billy if she could. And it took Marie's betrayal of Alice to reach Nina. Though they never say so out loud, to be with each other as mother and daughter they know they'll set aside these other people.

"We are all of us," Marie one day tells Nina, "like family under a tyrant. We'll take our dignity from each other as if it were a thing you could stuff into a jar."

*

At sunrise Nina lies awake in the tent next to Billy, still sleeping. She wants to touch his lips, to move her body up to his. But if she does, he'll wake and she'll lose the feeling. In one way or another she'll then want to hide herself. What she won't tell him humiliates her. She's said nothing to Billy about his mother, though she's thought of little else. In moments of quiet she's turned away from him, not knowing how to hide what she knows. She doesn't know how to be alone with him when there are always so many ghosts with them also.

Outside, the dew on the tent is heavy. She hears the sounds of men beginning their day. Pots banged against a grill, a fire being started. In a moment Billy will stir. Everything seems nebulous to her, as if nothing could be pinned down. She thinks she knows what Marie means when she says, *Isa exists between them all*. She's the shape of the space between Nina and Billy, what they hide behind, what they all fight over and rip at.

Nina knows Billy will accuse her of keeping this knowledge of his mother from him. But she knows too what she'll say then. She'll say she did it for Marie, that she woke at night to find Marie crying by her bed, Marie's tear-soaked hands in hers, her wet forehead pressed to Nina's and the vibration of Marie's sobbing moving through them both. She'll explain the feeling of being close to her mother for the first time. "Marie begged me not to tell you, to forget it myself," she'll say to Billy. "There was panic in her eyes, desperation in how she gripped my arm." In the tent beside Billy Nina imagines the entire conversation. But it won't be true. It didn't happen. It'll be a lie. What is true is that she and Marie have become close and that this is more important to her than him. She'd rather keep Marie's secret than reveal it to Billy.

So rather than lie, Nina slips from the tent before Billy wakes. She closes it behind her and in the morning light walks across the yard to the house where she'll not have to pretend.

*

Marie kneels over a bowl, her dress bunched behind her. Alice holds Marie's hair. The acrid feeling in Marie's throat subsides and she stuffs a mint sprig from her pocket into her mouth. When the feeling returns she is over the bowl again. The mint is from Nina's garden. Marie keeps it with her now to cover her breath. Not wanting to face Alice, she waits for Alice to leave.

But Alice stays, her hand stubbornly around Marie's: a strange intimacy, Alice wanting intensely to make a thing better but too far away to even know what the thing is. Marie looks away, shamed. She'd wanted to give Nina something to show her feeling. She wanted to show Nina she'd wreck her life for her—wreck as she did years ago when she left Nina alone to be raised by another woman.

But betraying Alice put a sickness in Marie. In her belly she knows it. She feels it every time Nina leaves. As soon as she's alone, her thoughts turn and she rushes for the commode. She

becomes eager for Nina, unwilling to let her go, finding reasons to keep her near, ways of inviting her when she hasn't been. Walks, meals, drinks: anything to stretch a moment and keep the sickness at bay. She plays Alice's music recordings for Nina when she thinks Alice won't hear. But always, eventually, Marie's stomach turns acrid—the things she's done now become a feeling she can't keep down.

She should've known. There's always a bargain. Something to swallow, something to have taken away. She'll lose Alice forever with this. Having Alice in the room doesn't make it better. Alice flounces across the room, her movement sharp, directed like a blade. Marie is always aware of Alice these days. She feels her in the air, in the next room, the floor above. She hears her steps, senses her movements. To her, Alice is in the house like a guest, neither leaving nor staying but hovering only in the doorway.

Marie turns. For a second their eyes meet but there's little understanding between them.

"I'm let down," Alice says. "You aren't getting better."

"This is new," Marie says.

"No. It isn't. This illness scares me."

Marie can hear the fear in Alice's voice. Alice depends on Marie, has no security without her. The little affection she still has for Marie comes only from self-protection. And even this, Marie knows, will vanish when Alice discovers what Marie told Nina. They're different, she and Alice, Marie thinks. Like Alice, Marie will never acknowledge Billy, it's true—she fought too hard for her life to let some breed take it away (her hate for him, she knows, lets her believe she has power over him). But she won't lie to herself like Alice. She understands what's between Billy and Nina, what was between Isa and Boy.

"Everything is a terror to you," Marie says sharp, indignant. Alice glares at her. Marie

wants to distract Alice from her sickness. She wants to injure Alice and increase their distance. She looks up at Alice, scornful, sneering. Suddenly, for the first time, Marie wants to leave, and not just the room, but everything—Alice, this house, all of it. She stands and looks at Alice, realizing her nausea is gone. She takes her bowl, covering it in her arms, turns and goes, leaving Alice alone by the window.

*

There are rumours of a man in the yard at night. Billy's heard the footsteps. The other men speak of it too, noises outside their bunk. Billy leaves his tent open at night so he can watch, but sees nothing. Only once from the roof of a shed where he smokes does he think he sees a man at the field's edge, but this is only for a second and might just be a shadow of the corn.

He paces back and forth on the lawn in front of Nina. She's asked him to move into the bunkhouse with the other men. "For me," she says. "Please." She wants him to be safe, but he also thinks she's only asking him into bunk (where he's not been invited) because he's also not invited into the house where she lives.

The truth is though he doesn't want to give up his tent. He's come to prefer small spaces. For days now everything has been spinning again. Like a dream the world swirls, his life a deluge of debris moving too fast past him. The feeling comes and goes. He loses sense of space, gets confused when he enters a space then leaves, not recognizing the outside as the same place he left a moment earlier. Geography plays tricks on him. Boy has tried to get close to him, to understand, but Billy turns away, not able somehow to be near the old man, everything Boy says muffled in Billy's hearing, seeming partial and incomplete. He wants to leave.

He drinks now. All of what he makes he spends in town. He leaves with the other men but comes back alone, a cut on his face, a limp in his leg. There are fights: some he starts, others

seem to have no beginning, as if somehow already begun before he got there. He knows he's talked about in town, but not in what way. Word never reaches his ear. All he knows is when he enters a room he's already there somehow, as if a presence of himself went on ahead, conjured by rumours and whispered talk, vanishing when he himself arrives.

He has history here (even if he doesn't know what it is). And maybe that's it, he thinks. Maybe that's what they don't like. An Indian with history.

"We could go anywhere," he tells Nina. "You could teach. I could work."

He feels far from Nina. Like a rain trying to land on her skin, falling anywhere but.

"You want me to leave?" she asks.

"Yes."

"I can't. I don't want to . . . yet." The last word too late. Nina betrays herself, he thinks. She doesn't want to admit she's already letting go of him. She won't leave with him. He's seen how she is with Marie, how she's fit herself into life here. She belongs here more than he does, he thinks. But what Nina sees and he doesn't is that while they argue to stay or go, they are an echo of Boy and Isa decades ago. Then those two had argued the same thing—Isa wanting to leave before Billy was born, Boy finding reasons to stay—only weeks before Isa drowned herself in the river. This knowledge is real for Nina, as if all four of them are standing in the grass together saying the same things. Isa and Boy, Nina and Billy: each conversation an echo of the other. She can almost reach out and touch Isa's arm beside her—an overwhelming sadness for her that Billy cannot feel this with her. She feels Billy as an absence.

She watches him move closer then change his mind before backing away. He turns his back, a shield between he and his confusion.

*

They sleep in the tent, worrying about the stranger in the yard. Billy tells Nina the man is a shadow for him, that there's always been a man like this for him in the back of his mind—an ambiguity which follows him through the day. Part of her is frightened when he's like this. He's told her how it feels: what happens to him when his perception swirls, how everything becomes charged with meaning. "Like a dream to decode," he says. "A poetry for me alone."

She wakes in the night and moves close to him. Her chest to his back, she wants to believe that touch might overcome their separation, might make all these other things not matter. But when she wraps herself around him, he doesn't respond. His body remains inert, as if it doesn't even really contain him in it. She feels empty beside him and moves away, hoping he'll, in his sleep, feel the emptiness too and so stir and wake. In this way, she hopes to see movement in him and so be relieved. But when he does wake, he turns and to her his eyes are inky as if everything in them were slowly depleting.

"Isa never believed Boy loved her," Nina says. She wants this to be a shock. Billy looks at her. "She thought this when Boy wouldn't leave with her." She tells Billy everything, everything Marie told her: how Isa begged Boy to leave but Boy wouldn't, that Boy refused because he wanted to hurt Gale—hurt Gale for the ways Gale never saw him, for how he never occurred to Gale. He wanted Gale to see, in his should-be child's face, Boy's face instead. It wasn't enough to leave only with Isa. Boy needed to take what was most important from Gale. All of this whirls past Billy too fast. There are people in the story he doesn't know, events he doesn't understand. Nina watches the anger in him but can't tell who it's for. He's impenetrable to her, a stone house without windows.

"Boy wanted Gale to see you for himself, Billy. An Indian baby. So Gale would know it wasn't his. He risked everything for that." She tells him how Isa wrote Boy after Billy was born

just before she ran for the river. “It was written to him, but not all of it made it to him. Some of it, years later, ended up with Alice. It was a love letter, and also a plea for Boy to take you away somewhere else. But halfway through the letter changed, the tone became bitter, resentful, blaming. Her hopelessness took over. That was the half Alice found, that Marie showed me, not even knowing your half existed. Isa hated Boy for not leaving, for wanting to hurt Gale more than he wanted protect her and her baby.”

Nina eyes Billy’s confusion, how he’s unsure even what to ask. She turns away, uncertain herself. She isn’t even sure how these letters fit together herself. “But for whatever reason only the first half of that letter ended up with you. Maybe the rest was dropped, fell behind something, maybe Isa thought better of the resentful second half and threw it out. Perhaps it hurt Boy too much to read it. But only part of it got tucked away with you when Boy hid you in another country.” Billy stares at her. It all seems real to him, as if it was something he’d long ago dreamed, a story he’s always had.

“This is what you’ve carried with you your entire life,” Nina says. “The rest of it Alice found in the cellar. Alice believed it could only have been written to her. She saw too much of herself in it. When her loneliness drove her to grief, she used that letter as a defence for her bitterness. She lived in it like madness.”

Billy listens while Nina pieces together his world for him. She knows she’s flooding him with narrative, that there’s too much to hold on to, that for each of them this history is like a river they might dip into with a cup while letting too much of it go by.

“Isa must have felt bereft, out of security, out of places to go. You were born and she was scared of Gale. Scared for you, scared for her. So she left a note for Boy. A letter with two halves. All her love in the first half, her bitterness in the second.”

“But in the last moment she threw it out,” Billy says, suddenly complicit in Nina’s telling. Nina looks at him, hesitant, not knowing what this means. “The second half. She threw it out. She didn’t want to confuse things—who she was, what she needed Boy to do. So she threw it deep into the cellar where it’d be lost.”

“Yes,” Nina says, amazed at Billy, this story that is like a fire burning between them.

“And that’s where Alice found it years later.”

“Yes.”

There is a rush between them, Nina and Billy. An excitement in realizing their lives were shaped by moments of other people decades ago.

But then Nina says, “And that’s when Isa ran for the river.” And Billy looks at her.

*

Boy walks through his cabin past Billy, not quite eyeing him, not fully wanting to see there his son’s thoughts. For an hour Billy has said nothing. He drinks. He smokes. There is a silence in him like a storm: the tension in his body, the anger he won’t speak.

There have been moments like this when Boy resents Billy. When Billy first arrived Boy wanted Billy to be an image of Isa, to find pieces of her in him. Billy was to be a road back to Isa. Who Boy found instead was someone insular, who argues against him, who turns away.

“Is it true?” Billy asks, his voice sudden after the silence. Boy looks at him, unsure. “That she died because of you?” Billy says.

Boy feels small, always has, like he’s lived his life inside a container smaller than him. Billy’s accusation pushes him into an even smaller shape. He feels targeted. The nerve of the question, the gall of it. A rage moves inside him like an infection in his blood. He can’t explain it. He feels pulled into Billy’s circle like an undertow. He understands Billy wants a

confrontation—the look in Billy's eye begging for a fight—but he doesn't know how to resist it. He boxes Billy in the jaw. He pauses, shocked at what he's done. But Billy is on his feet. The first blow is both sharp and dull. His vision flashes white.

Billy throws again. Their fight moves through the cabin. They fall through the door. Billy staggers, bent over, punching up. He catches Boy in the stomach. They are all over the kitchen, bodies slamming into wall and counter. Boy can tell where they are only by the sound of what he's thrown up against. Everywhere he hears things breaking. His eye has blood in it but he won't wipe it because of the glass stuck to his face. Billy punches again but misses. He fights wild, erratic. Like a drunk believing his body to move as it should when sober. Billy lifts a stool, swinging fiercely, but it catches on the wall and a shelf lands heavy and broken behind him. There is a knee to Billy's ribs, then another. For a second Boy fades. He bends at the waist, his breathing a labour he has to push through his whole body.

He stares at Billy, the boy on his hands and knees slumped against the wall, unable to stand. He sees confusion in Billy's face and knows Billy has forgotten why he's fighting or where he is. He's a blur to himself on the floor. In a rage Boy swings his fist against the wall.

*

Nights later Boy and Billy sit in the doorway of Boy's cabin. Lit from behind, silhouettes in yellow light, they hold their fight and all they've said since as memory in their bodies, a terseness they'll live with always, a feeling to be reminded of. They don't talk, but they feel each other near—heartbeats pulsed in the air like water rippled from a plunging stone. Boy watches Billy from the corner of his eye. He feels Billy's worry as if it were a colour to be seen.

In the last weeks Billy has put a restlessness in Boy, made him more alive, made him want things, hate things. He feels things he hasn't in a long while, like time. Billy has given him

time and in the same breath taken it away. Boy knows what wasted breath and wasted flesh is. He wonders what it means that he didn't notice a piece of Isa's letter was missing. If the letter was partial (and he couldn't tell), then his love was partial too.

He's pushed Billy into this, he knows. Having Billy break into the house to steal the letter, he's pushing both of them into crisis, but he doesn't care. He feels reckless. He'd rather wreck a life than live for nothing anymore. There's an edge to him now. He feels it in Billy too, but in Billy he senses also an emerging despair, a futility in the way he throws his weight around.

Beside him Billy shifts uneasy, fingering the cut across his cheek, the scar like an arrow pointing back to Boy. It's Boy's shame for having put it there two nights ago, a mirror to his grief. As if having sensed his thoughts, Billy says, "You know I used to think a scar was something you carry with you, like a weight you can't get free of. Now I think it's what you become."

There is awkwardness between the two men: silence, moments of regret. It's not always there, but comes to them like a smell one walks into, a sourness coming up through the floorboards. But there is understanding also. Who they are in this space is changed.

*

Billy moves quickly through the yard. Rushed, too urgent. He goes to the side of the house, pushing a window open. He lifts himself through, pausing, trying to remember the lay of the room, where the chairs were, the lamps, the things he could break. He's been inside only once, that day he first arrived when Marie pushed him back out.

He stays close to the edge of the room. In the dark he moves with a finger trailing the wall. He wants to stay, to fall in love with the smells of the room: the scent of books, food, wine left out. But he hurries past. He's motion amongst objects, an intruder in stillness. In the staircase

he walks with his legs spread, his feet landing silently at the edges where he knows the boards creak less. He counts the stairs on the way up so he won't trip on the way down. He doesn't know exactly where he's going, only that his mother's letter is at the very top of the house.

He feels a hand on his wrist, Nina catching him in the stairs. He turns.

"Why are you here?" He could recite the dialogue already, knowing how it will go: the accusations, the retreats. He wants to push past the conversation, be up the stairs already. He tries to move around Nina but she blocks him.

"You know what I'm doing."

"You can't," she says. "You have to go."

Always he's been told this: that he has to go, that he cannot stay, that there is no room—as if there's no place for him anywhere, not even a place in himself he might inhabit. And now Nina saying it too, *You cannot be here with me, not now, not ever.*

Nina moves close to him, forcing him back to the window, trying to make him leave. The weight of her hand on his chest is like a push of a wind moving him here or there, drying him out. It hollows him, makes him brittle.

*

From her bedroom, Alice listens to Billy and Nina in the stairwell, their whispers brusque and cruel. She cringes, wanting to hide herself. It's her they're fighting over. Billy wanting her journals, Nina keeping them from him. Neither should even know about them. They're her sadnesses, things she's shared only with Marie. Every word from the stairwell is a piece of herself never exposed before.

"You can't do that to her," she hears Nina say. "You can't do that to me." Shamed, Alice pulls her blanket over and curls beneath. She doesn't know how to be. She feels talked about and

minded like a carcass nobody knows what to do with and so left uncovered for birds to pick at.

In the hall something is thrown against a wall, a glass shatters, then the sound of Marie running out. “You! Out! And you! You promised you wouldn’t tell him!” Alice can picture Marie’s anger. The way it looks like rage but sounds like sadness. Marie has always sounded to Alice like a house creaking, like a whole world coming down on itself. She pictures Marie in the hallway, angry at everyone but her, not wanting to admit hers was the first betrayal. Alice has known for days now how Marie sacrificed her to be close to Nina. She saw it in the shoe prints left by the trunk. Mocked, laughed at, she clenches her fists under the blanket. Her anger is a turbulence moving through her, a riling in her blood. She wants to stay hidden, to never go out into the hall, but her body moves anyway, willed by anger.

They don’t see her when she enters. Above them, Alice looks down onto the main floor. Billy, Marie and Nina, the three of them in chaos, each fighting for the wrongs done them. When they notice her and turn, they still only see her as partially there, as if they can’t quite make her out. In this moment her anger subsides and turns to regret. She’s an old woman they don’t want to know.

*

Desire, love—words too big to capture a feeling in a moment. They can’t convey how a feeling carries across moments, years, geography, catching like a bur, then dropped, abandoned, to be picked up by another. Words aren’t like that. They’re clumsy things that won’t even rightly fit through the door. This is what Boy thinks in the same moment Marie interrogates Billy and Nina.

Waiting for Billy to come back, in his bunk he tries to remember how Isa looked, how he felt about her. He wonders if Billy is right, that the way he thinks he felt is not really how it was. He’s remembered her too many times, he thinks, changed her slightly every time (and he as

well). Now, suddenly he's unsure of everything. How much of him was based on too little? He thinks then that Isa left Billy with him as a way to redeem himself to her and that he'd only abandoned him too for his own selfish reasons.

He wishes Billy will never return. He doesn't want to know what's in that letter from the house. He wants it to not say anything new to him. He doesn't want to know she wasn't ever anything he could see, that this had more than a little to do with the way she died. He'd rather never see Billy again than know that.

Then he sees a pair of eyes in the window, a shadow of a man watching him. The figure doesn't move. Boy thinks about his gun in the drawer across the room, closer to the window than he. He thinks about Billy in the house. When he looks again at the window, the man is gone.

Nina

Boy was always the thing missing, Billy. Alice wouldn't let him in. She left him at the edges of the story like a face in the window, a figure in the doorway.

Picture her: Alice, alone in her room, scoring everything that's happened to her, and to Isa, into memory like carving an image onto a wall—the knife in plaster slicing the grooves, turning the image until the vision becomes certain, clear. She shapes what she needs, forgets what she doesn't: two lives (she and Isa) becoming one. She's mad and rushed, not even knowing she does it, but doing it all the same: Alice removing Boy from her thoughts like an object from a painting, lifting him from every thought as easily, with no more awareness, than if she were brushing over a mark with paint. Because she couldn't see herself in Isa and also see Boy there too. For her, eventually, it was as if he never existed at all.

But he was there. So, Billy, imagine this also: the swirling white, the wind and snow, the rough cabin half-buried. She, Alice, approaches in a coach with Gale for the first time, thinking already she knows what desolate means. She doesn't know yet she'll watch Gale drag the stones to build a house in tribute to another woman (a woman Alice won't know existed until the snow melts and the ground thaws and she finds her letter hidden behind a turnip crate in the cellar).

Stay with me, Billy, because even now I know I sound like Alice—her voice in Marie's and Marie's in mine. Alice has just ridden halfway across the country (from Upper Canada to Snowflake) in a coach with a man she doesn't know. She's already survived one wedding (there) to please her father and another wedding (here) to appease the town, Alice's father insisting on the first because he knew what Gale would later find—a scar—and he knew what Gale would know also, that a scar meant surgery and a surgery no children. He wanted the wedding witnessed and done so it could not be undone later. And so in new country, before Alice has even

had chance to pause, to wash, to take stock of all the things, he, Gale, has her rushed into a second wedding.

Gale wouldn't sleep a night with her in that house (with the town watching) without there having been a wedding, because even if there was already a wedding in another place, it wouldn't matter to him because it wouldn't matter to the town, who didn't see it itself and wouldn't believe him anyway (ratified by a priest or not), not after Isa—never totally believing her death was even her own doing (and not his), and that even if it was, it had to be because of him. So he leaves her at the chapel with no dress and no paint to make herself up with, and then, after only a short word with the preacher, is gone. And she there now crying in the pew, with the priest above her trying to make good what he (a man) cannot understand, and she no longer sure why she's crying at all—for the lie her father told to get her wed, for the first wedding which was supposed to protect her from the second, for the second which is only an affront to the first, for her husband who is brutish, or the priest standing beside her, interrupting and absurd, un-ironically speaking, *My child, I understand*, and then Gale returning and so the preacher ushering her to the church's back rooms, hidden so the congregation can drag its reluctance inside and Gale can get his *forever hold their peaces* and then have his marriage and children.

Because while she's been crying, he's been door-to-door, rustling the town from quiet homes, it not mattering to him if they approve the wedding or not, only that they see it done before God and law. And so then the second ceremony, and she in front of all those grim and harrowed people she doesn't know, and she not knowing who they hated more, she or him, and not even knowing yet why they might hate him but knowing certainly that they *did* hate her. Because they believed, Billy, (so much that they wouldn't say *believe* at all, but *know* instead) that of all the reasons for an abrupt and hasty wedding, though it was a man's doing, it was

always, absolutely and indelibly, the woman's causing.

So she breathes their scrutiny, scorn, and *how-dare-she's*, while secretly knowing (having told no one ever, and only her father and doctor knowing also) that the fault they believed for the wedding (that there was a child in her), and the reason Gale wanted a marriage at all (to put a child in her), wasn't at all in any way possible. Before them all—Gale, priest, town—she thought about that scar, fingering it through her clothing (not a dress because time hadn't allowed it), imagining the ridged tissue on her abdomen as a thing growing—and growing and growing until it wasn't anything she could hide, until everyone could see how it marked her belly not as with child, but as barren territory, as zero space.

So see now, Billy, how after the wedding (coming home: the house, the coach, the ice and snow), Boy is there waiting for them, having seen them coming for miles. And she, eyes clawed open, fixed as if held there by string and tape, not crying now, just staring, eyes the colour of gunmetal. Already she can't see him. Before she even really knows he's there, she's decided he isn't. Boy helps her from the carriage. He carries her luggage. And she won't look at him. Even as he helps her down she won't touch him. She gives him her sleeve, not her hand.

Watch, Billy, how he follows her up the steps. She stops exactly, fiercely, raising her arm—her body rigid like a fence. He'd walk straight into her if he didn't also stop in exactly the same instant, suddenly as if intuiting what she'd do. Because, *This*, she thinks, *this I will not*. Her elbow at his chin, she doesn't turn, doesn't look to see his reaction. She just remains frozen, refusing this one thing (to let him into the house) because she has nothing else to deny. But Boy doesn't collide. He already knows, has no need to have it shown. He knows it better than anyone, feeling it in his bones. The last time he entered the house (not yet the big second house, but the smaller first one) was the day he and Gale finished building it, and since that time it's only been

Isa and Gale who've come and gone.

So Boy hardly notices. As Alice holds with all the determination of having only one thing to take (and having found someone to take it from), wondering how long she'll need to stand to be sure it's took, Boy has already walked away. In the same instant she's stopped, he's turned, dropped her bags and left—feeling her refusal only to the degree he might feel a hundred others through the day, and probably not even feeling that because he's only thinking it's this woman here now and not Isa. *And not Isa*, Billy.

So now all Alice hears is the sound of Boy's boots in the snow a dozen yards away and she's crying again now too. And all the while Gale watches from the carriage, seeing everything saying nothing. Then, walking quietly, expressionlessly, he leads Alice inside.

So back up, Billy, the picture: the winter, the cabin, the winter desolate coming down like silence. Watch how Alice changes it through the years. Billy, see it through her retelling, how every time he's a little painted over. Boy in it fades, soon the storm taking him over, not even there now: not to have his hand refused, not to be blocked at the door. Not there at all.

Boy

Isa says she's never knowing where she should be. That the place she lives is not the one she belongs to. This in the months she's wanting to leave but I'm not. She's by the window when telling me. The sun coming in. Waited too long. Morning and she'll be seen leaving. The men outside watching her cross the yard. I'll stay here till tonight she says. Liam'll be back after that. But by night she's still there. I open the door and she's on the floor. A candle she risked lighting. Arms around legs. Stomach rounding with the child we're never talking about. The child he's named Billy. Thinks it's his. We not able to change the name on our tongues.

All day preparing machines for harvest I'm imagining her inside. Moving through sunbeams. Staying from the window so no one sees. Flattening on the bed. Wondering what I'm thinking at night when she too's awake across the yard. Beside him. If our thoughts connect. When she goes I know she'll be leaving a sadness on the pillow. Like a scent I'm not quite finding. But when I return she's not left. Looking up at me in the doorway. Sadness without tears.

Liam'll be back from the city soon she says. Only she calls him Liam. No one else. You said you wouldn't I say. She shrugs. And I'm knowing she's right. These things we shouldn't give him. Words that'll get between us. I'm regretting saying it. A part of my life has never belonged to me she says. Was never spoken about so not made real by talk and story. What I remember I'm unsure. Memories I didn't make. A past I don't know. She's like a bird without the ground to follow I think.

Isa tells me her shame is her father's shame. She tells me about the half Indian woman who raised her. Grace. Her sister's mother but not hers. Who was also her father's half sister. Isa says Grace never knew how to separate the lives she lived. It all became the same to her. Mother sister wife. Isa says when her mother died Grace came to help. But her father's grief settled in his house. Like a smog. Darkening him. He pulled Grace into that. Making her find where he'd gone to. She told Isa the first time she barely noticed it happening. How she said it. That it happened. As if no one had done it. Like something had come over her. She told Isa years later when sick and was dying. And even then not all the way telling. Only letting what Thomas did sit between the words of her telling. Not because she wanted to spare him or spare Isa. But because that one word *did* still wasn't enough. The cold damp of her father's house had entered Grace's lungs. She talked of fungus living in her guts. Eating her from the inside. Breathing what she breathed.

Eating what she ate. She told Isa she wasn't her mother and it didn't change anything. Isa knew it already. Their skins didn't match but Grace's and Isa's sister's did. Isa told me what her father did and she said it didn't un-confuse him either. But left her feeling queer. Like she didn't want her secrets in another person. They had her father in common. Grace knew something about her and she knew something about Grace. And that made them strangers. She wanted wanted to change herself. And hated Grace. As Grace talked her words stopped meaning anything. Speech then sound only. Words wet lips tongue mouth saliva. Isa turned away from her. Threw her bitterness like spit. As if Grace deserved it.

As Isa says this I move in behind her against the bed. She leans against me. Looking at the night in the window. The moonlight on us. This skin against that one. It's dark and Isa hasn't left. Both knowing she should. Neither wanting her to. Grace was trying to tell me about leaving Isa says. And I didn't see it. Isa turns on her elbow to look at me. If you won't leave with me I'll without you. Her face is serious. One day there'll be a letter. You won't be able to read it but you'll know what it means. It'll mean I'm already gone.

I think about this. We're always leaving I say. You and I. People like us.

Nina

Isa slips from the room at dawn, not dressing. Leaving her night clothes on, pulling only a coat over, she pushes her feet into a pair of too big shoes and shuts the door behind her. Outside she hurries to the road, her feet dew-soaked by the time she reaches the lane. If he asks her later, she'll tell him she only went to pick chamomile from the ditch.

The fog is heavy, rainlike. Everything wet, everything still. No trees line the drive and with no bearing Isa's world loses semblance. Sound is distant, shapes imprecise. She turns

suddenly to find the house a blurry silhouette behind her, a darkened contour on a vague horizon. Weightless, all—a hazy sphere with she the muffled centre.

She crouches, needing to touch something. She pushes her fingers into the wet clay imagining if she were to turn round, circling slowly, dragging her fingers behind her, the mud would rise up like a disturbed a river bottom. A weightless cloud around her. A turbid whorl to disappear into and be swallowed by. Then as it settles both she and it would sink into the muck.

It's the heat she wants away from. What she and Boy have become is a heat to burn everything away. She digs her fingernails into her thigh to forget it. The bite of one displacing the burn of the other. Her skin becomes marked from her nails, white crescent moons across her legs. Lifting her fingers she watches them disappear and so too the relief.

At first there were only the quick minutes here or then, Boy knocking on the door with water he's carried in, she answering too quick and nearly on top of him, blushing. That first bit of heat on her chest—trying to forget it, later, not being able to. And then more frequently, coming across each other in the yard, or she watching him from the window driving posts into the ground, everything tangled, an excuse to be seen by the other, feeling: scared-wanting, not wanting-needing, hoping-hating only that their looks might cross. And she lost in thought, forgetting things always, a pot on the stove becoming a ruined meal.

She couldn't say what it was, would not even be able to find the words. The two of them, like bodies in orbit insensibly and helplessly spun round, turned by the other's passing, pulled by gravity, flung apart by centrifuge, never really meeting but never separated either.

At night she wakes beside Liam, her husband, wanting to toss and thrash. But knowing not to wake him, she only turns in her thoughts. She rises, looking at him, thinking how it is when he, Liam, puts his hands on her she never seems to fit. She moves her hand beneath his,

lifting it to feel its strange weight. Not at all like Boy's.

The first time was in the tool shed: she, not knowing Boy was in there, going in to find a sack for garden pickings, finding him instead, he looking up, she touching his arm, the light coming through the wooden slats as bands across them. And then it was all up against the shovels on the wall and down by the chicken feed on the floor. Later, greedy for sleep, Isa cringed with guilt and was suddenly into her clothes and out the door, stopping long enough only to look back, Boy on his elbow watching her, odd and wistful.

For a time they're like this: the two of them, stolen moments. Outside of it they become diminished, hungry, are themselves halved then halved again when their torment turns upon them. Sometimes a moment lasts only seconds, the fingers of one catching the fingers of the other as they pass in the yard; other times it's longer. They seek each other out where they won't be seen: behind a small structure or between rows of corn. If there's time enough they'll meet in Boy's cabin. Once, hidden in the grain shed, their bodies slowly sink into grain. There, it's Isa who reaches for the wooden beam to pull them out.

They leave secret notes beneath stones or jammed in doorways. A pebble left on a sill becomes a warning. They move objects about the yard as a kind of secret code to each other, always worrying this will be the thing that gets them caught.

She never invites Boy into the house. Though she knows he'd not enter, she suspects he wants the invitation anyway. They never discuss it, and her refusal is understood all the same. The house is the only space she can keep separate what they're becoming from who she is. What they are together devours her. For her the house is a delineation between this-is-where-I-give-you-everything and this-is-where-I-don't. Here she knows she'll not catch herself suddenly and desperately in a tangle of limbs and pressing.

Yet she knows she's lying to herself, that what she seeks is impossible. Because even here in the house, where she is at once no longer Boy's, she is instantly Liam's—inside or outside, one space only relieving her from the other.

For the sake of calm, she devotes herself anew to the house. She sees this not as a sequestering of her life with Liam, but as a measure allowing her entry into her strange world with Boy at will. To enter a place you have to exit another, she thinks. So she orders lamps and tables from town, filling the house with scents and candles, making it beautiful. She plants herbs for cooking. She buys fabrics. To her the house comes to belong to someplace else. She changes Liam's world and at times Liam responds to this. He becomes interested, suddenly aware of her as if it were she and not he who'd been far-flung and distant. He speaks quiet, playfully. As she prepares the table he tries to make her laugh. Or he pulls out from the corner the small stringed instrument neither of them know the name for. He strums the chords he knows, or the ones he's made up, stomping his foot quietly until she starts to sway, then playing louder, his foot a lively thump on the floorboards. He waits for her to sing: not words at first, just sounds, melodies with strange syllables like another language in her mouth, but slowly the music comes round to form words on her lips. By then she and Liam move closer, arms around one another, dancing. And then for Isa it's like the last two years never happened.

She suddenly sees Liam as the man she first met. She leans into him, her head to his shoulder, his scent all around her, his body not so strange after all. And then she wonders what she's doing with Boy at all. She feels a guilty awfulness in her stomach.

Yet she knows too if she is now able to sing and dance with Liam, it's only because Boy taught her how. In quiet moments Boy has showed her how to find the sounds of words. "Don't be thinking of what they're meaning," he told her. "Sing only their sounds. They're empty shells

to be filled with other things, the things they're not supposed to be meaning, the thoughts you don't quite think, the sounds you make in your dreaming." And then, remembering this, still leaning into Liam, Isa begins to weep. At first she cries into Liam then moves to the table, leaving Liam alone in the middle of the room. She sobs with her forehead against the window, not even able to look out across the yard because she knows that's where Boy is. By the time she stops and looks up, Liam is already gone from the room.

She realizes she's let regret touch the thing she and Boy are together, worrying she's altered them forever by doing so, that now every thought, every touch and memory will be felt through this moment, a filter of regret—a haze between them to keep them apart. So a week later when Boy tells her he loves her, she looks at him with resentment: furious at him for thinking he could, with a word, mark a calm when there is for her only tumult and undertow.

He tells her this in the middle of a field where he's led her. Here they have an hour while Liam is gone to town. Isa has left a candle burning in the window so any neighbour passing will think she's inside and not somewhere else. Always, Isa feels watched, observed—and time (time moving, racing, running out). So Boy takes her out where they won't be so easily seen, out where the stars give a different impression of time, where distance puts time in its place.

Here, Isa moves through the grain, arms outstretched and palms down flat above the wheat as if skimming lake water. "In every second I feel myself further and further away from all the things I will never feel," she says. She moves through the wheat, closer to Boy, slipping behind and wrapping her arms around him. She tells him what she feels is too much, is so packed in that the hours and minutes cannot hold it together. "Either I'll rip apart or they will," she says.

She tells him how she dreams of leaving. She wants to plant rows of saplings by the drive so they'll be a clock for her leaving, a measure of her having stayed too long. She'll leave when

they're still small, not yet even to her knees. "The distance of my stride," she says, "will be greater than they. And that's how I'll know I didn't wait too long. If I wait they'll be old—broken, bent or missing in places. And I will be only a ghost amongst them," she says and looks at Boy. "We're young, children almost. And this thing, all of it, is stealing us away."

She watches Boy turn away as if shrugging off the calm he's just tried to give them. To Isa, if what's between them has been a torment, it's at least been one they share. But now she thinks her feeling isn't something Boy understands at all. She sees him suddenly so far away. And it isn't through any mean or hurtful act, some selfish thing he does. Because it isn't love or desire or anything like that that will steal him away. In this moment, Isa realizes it's only what she's said that can do that.

He tells her where he got his name. Not the name he was born with—he'll never in his life tell anyone that, not even Isa. That name he keeps close, like a locket beneath his shirt, too hidden for anyone to see or touch. Even to himself he rarely speaks the name. Like a memory too often remembered or a photograph smudged by fingers, it's a thing he refuses to handle needlessly. So he keeps it far from even his own thoughts, a memory he resists for the sole purpose of remembering it better later. There are times he goes weeks, months, without recalling it. Then, after having not thought of it for a long time, he'll want it abruptly and awfully—but it won't be there, too far beyond him. He'll panic, worry he's forgotten it entirely, bolting upwards as if woken from sleep, cold and damp, terrified he's changed too much since he last spoke it, that he's no longer the same person he was then and so the name has abandoned him, refusing to be carried any further by some stranger. But then, like the locket-wearer thinking his necklace gone, he reaches for it desperately finding it strangely still there. He breathes the name quietly to be sure of it, then collapses into himself.

But it isn't this name he tells Isa about; it's his second name—Boy. This is a name he'll years later tell Alice came from whiskey traders who sold him back and forth for alcohol, who used him as they would a servant, as they would a woman. He'll tell Alice they called him Boy when they were too drunk to think of calling him anything else, a slurred and leering call. But, though it was they said it, he chose it—he heard it for what it was, a word to keep him small, so he took it before it stuck, before they could pin it on him like a sign they thought he couldn't read. Knowing this will change how Alice thinks about Boy. She'll suddenly see in him things she'd felt herself, things that made her distant and spectral. She'll realize she'd given Boy over to Gale, thought him part of the same, made him into one thing when he really was another.

But this too is not what he tells Isa. "I took the name Boy," he tells her, "because I'm not ever remembering being one. Boy. The name is always reminding me of what I never was." He tells her that his first memory is walking through a camp, the men just returned from battle. The horses bloodied, the men cut. Tatters of blue uniform gusting on poles like a burlesque of flags. Everywhere scalps drying in the sun, crusted and stinking already. And the flies, flies on everything, their sound in his ear which he can't get away from. He has no memory of his father's body being dragged into a tipi, or his mother kneeling over it, though he knows he saw both. In his memory, this is what he's walking away from, trying to return to, but unable to find—circling as in a dream. Later he hears voices calling his name. It's the last time he'll ever hear it. He listens from his spot in the grass where he's hiding, not wanting to expose himself. He doesn't notice when the camp leaves, only that the shouting has stopped. After that, it's just him alone standing up in the grass.

As Boy tells her this, Isa watches him become someone she doesn't recognize. He refuses to come any nearer, to pretend at the closeness she wants to feel. She doesn't understand if it's

she who never saw him right or he who kept too much hidden. She feels loneliness for having risked so much for a person she understands so little. She wonders if it's true, if his name changes how she sees him. She sounds it in her mouth and looks at him, wondering if one is the same as the other: the word and him. If she could touch him, she thinks she'd know. Then this would stop, she thinks. So she reaches, puts her finger to his lips. At the same time he leans back, pulling his mouth away, far enough to speak but close enough she feels his breath on her palm, the wetness of his speech like a mockery of both the touch and silence she really wants.

When their hour together is done, Isa walks back to the house more alone than when she left. She doesn't sleep. Lying beside Liam she feels she can't stay in the house.

In the early morning she leaves. She walks out onto the lane, half-dressed, the fog all around her. The heavy air suffocating. More than twenty-five years from this moment, Alice, whom Isa doesn't know, will walk down this same bit of road on a morning just like this. By then the pine trees Boy planted after Isa's death will line the drive, not much taller than Alice herself. Between those two rows she'll leave quietly, without anyone noticing, and vanish. And when Isa herself finally leaves, months from now, it will be in the opposite direction. East from the house towards the river. And it will not be quiet. It will be mad and hurried with things left behind and forgotten. Everything run from, and nothing towards.

In that moment, she'll leap above the water, the ground beneath her disappearing, and remember how in this moment she thought she could get outside the heat of it.

Boy

For a year it's me and Billy together in America. Always with me. Strapped to my back. To my chest. Putting him in the shade while I work. Buying milk from a mother. I don't sleep. Always

he's in my doing. But Gale's in my thinking.

Isa's death festers in me. She's jumping. She's pushed. Both in my mind. Never seeing either so both are true. If he didn't do it he was doing it to her anyway. I'm weak for being there while he's here. While he's anywhere. Hating him like never hating anything else. Not seeing I'm guilty too. For not letting her leave. Like Isa wanted to. For holding her in place like he was.

I decide to go. I leave Billy with a woman. Telling her I'll be back. A month or two. I promise. Give her money. Then riding back the way I came. A map will never tell me where I'm going. Where I belong. Not read me like that. When I get here the place is empty. No tracks in the snow. The house hateful inside. Empty bottles. Plates crusted. Sweat smell and old whiskey. Walking through rooms I imagine killing him in. Doing it here. There. Setting fire with him inside. If I go into the bedroom I think I'll find something of hers. To take with me. But there's nothing and I'm wondering what he did with it. For hours I wait. For nothing. I sleep in my shed. Foreign to me now. Small. Mice in the floor. I clear out a swallow nest in the ceiling. Light a fire.

I return to old work. To make me less suspicious when he returns. I worry days of purposelessness will empty my hate. After weeks I'm seeing the coach returning. Two people in it. A woman with him. Getting out. I carry her things. Not knowing why. All the while he's watching me. Me trying not to flinch. He wants what's in my head. Wondering what I took. Where I been. The child he never saw. Isa and me. I'm a thief without a crime that he can see.

We're never turning our backs on each other. Becoming shadows of the other. He starts his house in spring. Men arriving. Builders. Sleeping in tents. Never leaving. All these eyes to see me. My whole life I'm unseen. I'm disappear. Now I'm too seen to be who I need to be. Waiting too long to kill him. Time passes. More months than I promised the woman. Up and up

his house from the mud. A hole. Then a skeleton. And then the stones like muscle around that.

Then one day there is a marshal in town. And Gale disappears. Is gone. Taking my revenge with him. The second time I'm waiting too long.

Remnants

In the living room, Nina and Marie stand apart. “He’s to leave now,” Marie says, an order as much as a plea. Nina glares. Marie wants Nina to side with her, is desperate for it. Without Nina, she has no one.

To Billy, Nina and Marie are distant noise. Held behind Nina, he feels her hand light on his chest, there to calm him, to keep him away from their conversation. But he has no interest in their talk; he's an intruder in their world, and they're too far away from his. Even when Marie threatens to go for the mountie, he doesn't seem to notice them. All he wants is what's upstairs—the letters Nina mentioned. “The mountie'll come if I ask,” Marie says, furious. “If Billy leaves, I will too,” Nina interrupts, her anger at Billy vanishing. Impetuous of Marie, she sets herself against her. But Billy senses none of this as he pushes past them up the stairs.

In the dark, he moves room to room, searching for the way up to the crow's nest. Seeing the latch already pulled, the drawstring dangled, he climbs up through the floor. He finds Alice kneeling before a metal bowl lighting fire to her journals, one rolled bundle at a time. She puts the match to each, letting the pages burn until she's sure they won't go out. Then, turning, tossing them over the perch, she watches them descend across the yard—like pieces of a paper sky singed by lightning.

They've never been in a room together, Alice and Billy. There's silence between them as Alice looks up, Billy, for the first time, realizing this woman was once married to the same man as his mother. He watches her, Alice, destroying the record of his own mother's thoughts, a purging of a past she no longer wishes to remember. For a second, slipping in his mind, he conflates the two—they, Isa and Alice, becoming the same person. He sits in front of Alice like he might before his own mother: she, Alice pausing, match burning down in her hand, the last bit

of unburned pages held in the other.

They say nothing, trying to reconcile what they know with the person in front of them. To Alice, Billy is the son of a pairing—Isa and Boy—she refused to see, proof Isa loved in a way she has never. As Alice and Billy accustom themselves, Billy points to the last pages still unburned in Alice's hand. She nods, handing them to him, their eyes not leaving. The air is thick with their wrestling, each, in their way, trying to undo what they are, who they were made into.

When he comes down, Nina says, “We need to go.” Still altered from his moment with Alice, her voice is like one pulling him from sleep. Nina fears for Billy. She's watched from the window, Marie outside, furious, ordering her horse saddled, yelling at the man to work faster while she holds the lamp. Now, with Marie gone, Nina slips her hand tight into Billy's and pulls him out into the dark.

*

They enter Boy's cabin hurried and rushed, a whirl of frantic intent. Their bodies wrapped together, they're less divided than they've ever been. Having spun her anger for Marie into a revivification of Billy, she pulls him tight and he does the same to her. They're leaving. They'll find a place together. Billy carries his encounter with Alice like a talisman of good feeling. His actions feel inevitable. He seems now what he's never been: animated, charmed, certain in what he does and doesn't know. Between the house and Boy's cabin, he and Nina become a dither of possibility. They will, can, go anywhere, and they want Boy to come with them.

But they don't see their own confusion, nor the interruption on Boy's face when they burst into his cabin. Boy refuses them at the door, urging them back as they tell him what's happened and how they need to leave. "You have to come with us," Billy says. "It's true," Nina pleads, taking Boy's hands. Boy looks at her strangely. He's never spoken to her, doesn't know

her except what Billy's told him. Her sudden amity feels alien. "You need to be going," Boy says, his movements stiff, his fear acrid in the room, which Billy finally senses, searching Boy for what he won't say, Nina watching, unsure.

Like a shadow then coming to life, they see a man in the corner with a gun. The man is slight, shrivelled into himself, disheveled and dirty, pants from an uncertain uniform; his shirt, partly done up, is sweated through and smattered with insects. The man, Nina and Billy realize, who's been stalking the yard at night. He lurches between them, prodding Billy with his Smith & Wesson, Boy looking away. "So my son, ah?" he laughs, leering, moving close to the door so no one leaves, knocking things over with his gun as he passes. He chortles, "My old place, eh?" kicking a chair over, violence in his mood, humour and meanness.

Gale is less than Billy thought, not how Nina said he'd be from what Marie told her. To Nina, also, the moment feels robbed of something. "So he's your doing?" Gale says to Boy, indicating Billy with his gun. Boy glares, fingering the threads of his pants, having to listen to this man. A humiliation on his face his son can see all too clearly. A yellow feeling and a sick heart. All for a man now too diminished—Gale strangely verbose, unpredictable, hard to follow like a drunk purposed on what no one else can see clearly, smirking as if a great joke were being played on him and he in on it. "And I bet you wondering where I been . . ." He speaks then trails off, a lush at the end of his night.

"I've a man in town kept touch," Gale says. "Knew where I was. Told me a woman bought my house, made it a whorehouse. Told me all about 'im too," he says, waving his gun at Billy, they, all of them watching like he a bull and they on the wrong side of the fence. "See, I thought Isa took 'im from me. I thought he was mine and she wouldn't let me 'ave 'im. I found the blankets bloody—right over there—but no baby and no her. When she turned up in the

weeds, I thought that's where the baby went too, in the river.” Gale moves close to Boy, threatening. “But it was you who took him. To hide the evidence. For what you did to her.”

Billy and Boy’s eyes meet across Gale's shoulder, Gale's accusation hanging between them, how Gale can only think of Boy with Isa as a violation of Isa. Boy gestures to where the gun is hid, Billy moving towards it, but as he does there are noises on the lane, lights across the window—Marie returned with others. And in that second, Gale is gone, slipped out before anyone can react, the moment lingering like an odour in the air. Boy eyes the commotion in the yard and tells Billy and Nina they need to go now.

*

Returned from town, having ridden with the mountie's men, Marie stands alone on the drive, her place seemingly no longer hers. She hadn't meant to say it. It wasn't what she wanted. In town, desperate to be heard, Marie told the mountie Billy took her daughter. Now, she watches the men enter the fields with torches like the first sparks of a prairie fire. All these men searching for Billy and Nina, a sign of where they went, but neither does Marie want back inside where Alice is. She doesn't yet want to face that loss too.

Marie tried to tell the mountie about Billy breaking in, but the mountie was disinterested, hardly even looking at her in his office, his thoughts plain on his face. He knew what went on in Marie's house, or at least what used to. Even now, he could only imagine what happened in a house full of women far from town. Whatever Marie's accusation, there has to be more to the story—something Marie's done to bring on the trouble. These things have a way of coming home to roost for loose women.

Marie tried to convince him of her seriousness: how Billy came through the window to rob her. “Rob you? What did he take?” Marie couldn't say only a notebook—he'd laugh at her—

so she flustered in front of him, angry for seeing already how she wouldn't be heard. Not knowing what to say, she raged silently, her thoughts racing ahead like spooked horses taking her where she didn't want to go. She said it without thinking, anything to get back control of the situation.

“Run off?”

“Yes! Kidnapped. He took her!”

“The teacher?” The mountie was agape, incredulous of Marie for not saying so, of a woman’s capacity to not get to the point. She regretted it immensely as soon as she said it. What followed were decisions she didn’t make or want, each unravelled into the next: the mountie rising from the table, grabbing his gun, telling her to wait while he went door to door, hotel to saloon, rousing men to make the rounds: they gone home for rifles, torches lit and Marie then with a great ball of unease in her stomach with no way to take back what she said. How to tell them that what she said wasn't quite true? that she panicked because the mountie's listening wasn't really listening, that what happened wasn't sure, and was actually a little confused.

Marie, vexed, had worked hard for decades to not feel like this way around men. Now in a moment she lost all that, was just the same as when her dead husband humiliated and ruined her in his death: helplessness that made her want to vomit. She searched the mountie's office for a place to be sick, finding nothing. She ran out the back to retch on the ground, grateful the mountie hadn't seen her. Walking back, wiping her mouth with her hand, she saw the men out front readying their horses to ride, she regretting everything she'd done to start this.

*

Nina and Billy flee. They've no horses, but the searchers do, so they stay hidden in the corn.

When they lose direction, they make their way roughly by stars. They bend low crossing roads,

staying away from houses. To the south and west, the searchers' lights are like fireflies just out of Billy's reach. They, Nina and Billy, will be safer across the border. From there they can get to Langdon where they've agreed to meet Boy. The searchers, though, keep them going in the wrong direction.

“We shouldn't've left him.”

“We didn't leave him,” Nina says, her voice curt. “He told us he'd meet us.”

“We should go back.”

“You'll get arrested.”

Nina senses Billy's irritation. She squeezes his hand, but the gesture feels empty for both. She herself feels out of place. The excitement and hope she left with is gone now, and she feels absurd for having felt it at all. Her anger for Marie pushed her into this. She doesn't want to live this way, not even with Billy. She watches him, crouched, smoking, sipping from a bottle she didn't know he had. He seems displaced from her, not who she wants him to be. As he rifles through his mother's letter, she wonders how she'll leave him.

*

From the verandah Marie watches Boy, rifle in hand, slip across the yard, along the tree line, the mountie's men spread too far now to notice. She wonders why Boy would be carrying a gun. Thinking it might have to do with Nina, she fingers the rifle beside her which one of the men left—“Just in case,” he'd said. All these guns, each a violation she hates to have near her, a cold nightmare, something she shudders to think of.

*

Boy finds Gale a blue figure by the water. His back turned as Boy steps from the bush. The sound of the river masks Boy's sound. Gale doesn't move. Boy has never felt power like this

before: his rifle aimed at Gale's back. He won't be meeting Billy like he said. His gunshot will call the men back. They'll find Gale dead and him, Boy, guilty. He'll spend his life in prison, he knows. He imagines rolling Gale's body into the river with his boot, it falling off the bank like a piece of driftwood. Maybe it won't even be found till far downstream. He waits, wanting to linger. Whatever happens, he wants to remember this: Gale's boots, his dress, posture, how Boy's own head hurts still from when Billy punched him days ago.

"I should kill you," Boy says.

"You should."

Gale doesn't turn and Boy wonders if Gale sensed him all along. "You wouldn't have wanted your life before I found you," Gale says. "I saved you."

"You didn't." Silence.

"Maybe not," Gale says. "Maybe nothing's for sure."

Gale's much changed from the cabin before—sober, regretful, his doubt unrecognizable to Boy. "Some things are for sure," Boy says, squeezing the gun.

"Just like you, I never saw it happen," Gale says.

"Not just like me."

These are the most words they've ever spoken, strangely intimate.

"But I've seen it everyday since," Gale says.

Boy doesn't say anything. The man invisible to himself, not seeing what he is, Boy thinks. Boy wants the feeling to be right. He wants something to die with Gale, something that can't be touched. But suddenly he doesn't know what that feeling is or how to find it. He doesn't know how to continue without it.

“It's our lives that won't let us be together, not us,” Nina says. They sit on a slope where they can hide easily if they see someone coming. Billy nods. They don't know how to walk together, and neither knows how to follow. Nina will leave. There's sorrow, but no weakness in this. Once spoken it becomes truth. They simply look at each other and know.

Billy feels possessed of something he can't share, something that swallows him, focuses him, makes him unreachable. For hours they've walked and fought, sometimes with words, sometimes with silences—their separate thoughts grappling with the other's like proxies of their bodies, each trying to find their way.

But Billy senses Nina's reluctance. She doesn't want to leave. If she could, she'd light a fire, have them lean into each other, neither saying anything, the night sky above them. He can see it in her thinking. But he needs to keep moving. Twice searchers have passed them on the road while they huddled in the grain like ground animals waiting for a predator bird to fly past. They have to hurry, moving from cover to cover, never sure if they're in view. The men pressing near are an urgency between them making everything happen before they're ready. There are more men searching than there should be, so Marie told them something that isn't true. He won't feel safe until he's crossed the border.

“I'll go north before turning back. That'll give you time and distance,” Nina says.

“They won't believe you when you tell them, that I didn't take you.”

“I know.”

They remain like this for a moment, Nina unsure how to leave, Billy feeling sadness well up inside him like a great tiredness. He needs that energy, so he breaks the moment before they want to. Opening his bottle, he swallows, heat rising in his throat. He doesn't look up. He knows Nina's anger already. It's why he did it. She'll be hurt by his turning away, for not letting feeling

touch him. But he doesn't care. Not until all he has is the sound of her footsteps in the road.

*

Marie watches Boy and Gale from the trees. Having followed Boy there, she expected to find Nina or Billy. Why else would Boy be skulking? She wants one more chance with Nina, but brought the gun to protect her from Billy. She hadn't thought to find Gale. At first she hadn't even understood who he was. Then he mentioned Isa and suddenly she connected him with this spot, the place by the river where Isa died.

She feels a great rage. All these men who won't leave her alone, Marie keeps losing everything to them. Long ago she wanted a peaceful life here; with Alice, she thought this could work also. But Alice was hectored by a man who made ghosts of women so he wouldn't be one himself. In this moment, Marie understands she lost Alice long before she met her.

Watching Boy aim his rifle at Gale's back, she knows how he must hate him. He'll shoot Gale, she knows. He has to. It's how he gets out. She feels this too. She wants to spit on Gale, hurt him for hurting Alice. She hadn't known how much she hated him until this moment. It makes her feel weak, this tumbling anger. It gets away from her, writhing in her belly. Like Boy, she could shoot him. She's never liked the feel of a gun—the indifferent metal, the violence absurd compared to the action of a finger. She's done it a few times though, fired at a skunk under the house. She missed and hadn't shot fast enough then as it ran away. She wouldn't miss now though. She'd make sure of it.

She'd do it in the same instant as Boy. The echo of his would be the sound of hers. Nobody would hear the difference, nobody would blame her. The mountie would find two holes and he'd wonder about that, but he'd pin it on Boy anyway. Boy'd be proud to take it. Marie only wants a shot too, one after Boy's. Boy's would be the fatal shot, hers an indulgence. So she

waits, the two men speaking, Gale standing like a suicide, his back turned with Boy's gun pointed, each knowing what's to happen. Gale waiting for Boy and Boy waiting for what?

She puts her gun tight to her shoulder, like how she's seen it done. She doesn't hear everything they say, but she sees Boy slacken his posture, his gun falling slightly. Maybe he'll not do it. Could he walk away without firing? Surely Gale has a gun too, and he wants to die. And then she sees it, what they're moving towards. If Boy won't shoot, Gale will. He'll force Boy's hand. It's what he wants. She can almost see him thinking it. He'll turn and fire, perhaps hitting Boy, perhaps not, but then Boy will shoot back, Gale falling back into the water—dying where Isa died. Marie understands Boy's hesitation then. He doesn't want to give Gale what he wants, even if he loses his revenge. Suddenly Marie panics. She doesn't want a firefight. She could be hit and there's no way to know how it'll finish. She wants a sure end, all of this done with. And she wants to feel powerful in it. For a second she thinks she does it for Alice, but knows this isn't true. She counts to ten. When she doesn't shoot, she starts again. At the six she surprises herself and fires.

*

Inside the house, Alice hears the gunshot. She hasn't known what's been happening in the yard since Marie came back with all those men, but she thinks it must have something to do with Billy. She runs to the open window, but doesn't think it came from that direction, so she goes to the back, the shot still reverberating in her ears.

In the last hours, she's felt strangely unburdened—light. Burning the letters had been her wanting to disappear. Every burnt page meant less of her existed. Whatever those pages spoke for in her, she wanted it gone. Marie, exposing her, had made her shame too available, like raw skin to the wind. She thought about jumping, but didn't know if the height was enough. She'd

been thinking this when Billy climbed up through the floor, taking these questions from her. She gave him freely what he wanted. She didn't know why, except that it felt right. There was much less that belonged to her in that moment, that maybe never belonged to her at all.

For years everything felt taken. She never knew what belonged to her. Everything that should be hers seemed somebody else's, and what was hers felt stolen. Now she feels freer. But the gunshot interrupts that feeling. It's a violence that runs through her body. And in the echo of it, she hears two more shots.

*

The shot is louder than Marie thought. When she opens her eyes, Gale turns, but it's Boy who's hit—she sees it in how he falls. As he does, he fires twice, straight into Gale. In this second, for Marie, events go racing ahead while she herself remains caught in the seconds further and further from the present. She imagines Boy's bullets carving through Gale. He becomes less than a body to her, parts only. She hears his heartbeat, how it stutters, the sound of fluid leaving his body, spasms in muscle, thoughts becoming thick. Oblivious to Boy as she enters the clearing, she circles the body, gun dragging behind her: Gale's head on a rock like a pillow—she hadn't seen this when he fell, and wonders if he's only unconscious and not actually dead.

Too long Marie hangs in silence, Boy moving towards her, dragging his leg. When he gets close he says: "You tried to take this from me." She's shocked at how Boy stands before her, eyes raging. But for Marie, what seems a few seconds is actually much longer, because Alice, having run from the house to the river, is circling the body now too, looking back and forth between Marie and Boy, trying to make sense of everything horribly out of place. Marie doesn't say anything, doesn't know how to.

Gale's body isn't something Alice is ready to see, not even how she remembers it. She

toes the jaw, head falling. Marie steps towards Alice—to say something, to hold her, Marie doesn't know. She wants to speak but can't. She's deflated, her actions debased and absurd, what she's done inexplicable to her too. But Alice backs away in warning, eyeing the rifle in Marie's hand. Then she sees Boy hissing through his teeth, bent and gripping his thigh. Alice pushes past Marie, tearing a strip from her dress to wrap Boy's leg in.

For what seems forever, Marie remains fixed, unable to move. When she does move and time for Marie springs back to what it was, she looks around to find herself alone, Alice having long ago left with Boy, the body beside her like an accusation, no longer a man.

*

As the sun rises, Alice leads Boy inside, where he's never been, and lays him on the table. She puts his leg on pillows, cleaning it before stitching, adding more wraps when the bottom ones soak through. For hours he moves in and out of sleep, panicking when he wakes, not recognizing where he is. When he asks about Billy, Alice isn't sure what to say. Nina returned earlier, alone, apparently passing by, without a word, all those men watching for her as if they didn't exist—they still haven't found Billy and are expanding the search. But to Boy, Alice only shakes her head.

This morning and for the next few days, Alice tends Boy's leg. The wound is serious, but will heal. For now, though, it needs constant attention. This moment for Boy and Alice lasts days, is without peace or resolution, but at the end of it they'll feel released of something, a small bond between them that for a short time lets them be in a room together. Alice guards their space. The main floor becomes theirs, and Marie does not enter except to leave the house. On the second day, when the mountie doesn't arrest him, Boy comes to understand Marie hid the body. He wants to acknowledge this, but she moves past too quickly, her eyes downcast, keeping her

distance. He wonders how she did it. Their gunshots would've been heard. She would've kept the mountie away from the river, told the mountie she shot Boy but hadn't mean to. She would've understood the mountie likely wouldn't charge her for this.

Later, Nina comes down and tells Boy how it ended between she and Billy. She tells him she's leaving, returning to her family in Winnipeg. She says she tried to tell the mountie the truth, but he hadn't believed her. Now she doesn't want to be here. The mountie wants her to stay, to testify against Billy when he's found. "They won't find him," Boy says. "I hope not," she replies.

In a moment's panic Boy realizes he never got to see Isa's letter. When healed, he thinks he'll meet Billy where they agreed to, but days become weeks and still he can't walk. By the time he does, he's too late, Billy long moved on to where he won't be recognized. So Boy stays, waiting for a sign. Like two people searching in the wilderness, they'll find each other only if one remains still. Boy refuses to be pushed away. He dreams one day his son might return, and they, together, might buy a piece of land for themselves.

*

On the verandah, Nina watches Alice go. She's asked Alice to come live with her family and Alice has agreed. She's insisted, though, on leaving alone. "I need to do this myself," she says. So, taking little with her, with Nina watching, Alice begins the miles into town, where Nina and her father, when he arrives, will collect her.

At the same time, Nina scans the horizon. Billy is out there somewhere, the men having never found him. For now, she feels certain in herself, believing she could never have really gone with him. But these feelings will change. A year from now Nina will write to him, addressing the letters to Boy, hoping Boy will have found his son. Her letters will be a kind of

regret for how she left. They will also be a story, pieces and fragments, a way to understand what happened. She won't know what she expects from Billy by sending it, a mess of bits arriving erratically in the mail, a frantic, almost obsessive attempt to straighten things out. When Billy doesn't reply, she'll not know if it's because her letters never arrived or because he doesn't like her portrayal.

She knows she won't stay long with her family in Winnipeg. She doesn't have it in her anymore to live only one life, to remain in one place. She's like her father in this way, not at all like Marie who's carved her life out like a territory to stake.

In her last days at Gale's Furrow, Nina refuses to speak to Marie. She feels petulant in this, believing herself right, just, but knowing also there are better ways to leave. Marie secludes herself in her rooms, makes herself unavailable, is brooding and abased. Nina saddens to think of Marie alone in the house for years to come. She wonders what it'll take to make her contact with her mother again. She understands this will require a strength she doesn't now have.

*

Before she goes, Alice ties a strip of red cloth around the doorknob—the same one Isa once tied her letter with. It's a sign of her, Alice's, having been there, and of other women too. Alice wants to walk away with nothing. She's told Nina she'll live with her and her father—Marie's once-lover—but she knows she won't. It doesn't feel right. Alice has the feeling of having left already. She'll not live dependently on one more person as she has always before.

In these last days, Alice's resentment for Marie has diminished to pity. She thinks this is perhaps how Marie saw her when she, Marie, first arrived at Gale's Furrow decades ago. She wonders if this is all they were ever meant to be to each other—pitiful. But then she thinks about how Marie hid the body, and fired the gun. This must mean something also—maybe there really

was love, maybe it was she, Alice, who was never able to see it.

She steps onto the drive and is glad for the pines on either side. Boy has told her how they came to be, what they've meant: that Isa wanted them to be a marker of her leaving, but that he, too late, planted them only after her death as a way to remember her by. So though marked by sadness and loss, Alice warms to count them. They are, each tree, a measure for the limits of her understanding. They are real to her now, these people—not only like ghosts she can't get out of her head, a counter to the way she herself has already begun to recede.

She feels it as she walks, like weather diminishing. She thought she'd walk, miles and miles down the road until her body failed, remaining where she fell like a deer gone out to die. But she won't. There won't even be that now—little left to see and touch of her by the time she reaches the end of the lane. She feels robbed, wanted more, has always felt not fully anything. Slowly, as if into vapour, she feels more like moisture on the air than something solid. Wind moving between her cells. The parts of her she can still feel farther from her sense. Faint and whispered. She wanted to be real. Now, a mile out, she's almost nothing. She'll know always she never left as how she wanted to. Vanishing, she wonders how she managed to be anything at all.

*

Billy waits in Langdon for two days then keeps walking. He stays south of the border. He'll return some day, but for now he has to go. There's something too in the letters he has to live with. When he's ready, he'll burn them, like Alice did. They should be carried so far, and no further, he thinks. Parts of his mother exist in them, and Boy and Alice too, and these parts need live on, but they need to change in his telling too. He sees, in them what Boy was reluctant to face: that he, Boy, failed them, Billy and Isa, by leaving them too much alone. But he thinks too that Boy did so out of his own suffering and wonders if this is all forgiveness ever is—

recognizing the hurt in another's actions.

When he returns there'll be recognition for Boy, but love also. It's this he's most proud of, the persistence of love when other things are made to grow instead. It's love that lets him walk, love that'll let him return. But for now, it's also what makes him do it alone, a way of caring for himself so he knows who he is when he comes home.

Characters

Liam Gale: Widower of Isabella, Alice's husband

Alice Gale: Liam Gale's second wife

Boy: Billy's father

Marie Devine: Nina's mother, brothel proprietor

Nina: Daughter of Marie, teacher

Billy: Isabella Gale's son, labourer

Isabella Gale: Liam Gale's first wife, Billy's mother

Thomas Hood: Isabella's father

Grace Hood: Isabella's aunt, and her father's half sister

Critical Afterword

I. Introduction

Borderlands have been a life-long interest of mine. I was born in a small border town, Snowflake, Manitoba—the same town this thesis is set in and which is now a ghost town. As an invisible line insisted upon as real, the border, and the violence I saw accumulated around it, has both fascinated (and horrified) me for as long as I can remember. In 1997, just after my family left that border town for another, a number of people we knew, central to the community in Snowflake, were arrested in a smuggling ring involving mostly alcohol, but tobacco and hand guns also. The bust included a sting and an informant. A year or two later, the informant was shot in the head on the side of the highway—all of this because of that line. In 2009, I participated in a seven day walk through the Sonora desert from south of the Mexican border to Tucson (75 mi.). The walk, held yearly, is in support of migrant workers crossing that border in search of work because of free trade agreements devaluing their work at home. They cross in the desert because the border is most porous there, but it's also where the terrain is most lethal.

Not until I discovered an archival *Manitoba Free Press* article from 1911, however, did I realize how I wanted to write about the region I came from. The article was about a man who'd kidnapped a Snowflake school teacher and was being chased by a mob of several hundred people across the border. The facts of the events were ambiguous and speculative, and by the time I followed the story through subsequent articles, I'd already begun imagining a narrative of my own—one which didn't turn out to agree with the articles (“Blood Hounds” 1, 7; “Henry Wilson” 1, 24; “Many More” 1, 20; “Miss Price” 1; “Reward Offered” 1; “School Teacher” 1,

10).¹ I later read, in Garrett Wilson's history of the Canadian frontier, *Frontier Farewell: The 1870s at the End of the Old West*, about an 1879 fire along the Canadian-U.S. border, which Wilson writes was once thought to have been lit by the U.S. Army to starve out Sitting Bull and the Sioux, then in Canada after Little Big Horn, by limiting their access to buffalo (Wilson 371-381). The image of a fire lit across that distance, making visible a violence that was invisible before, struck me and I knew I had the bookends of a story.

What I didn't understand was how my focus would quickly shift from the border itself to how that border stood for all kinds of colonial violences in the frontier and settlement periods. More and more, I saw the laying down of survey lines as a violence which, as it reorganized space to an agrarian model, erased people whose experiences of race, gender, or sexuality complicated a narrative history of settlement. I saw settlement narratives themselves producing an imaginative order: prairie as empty space for settlement to fill.² To varying degrees, I saw such texts as erasing the nation's hand in constructing the prairie, of ephemeralizing it, like the border itself. If the silent prairie was supposed to be space away from the nation, I saw this silence as an act of nation-building—silencing, not silence itself; a verb, not a noun. The prairie was an ordering of space, a removal of difference in consolidation of a preferred narrative for progressive peaceful expansion.

I was interested in voices or subjectivities that haunt prairie narratives, which interrupt settler solitude. If settlement pushes other subjectivities from the clearing, I wanted a narrative

¹The articles offered, as events unfolded, different motives, identities, and names for the man—who he was and where came from—constructing him as an outsider. The woman too was made to represent either female frailty or resilience, depending on the article of the day. They were being constructed in particular ways according to their relation to prairie space as either a woman or as a vagrant with unsettled roots.

² In this afterword, I discuss the settler imagination through Wallace Stegner, Dick Harrison, Henry Kriesel, Fredrick Philip Grove, and Laurence Ricou, but discussions could also include Robert Stead, Martha Osenso, W.O. Mitchell, Sinclair Ross and others.

that spoke not from the centre but from the periphery. I wanted a text that not only presented prairie with an unsettled past, but one with characters who themselves spoke from their ephemeral positions of having been erased from the spaces they still very much inhabit. Women reduced to function, indigenous people displaced, sexual identities not productive of settler kinship structures repressed, a landscape scarred by extermination and terraformation: these traumas needed to be given space in the narrative. And if such identities had been isolated from the general settlement narrative because of racialized and heterosexist patriarchal reorganizations of space and belonging, I needed a text which spoke to such isolation, which spoke from fragmented space; I needed a structure which was itself broken.

However, as a white writer writing about settlement, one of my biggest anxieties was that my work would reenact the work of settlement. Both my families, French Catholic and German Mennonite, trace back to immigrations in the 1700s and late 1800s. My family did the work of settlement and I inherited an immense privilege in this space as a result. I cannot escape the fact that I am a white settler writing about past violences my family is implicated in. In trying to make sense of this inheritance, I didn't want to create a narrative to settle the matter—meaning I wanted the text to be unsettling, on one hand, which is to say disquieting, but more importantly, I wanted a text that confounded any kind of cohesiveness of settlement though an abundance of voices and language, of conflict, and negotiation. I wanted a text wherein the characters themselves vie for narrative, and I wanted this competition to be reflected in the very structure of the novella, so that reading it became a negotiation between narratives at odds with each other.

My chief influences for this text are William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient*. While I'll focus my discussion mostly on these texts, a similar influence could be drawn from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*, Toni Morrison's *Paradise, Beloved*,

and *A Mercy*, or Ondaatje's *In the Skin of a Lion*. These texts use interrupted narratives to express traumatic erasures of identity and narrative by histories of nation building and colonization. They also use structure to produce spaces of other possible belongings.

Much of Liam Gale's character derives from John William Sandison, who lived near Brandon, Manitoba when this novella takes place. Friends of mine restored his house, which he built, like Gale, by dredging stones from a river. A hugely successful farmer, he was sometimes called the "Wheat King," and a number of the more preposterous descriptions of Gale come from stories of Sandison, and a couple brief online biographies of him—that he invented an agricultural cannon that fired seed into the field; that he was so fiercely proud of his Scottish ancestry he wore his kilt and Scottish robes even in the field amongst his men; that he mailed his laundry to Scotland because he believed only a Scot could launder it properly. He disappeared, as Gale does, under mysterious circumstances, amidst financial ruin and rumour—vanishing after a Scotland Yard detective appeared in Brandon, pursuing Sandison for fraud ("Memorable Manitobans," "John Sandison"). The house itself maintained a dramatic history long after Sandison was gone. That history is somewhat retained in Marie's purchase of the house (her last name, "Devine," comes from a family who bought the house), merged also with how my friend, who bought the Sandison house, discovered that her grandmother once ran a brothel in rural Manitoba during the early 20th century.

The genesis for Boy's character came from Mary Weekes's record of Norbert Welsh, a frontier Red River trader and buffalo hunter. In it, Welsh tells of a Sioux boy traded between camps for alcohol in 1862. The man Welsh worked for, Joseph MacKay, bought "the unfortunate boy" at his wife's behest, the boy becoming "a useful member of MacKay's family" through his adolescence (Weekes 7-8). I was shocked that not only that a person could be purchased on the

prairie, but also by the paternalism of this transaction—that in one action a person could be made into an object, used for labour, and at the same time claimed as a ward in need of protection.

From this, I saw Boy as having to fight his way out from such reduction and indignity felt early in life, of being racialized as one in need of saving through an act which reduces him to a thing.

II. The Settler Imagination

In 1968 Henry Kreisel wrote, in “The Prairie: A State of Mind,” that “All discussion of the literature produced in the Canadian West must of necessity begin with the impact of the landscape on the mind” (Kreisel 6). Indeed, much of prairie literature, especially settlement narrative, has oriented prairie experience by positioning man [sic] as the self-conscious centre of a great expanse: endless horizons, big skies, and seas of wheat. Kreisel argues this has a twofold effect on the settler imagination. Man is both “the insignificant dwarf always threatened by defeat” and “the giant-conqueror” (6). He is both everything and nothing, anxious over his inconsequence and simultaneously insistent on his significance. Other critics of that period echo this. Dick Harrison argues, “the prairie with its openness and isolation does make its own peculiar assault on the civilized mind” (Harrison 2). For Harrison, such “A menace undefined” (8), wide open and engulfing, terrible, is met with “the need for imaginative order” (2). He says, “This was the challenge to the pioneer imagination, and one to be met not just verbally and ritually but by surveying, fencing, building—anything to capture the new space within a known order” (x). The imposition of order onto landscape renders it un-terrifying: the nothingness named, mapped, staked. If Harrison describes such strategies as ill-adapted (18), he never imagines the inscription of a map’s grid onto the landscape as a violence in and of itself.

Such configurations of prairie have at their core both an existential unease and a

determination of self. Wallace Stegner, in his influential memoir-history-fiction composite, *Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier*, writes:

You become acutely aware of yourself. The world is very large, the sky even larger, and you are very small. But also the world is flat, empty, nearly abstract, and in its flatness you are a challenging upright thing, as sudden as an exclamation mark, as enigmatic as a question mark.

It is a country to breed mystical people, egocentric people, perhaps poetic people. But not humble ones. At noon the total sun pours on your single head; at sunrise or sunset you throw a shadow a hundred yards long. It was not prairie dwellers who invented the indifferent universe or impotent man. Puny you may feel there, and vulnerable, but not unnoticed. This is a land to mark the sparrow's fall. (Stegner 8)

If self is made uncertain by distance and solitude, that solitude also impresses itself as a mythic significance. To be small here is to be huge. Laurence Ricou, also working with such geometry, in his *Vertical Man/Horizontal World: Man and Landscape in Canadian Prairie Fiction*, emphasizes the existential: "Vertical man in a horizontal world is necessarily a solitary figure; the fiction of the Canadian prairies is the record of man conquering his geographical solitude, and, by extension, his other solitudes, not so much physically as through imaginative understanding" (Ricou 6). Man at the centre of an empty geography, alone, "erect on the prairie" (6): he overcomes himself, his singularity and smallness, by projecting himself onto an entire geography, conquering it and himself as if by a single unspoken thought.

For these writers, varyingly, the prairie becomes a thing to be filled by consciousness. For Harrison, it's the mind's order onto landscape; for Stegner, mythology; Ricou, freedom ("The uninterrupted view to the horizon gives the impression of uninterrupted personal freedom.") (7); and Kreisel, the impetus to conquer. The fragility of settler survival and identity is overcome with a conviction of imagination, a possibility of mind laid down and called forth: a moment of unity between consciousness and geography wherein the settler is both empty and complete.

To be imagined as possibility, as becoming, the prairie first has to be seen as nothing.

The prairie to come needs a figurative void to fill. In a way, settler narrative clears the prairie in ways actual settlement could never. Frederick Philip Grove's *Settlers of the Marsh* reads:

A new dream rose: a longing to leave and to go to the very margin of civilization, there to clear a new place; and when it was cleared and people began to settle about it, to move on once more, again to the very edge of pioneerdom, and to start it all over anew . . . That way his enormous strength would still have a meaning. Woman would have no place in his life.

He looked upon himself as belonging to a special race—a race not comprised in any limited nation, but one that crossed-sectioned all nations: a race doomed to everlasting extinction and yet recruited out of the wastage of all other nations . . . (Grove 139)

Niels is interested in singularity: space undifferentiated by sex, race, and nation. While Grove sets up a myth, wherein a man might walk away from nation states, empire, and women to be his own man, he also rejects such a possibility. Niels is the agent that makes way for nation. By impressing his solitude onto prairie, by clearing away difference, he makes settlement possible. He insists on an uninterrupted male interiority disseminated over an entire landscape, an endless moment of oblivion. As he physically clears the land, he also does so figuratively. He, as settler, as harbinger of nation, delivers apocalypse to the prairie so as to make it new for the nation.

The geometry of settler imagination privileges space. What the settler sees he claims. In his space there's room only for his subjectivity; all others vanish in his sight. This action happens in time too. Stegner sees the deaths of indigenous peoples as regrettable, but an eventuality of their proximity to encroaching civilization: "The white man literally created the culture of the Plains Indians by bringing them the horse and the gun; and just as surely, by conquest, disease, trade rum, and the destruction of the buffalo, he doomed what he had created" (Stegner 53). He sees the Métis similarly: "As a race, a tribe, a possibility, the métis had ceased to exist" (57), continuing, "[...] the métis were a white creation; ethnically and culturally they were the product

of the meeting of white and Indian, the spark struck out by the contact between industrial civilization and the stone age. And like the Plains culture, they were obliterated eventually by what had made them” (58). Stegner literally claims the “Indian” for “civilization.” The “Indian” is his creation because the “Indian” exists in his sight. Contact brings the “Indian” into presence, pulling him from primitive time into modernity. But in that instant, as the “Indian” approaches being, contact eradicates him. In the settler vista, the “Indian” is surveyed, marked like any stone or tree for removal. Candace Savage, in her *A Geography of Blood: Unearthing Memory from a Prairie Landscape*, a text meant as a companion and criticism of Stegner’s *Wolf Willow*, writes:

If [Stegner] failed to detect the racist underpinnings of the Great Plains adventure—the confident assertion of white European superiority and the unquestioned value of European ‘civilization’—he certainly wasn’t alone. As for his easy capitulation to the ‘growth-and-progress gospels’ that, in his heart of hearts, he recognized as frauds, he clearly deserved to be outed as a backslider. (Savage 64)

If Stegner sees such disappearance as tragic, even the result of settler imagination, he makes no bones about the settler’s right to be there, eyeing both land and “Indian” as settlement property.

In this thesis I wanted to work against such configurations of prairie. The terrible action is not the “impact of the landscape on the mind,” as Kreisel suggests, but inversely, the violence of an “imaginative order” onto landscape, and the people in that landscape. Harrison writes, “The prairie seems to deny the permanent signs of human society which could reassure the observer that he is not alone in the face of the huge eternal forms of land and sky. The best that man has managed, the lines of road and fence, are as bloodless as geometry” (Harrison 12). The prairie was long a site of transformation by the time of Harrison’s writing in 1977, and that change—genocide, extinction, and ecological devastation—was hardly “bloodless.” In her exploration of prairie as traumatized space, Candace Savage writes, “this land is filled with ghosts. Sometimes, [...] I wake up to find myself troubled by an unaccountable melancholy. It lodges in my

breastbone, a dull, lumpen ache” (Savage 51). Though rendered invisible by particular settlement narratives, the violences of settlement linger on scarred landscape and in the generational trauma of the people still here. Where violences remain unearthed, they inhabit space as a haunting.

Contrary to Harrison, I would argue that it’s the very geometry of settlement that is so bloody.

In moments, *The Borders* offers an expectation of such configuration of prairie: as Marie arrives and in Alice’s reconstruction of Gale’s nightmares, wherein Gale enters Canada by igniting the border. Both suggest new beginnings and empty spaces. However, the text complicates such positionings: “what [Marie] craves is the distance of a treeless skyline: a sepia-toned world before there are even photographs old enough to colour it like that, a place called Snowflake on the bottom edge of a country barely named” (Braun 9); “What she sees in Gale’s Furrow is a great stone house where time is a thing that happens far away” (10). Marie never gets the moment she “craves,” but if Marie doesn’t at once recognize the impossibility of such a moment, the reader does: “In 1894, when she buys the house, Marie knows nothing of its past. She doesn’t know the women here before her and she knows little of the man Gale who built the house. Later she’ll learn about Isa, Gale’s first wife found dead in a river, that there are those who believe he put her there, even if he was never charged” (9). The space already exists in history: There are women here before her, violences already done, and a history of land extortion—“They’ll tell her Gale cheated his wealth from other men but lost it before he finished building his house” (9). Further, these are contested histories, arriving from competing sources interested in the space being seen in specific ways, histories complicated by Marie herself as a woman entering the masculine space of bald prairie.

Marie’s intention for female space, her brothel, and also her materialism and sense of market economy, undermines prairie as a space to flee into from civilization. She reveals a

prairie already marked as the material space for the nation. Looking to the house, not away, she calls forth her wagonloads of civilization—“Her things will arrive by wagon later, and the girls in a week” (9). The market economy Marie brings with her to a space already intended for it is the very thing which delimits the possibility of her newness:

Surrounded by crates, Marie lifts objects from their packing, setting them here or there, never sure where they belong. [...] In this new place, her things are suddenly strange to her, different without the world they came from. [...] She wants to believe she is new here too. She closes her eyes, touching a wall as if it were a thing to induce sleep by, as if she could draw in its quiet (11-12).

Her moment of release, of breaking from past and city, will remain deferred. Snowflake is a space already constructed by politics and economy by the time Marie arrives, existing because of its proximity to the border. The later collapse of both the local economy and Marie’s business show the nation’s hand in the construction of such spaces: “A political decision made elsewhere moved that crossing thirty miles east to a different town. Snowflake baked and shrank in the sun, withering like a crop meant to grow elsewhere” (30). Hardly a space away from civilization, this space exists by way of national ambition. The moment of new prairie possibility never quite happens, is already halted by its own construction as a space “cleared” for nation by nation—an unsustainable construction without continued colonial support.

III. Ephemeralities & Borderland Violence

Gale’s crossing into Canada is itself a violence, one erased, unspoken, and perhaps didn’t even happen: a possible happening that haunts the rest of the text, and Gale himself, as a violence nevertheless felt. I based the fire on a grassfire that reportedly spread along the Medicine Line in autumn 1879. Then Indian Commissioner Edgar Dewdney reported to Parliament in 1890 how fires raged from Wood Mountain to the Rocky Mountains, 560 km, and

spread north 210 km to Qu'Appelle. He said the fires “were started at different points almost simultaneously, as by some reconstructed arrangement” (qtd. in Wilson 371). Garrett Wilson writes that a theory once argued the U.S. army lit the fire in an attempt to starve the Sioux, then residing in Canada after Little Big Horn, and so force their return to the U.S. where they would be put onto American reservations. At the time, buffalo were believed to be a migratory species. By killing all grazing material, such a fire meant the buffalo would remain south of the Medicine Line, effectively starving out the Sioux, which Dewdney himself indicated (Wilson 371-2).

There was enough evidence to justify the suspicion. Wilson writes:

The U.S. Army, which wanted the Sioux forced back over the border, was a natural suspect and reasonably so since it was known to have employed fire as a tactical weapon. In 1865 in Nebraska Territory, hoping to burn out Sioux and Cheyenne war parties, the military set a prairie fire along a 480-km (300 mi) front. Colonel Nelson Miles [...] did propose burning over the entire country north of the Missouri River but was denied permission by his superiors, ‘except as a last resort.’ (372)

Further, in September 1879, the Privy Council already believed the U.S. to be setting fires, as evidenced by its strategy to return the Sioux to the U.S., a strategy that proposed “the Americans must cease burning the grass along the forty-ninth parallel to keep the buffalo south” (372-3).

Though this theory is now no longer accepted, it was an idea very much grounded in the politics of the day. The narrative fit with starvation policies employed by the United States and Canada towards the Sioux (384). For example, in 1883, John A. MacDonald spoke to the house: “At the time we took the vote last year I went, at considerable length, into the subject of destitute Indians, the utter disappearance of the buffalo and the action of the American Government which formed a perfect cordon to prevent buffalo from crossing the lines [...] I am not at all sorry, as I have said before, that this has happened” (Official Reports 1102). Starvation was a strategy used to coerce First Nations onto reserves. MacDonald continues:

So long as there was a hope that buffalo would come into the country, there was no means of inducing the Indians to settle down on reserves. The total failure of the buffalo the year before last, and last year, caused the Indians to be thrown on the mercy of the Government in the North-West. We could not, as Christians and men, allow them to starve, and we were obliged, no matter what the cost might be, to furnish them with food. (1102)

If First Nations could be weakened so as to break their independence, they could be then “civilized” by white Christian intention and the reservation system. While the border fire was not lit by a state, Canadian or American, the effects of it coincided with state policy. Wilson writes, “The famine engulfing the entire western plains almost rendered moot Ottawa’s policy of starvation towards the Sioux refugees from the United States, but the policy began to bear fruit. Solidarity weakened as some of the bands, desperate to survive, broke away, slipped over the border and surrendered to the U.S. Army” (Wilson 383). The buffalo were gone, the Sioux were starving, and the Canadian government was unwilling to feed them (381). These facts colluded to force the return of the Sioux across the Medicine Line.

The ephemerality of agency in such violence interested me: how colonial violence remains alleged. Because the fire is no longer believed to have been intentionally lit, but was once thought to have been, and yet also did concur in its effects with colonial policy, I had to hedge the way I included it. I did so as a haunting, one filtered through Alice’s recounting of having listened to Gale’s night terrors, and then she having reconstructed it over time by continually revisiting it as an acts of traumatic memory. She says:

The dry-whispered night terrors of a once-husband. A night I never witnessed but cannot forget. A swirling gleaned-only memory, where my mind-spun lonely words pile up on each other, tangled and hard to read—esoteric like omen shapes inside storm clouds on the horizon—where no longer sure of what I see or that I ever did at all, I return to things I know are true—that it isn’t mine at all. (Braun 46)

Alice’s impression is ephemeral, like the frontier and the border themselves—lines which hardly

seem to exist but do represent real transformation: “[...] a line scorched between two nations, a great burning strip of no man's land which had until then remained only an invisible line (a line only the purveyors of government really believed existed), but now burned for miles north and south and for the length of a nation what could no longer be doubted by any man on this side or that” (48). The arrival of surveyors to the West is where the nation digs in its heels: the expressed will of established national order over a wild counterpart. The fire, as a vision, marks the apocalyptic scale on which territory is remade, both figuratively and territorially, as imagined space for actual settlement. Of Gale, Alice says, he “could not cross into this country, which was not yet a country, without then lighting it on fire” (45). Alice envisions the fire as emptying the land of others to make room for Gale. Gale's entry can be read as an overdetermination of being, an attempt to conquer a sense of inconsequence—“he knew nothing of who he was or what he wanted” (53). It's his fresh start, his new beginning: the space emptied so he can be new in it. The image plays with that of man walking into empty prairie, but sets it in the midst of an incredible violence: a border between nations scorched, a demarcation of no longer contested territory, a violence created specifically to make possible a new entry. It is a moment meant as Edenic but is nevertheless apocalyptic.

Further, the moment is without completion. If Gale wants to believe he's entering empty territory, he, or Alice's vision of him, on some level, understands his own fallaciousness: “on that night his eyes stared north into an Indian dark he goaded his mind into believing was a vacuous nothing, but knew to be no vacuum at all” (46). The fire is an over-insistence on emptiness, acknowledging the very falsity of open prairie. It shows the prairie isn't empty, that it has to be made empty, and that it can never be empty. What Gale would have been absent isn't and will haunt settlement as a spectral presence/non-presence. Further, because the event does not

arrive verifiably—arriving through Alice by way of Gale’s nightmares as fragments in unsettled moments—its very alleged-ness compels the event/non-event from the past into the present.

If the fire didn’t happen, and Gale didn’t start it, the fire still lingers because it speaks to all manner of patriarchal and colonial impositions. As an alleged act, the fire stands symbolically for other violences—“These lines that men draw” (8). Alice obsesses over Gale’s dreams as if to prove the realness of her own trauma from him. If what Gale has done to the landscape, and the people in it, is real, then so too might her own trauma be real: “They, bodies and not citizens, with their husking refusal to leave, for years abiding and enduring the push-and-pull of state and race in the same way I abide and endured my years here with Gale” (50). As a woman in settlement space, she sees her restricted movement paralleled by the coercion of Sioux onto American reservations. Gale’s space is a trauma she can’t get out of nor dwell in. Dislocated, yet unable to leave, she resides as non-belonging: “She keeps to only two rooms [...] This is as much of the house’s geography as she can abide. [...] For Alice every space has its ghosts: every room, every square inch of dirt. So there are rooms she never enters, floors she never visits. She reduces her travel in the house to a well-worn path” (13). Seeing her own positioning reflected in the Sioux’s forced movement into allocated territory, and seeing Gale’s role in both, she clings to the indigenous history for the way it speaks to her own.

IV. The Tyranny of Silence

Those who speak in accordance with nation, speak their belonging. Those whose voices betray difference, or who voice disagreement with the national strategy, implicitly speak their lack of belonging, their lack of right to claim territory, and to speak inside territory, or even about territory. Erin Manning argues that entry into national spaces and national narratives is

policed not only along territorial boundaries, but linguistic ones as well. She writes,

There are many ports of entry into the discourse of nationalism. Indeed, nationalism by its very nature depends on policed ports of entry from whence enunciation is limited by the vocabulary of the nation, a language that determines which bodies are qualified to speak. Accordingly, those who have curtailed access to the vocabulary of the nation—due to the renunciation of, expulsion from, or incomprehension of the nation’s semantics—are invariably politically disqualified: as a noncitizen [...] (Manning xv)

Bodies that speak differently and speak difference become disqualified from national space.

While some early prairie fiction explicitly connects the prairie to national discourses (Douglas Durkin’s *The Magpie*, Robert Stead’s *Grain*), for others this connection is harder to trace, is unspoken. Yet that silence maintains lines of national belonging and especially myths of quiet expansion. Insistence on unity, cohesiveness, and an absence of conflict is fundamentally a project of forgetting. Settlement would be a narrative of triumph if it weren’t so insistent there was never a conflict to begin with. Prairie given-ness, produced by a history of erasure, depicts “nation as harmonious entity” (Manning xv). Yet such over-assertion admits to a substantial lack in the given realness of harmony—as any interrupting voice will show. Manning writes: “If we are to employ culture as an instance of a counter coherence to the nation’s vocabularies of exclusion, we must locate within cultural texts the promise not of a stable language but an alternative that retains its ephemerality” (xxi). She positions what she calls “errant politics” (xxviii) as an erring of national paradigm, of a *différance* which does not indicate divergence so much as it does an incohesiveness present already in the narrative of nationhood.

Fundamental to my thesis is the idea that voices themselves undermine the settler project. They speak disharmony and discord. They interrupt a quiet meant to speak for itself. I wanted a text that spoke to settlement’s inability to actually clear the land, and spoke from spaces of erasure where such voices presented also as deconstructions of each other. In this way, I wanted

a text to interrupt even the possibility of an emergent singular narrative: a text that makes reading an act of negotiation between competitive narratives. Working against colonization, it would ensure a deferred narrative, incomplete, not at all settled.

In this way, *The Borders* draws influence from *Absalom, Absalom!*: how trauma voices itself in that novel's narrative structure, tone, and in several characterizations. At the novel's centre is Thomas Sutpen and the master narrative he attempts to impose, yet the text is composed of overlapping and competing narratives by other characters—three generations of Comptons, Rosa Coldfield, Shreve—each fixed on the Sutpen narrative, its ambiguities and uncertainties. These narrators, because of their respective traumas, are invested in figuring the Sutpen narrative in particular ways. Sutpen's austerity acts as shield for his childhood trauma of being turned from the door by a black slave. As a way of overcoming this past, Sutpen attempts to rewrite his legacy as a narrative which is monolithic, self-evident, and without need of explanation or accounting. By way of Rosa Coldfield, Quentin Compson first sees Sutpen as the following:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous [...] overrun suddenly the hundred square miles of tranquil and astonished earth and drag house and formal gardens violently out of the soundless Nothing and clap them down like cards upon a table beneath the up-palm immobile and pontific, creating the Sutpen's Hundred, the Be Sutpen's Hundred like the oldentime Be Light. (*Absalom* 4-5)

As if his will, command, and action are a unity, Sutpen's narrative emerges as if out of nowhere. It simply *is*—at least this is the “design” Sutpen intends. Laurie Vickroy writes: “One could argue that this story is not a typical tragedy in that the focus is not exclusively on the tragic hero but on how others make meaning of Sutpen's actions: of how he has made them his victims, and of the social and economic intricacies that fuel the traumatic stress that shapes his fatally flawed conception of a successful legacy” (Vickroy 103). She says also, “In *Absalom*, narrators are rendered as self-interested, lacking knowledge or understanding of other characters. Much as

they try to piece together the story from multiple sources, it's still not complete" (127). Rather than self-evident, Sutpen's unreachability renders his narrative uncertain. Those hurt by his ambitions construct their own Sutpen narratives. The reader never receives Sutpen's narrative intact or from any kind of reliable narrator. It arrives in pieces, with gaps, and overlaps, conjured and unravelled by the novel's narrators. Vickroy, summarizing Susan V. Donaldson, writes, "Women [...] do not fit well into the narrative sequence that the men are trying to recreate out of bits of Sutpen's story. The women are subordinated to this masculine story, but Faulkner lets them emerge out of fissures, things we see briefly that are mostly hidden, suppressed, repressed, because he is telling us the men do not want to hear from them" (Vickroy 129, Donaldson cited in Vickroy). These narratives complicate and interrupt the narrative Sutpen attempts to lay down. They reveal the traumas silenced by his design—its self-creation, its monolithic impermeability, and its certain bloodline. Yet they themselves are suspect in how they reenact trauma, silence each other, or frame one another according to their respective narrator's needs. If their narratives cannot be read as definitively true, they do express lives bound to each other by their proximity to Sutpen, a broken intimacy in which they compete amongst each other for narrative control.

Gale too seems motivated by a sense of inadequacy, of failing inside a model of white patriarchy. He's a white man in a system designed to embolden white men. Humiliated by his poverty, his lack of certain heritage, and his inability to produce a genealogy, the violence of his will for legacy onto both landscape and the people around him is an (over)assertion of self inside a system that diminishes him. "Always to be free. House land land horses wife. Retribution for the something someone put inside of him. For the things he couldn't name" (Braun 56), Boy says. Those closest to him—Boy, Isa, Alice—are coerced into serving that narrative.

Jane Tompkins, a feminist critic of the Western, sees the silence of male heroes in the

Western, and the general distrust of language in the genre overall, as a response to the female verbosity of the Victorian novel and female-led Evangelical movements of the 19th century making incursions into the male public sphere (Tompkins 44-45). While the prairie novel is not the same as the Western, there are similarities shared between the male protagonists of both genres. Grove writes of Niels, "Now that he was in the country of his dreams and gaining a foothold, it seemed as if individual women were bent on replacing the vague, schematic figures he had had in his mind. He found this intrusion strangely disquieting" (Grove 38), writing also: "He almost hated the woman for what she had done to him. He wanted oblivion: he wanted death-in-life; and she had kindled in him that which he had hardly known to exist: she had given a meaning and a direction to stirrings within him, to strange, incomprehensible impulses. [...] All this was dimly felt, not distinctly told off in thought" (141). Women are an outpouring of unsettling speech and feeling interrupting his solitude. Tompkins:

Not speaking demonstrates control not only over feelings but over one's physical boundaries as well. The male, by remaining 'hermetic,' 'closed up,' maintains the integrity of the boundary that divides him from the world. [...] To speak is literally to open the body to penetration by opening an orifice; it is also to mingle the body's substance with the substance of what is outside it. Finally, it suggests a certain incompleteness, a need to be in relation. Speech relates the person who is speaking to other people (as opposed to things); it requires acknowledging their existence and, by extension, their parity. (Tompkins 56)

Speech opens up vulnerabilities and identifies permeable boundaries. It also reveals a lack of self-sufficiency, and so an inadequacy as well: If one need speak, one is in want of something. On the other hand, Tompkins writes, "The hero doesn't need to think or talk; he just *knows*. Being the hero, he is in a state of grace with respect to the truth" (52). No lack in him compels the hero to say what isn't already self-evident. His quiet moment, where time and voice do not intrude, is the meaning of his presence on the land. To be without speech is to be truth. Others will simply have to *know*, and the land will respond to him as if by will alone.

Gale's silence is a way of ensuring his sufficiency. To have to speak to the narrative he wishes to present—that of the potent patriarch, a “Wheat King,” as Nina says—is to have to make understood what he is wanting to be, is to admit he isn't that thing. To speak is to reveal himself as not being equal to his own narrative. His silence then, is an exertion of will: “But the thing was, nobody knew for sure he had any money at all, but he lived and dressed in a way so as to challenge any scrutiny before it was spoken. He was a bewilderment, inexplicable” (Braun 53). Rather than a totality, Gale is the hollow centre around which other lives revolve. A tyranny felt in all moments, even long after he's gone, his silence is what everyone else must make space for, adjust themselves around. Alice says:

And yet how comes it not to be? That even as I approach the man as blood and sinew he becomes only un-thing (a beast, a devil, a shapeless disquiet); that in my apprehension of what happened, and not merely so accidental as happened, but the thing he did—that which was and is and continues to be the match-holding-hand in the grass, and the thought that stays the hand and the mind that bends the thought to its will so there can be no question that the hand does only as the mind commands. And so not just the apprehension of what he did but he himself as well (who he was and who he is and why one expunged the other), there is only and ever (in lieu of fact and gospel) miasma, fetor and question, a trailing ellipsis. Ether shadow. (49)

The space he does not fully occupy is one the other characters fill with meaning—with what they can imagine. While Gale precludes the possibility of intimacy between he and those closest to him, the totality which he tries to impress fragments other lives, severing their relationships, both with each other and from themselves. Nina says: “And when he left, having never lived in the great stone house he dredged from the same river that drowned his wife, he left us all scrabbling to know the thing that had just happened. All we knew was that nothing was ours. Alice mute and crazy in the attic. Boy still out in the cold. Men without fathers. You, Billy, there still—lost to me. And me gone” (6). The disappearance of a patriarch doesn't produce alternate space; his absence doesn't resolve the traumas his presence creates. Those traumas linger and re-voice

themselves. They pit themselves against each other as re-articulations of patriarchal violence. The characters of *The Borders* are interested in certainties. They want to know—who they are, where they come from, and who did what to them. The violence done to them seems illusory because they themselves feel illusory. At the same time, their present is relentlessly interrupted by traumatic memory, memories which are elusive, fragmentary, and contradicted by the memories of others. So, to locate a contained self, a cohere self, they invest themselves in particular narratives and pare away that which disrupts their coherency—each other—divesting others of their narratives just as Gale has to them.

V. Narrative Structure & Voice

If the text itself is to be thought of as space, I thought these characters needed to compete for that space just as they do that of Gale's Furrow. For this reason, I began with a structure of competing first person narratives, much like Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. With such a structure the reader would never find themselves in a secure or verifiable narrative. At the same time, such a structure would allow the characters their own distinct voices, which, while interrupting and contradicting one another, would let them speak from their own specific ephemerality and particular traumas. Whether read as oral voices or as interior monologues (Nina's reads more like a letter to Billy), these voices each have syntaxes and grammar specific to their experience. Alice's voice, for instance, is a tumult of language which never seems to stop spilling, is always reaching for something more. This can be read as an expression of her sexual trauma. In service to Gale's narrative, Alice exists in his space only as a kind of labour. Her reproduction eclipses

her sexuality. She is further erased when Gale discovers her body is incapable of reproduction³:

This is as close as she ever gets. He is a stranger to her. The smell of his body shocks her. His weight is a presence every night as he climbs in beside her. For a month after the ceremony, Alice lies awake beside her new husband, his unfamiliarity keeping her from her sleep. He never touches her—not since the first night when he found on her a scar and read it like a sign auguring him no children and turned away silent. Now she imagines his hands, cold on her side, his callouses rough on her skin—she shudders, pulling the blanket closer. (1)

She is eager for touch but dreads Gale's specific touch. Both Gale's distance and the possibility of his touch are traumatic to her. In either, she is erased: one, as his reproductive property, and two, as an expression for the lack of intimacy in which she lives. She desires touch to feel real, but touch also triggers the absence she feels in her life. Settlement accords presence according to one's ability to perform according to the agrarian model. Yet, in doing that work, or not being able to, Alice is either subsumed or erased. She becomes a ghost.

And for me there is only this reaching in the dark, which is not unlike that other kind of nighttime reaching—the body's burning want—desirous, that when unfulfilled and unappeased becomes only an appetite for want, no longer a reaching for him, for his shape, a shape which never reached back, but a cold and clammy mucid desire to be desired, a grasping to be known, to know a self that's real and not the mere churning thought of ghosts. (23)

Despite the ways in which Alice is made ghostlike, ethereal, she does have sexuality, it just doesn't accord with, and is also erased and undermined by, Gale's expectation. In her language,

³ Gale's sacrifice of the mare, which Boy, as a child, participates in, indicates this. The mare is useful to Gale only in its ability to produce more horses, and in this way indicates female labour in Gale's design. Like the slaughtered horse, Alice is nothing to Gale once he realizes her infertility. Similarly, Gale regards Isa's as a betrayal, not only because she has taken from him his property—she, herself—, but, more crucially, because he perceives her as having taken from him his son. That the mare is burned to hide her branding is further representative of the erasure of violence in this narrative, and of how Gale regards those around him as his labouring property. That the trauma cannot be seen, cannot be touched, means that those closest to Gale obsess with knowing what they don't, proving what they can't: that which they nevertheless feel. In the same way Alice insists on Gale having burnt the border to evidence her own trauma, Boy too over-asserts his knowledge of Gale's motivation: "My eyes change to the dark. Then I see what he sees. Not the horse. The thing he would do with the horse. The horse beyond the horse. And I'm wishing I'm still sleeping. Seeing anything but this" (22).

she's always reaching for a tangibility she doesn't feel, so her desire to be known subjectively and sensually cannot be separated from her language. Outwardly, she's been silenced; internally, she produces an overabundance of language. She's been made to live like a ghost, and so her interiority obsesses on her realness, that she is not nothing. Her language marks her as strange, as queer. Her speech cannot be contained; it doesn't fit into space as it should: "Alice had a strange way of talking I grew to love. Maybe it was from being silent too long. Her words came without a container. They spilled this way and that" (8). But if she attempts to make herself real, known, or understood through language, she is also never fully expressed, never really made real by language. If fully expressing her trauma is what she hopes to set herself free by, she never quite manages to say it. There are never enough words to say what she feels. Similarly, there is nothing she could hear to feel she is known.

Boy, on the other hand, speaks in fragments, as if each block of language is a certainty: contained and knowable, and almost always speaks in the present continuous tense. Even describing events from thirty years previous, he does so as if the event were before him as a knowable object. At the same time, Boy guards his identity, name, and past. At once, he renders all things as certain knowable objects to his own subjectivity (as an affirmation of which), while delimiting his own subjectivity as a knowable object to others. This can be read as a response to having been so reduced in his childhood—having been bought by Gale and also having been made an object in Gale's sight. If Gale wants to enter empty territory, Boy reveals this as impossible, showing the space to be already inhabited. Even if dislocated from family and culture by colonization, Boy has not vanished; he has not receded into history: "Because to him I'm the dream returning that can't be shook. Because I appeared. Emerged from the mist and wouldn't go back. He bought me with whiskey" (3). If, for Gale, Boy won't disappear, Gale can

acquire Boy like another property, and so render him a part of the possessed landscape. Boy says, “Then I see how he sees. How the world breaks apart into the pieces of his seeing. How I'm made a thing for his moving” (22). Reduced to an object, Boy insists also on his own subjectivity: he sees Gale seeing.

A similar action happens in Boy's naming. While Gale doesn't name Boy, he participates in that action. Boy's name speaks to an emergent paternalism towards First Nations during the emergence of the reservation system.⁴ The name keeps Boy in a perpetual adolescence. As such, he can never be a full citizen of the space; he remains perpetually in need of keeping. Boy tries to step outside of this way of being seen throughout the novella. By the end, he's a middle aged man, trying to be taken seriously by a son who himself can only see Boy as childlike: “[...] an always child, this is how Billy sees Boy. And it isn't just the name. It's a view that enters him from the other men—their way of seeing he can't get outside of. When he tries to shake it loose, he still only sees Boy as a child not wanting to be a child. So he looks away” (43). However, Boy, in being named, insists also on his agency, allowing the name as a way of obscuring himself: his real name and his past. In doing so he refuses to be made an object. “Because he didn't ask. And later when he did I wouldn't tell. Because he'd rather call me Boy. And I didn't want him to know. I hid my name. I hid it like the stories you'd never tell. Not because they say bad things. But because you don't want them inside some people's mouths” (3). He resists being subsumed/consumed by Gale and becomes, instead, spectral—that which cannot be claimed or known. If he's to be made ephemeral anyway, he uses this to guard his subjectivity. He's both there and not there: never fully in reach, never fully surveyed, never really named, never really an object. Not even to Isa does he reveal his name. He further guards this with different versions

⁴ Boy's name is also indicative of a racial slur used against black American men, tying Boy to other histories of racial subjugation in North America.

of his name's origin. He tells Isa he took the name after losing his family following a Sioux victory over American cavalry. The scene, marked by a colonial violence, robs him of his boyhood: "I took the name Boy [...] because I'm not ever remembering being one. Boy. The name is always reminding me of what I never was" (88). What he tells Isa is both a traumatic memory and a way of guarding his privacy, precluding the possibility of being known. "As Boy tells her this, Isa watches him become someone she doesn't recognize. He refuses to come any nearer, to pretend at the closeness she wants to feel. She doesn't understand if it's she who never saw him right or he who kept too much hidden. She feels loneliness for having risked so much for a person she understands so little" (89). In this way his trauma too, like Alice, is what keeps him from being close.

However, I found that because the events of *The Borders* are spread across so much time, over thirty years, and perceived by a significant number of characters, "the story," limited to first person monologues, was too difficult to follow. The gaps—in time, between perspectives, between the present and the characters' own traumatic memory—were simply too big to be readable. Though I didn't want to construct the piece as a single story, there needed to something for these separate voices to interact with. For instance, though *As I Lay Dying's* text is broken up amongst its different voices, it has a, more or less, continuous timeline to ground the reader. For this piece, that wasn't a possibility: The present is too interrupted. While I considered converting the piece to a third person narrative, this wouldn't work either. A third person narrative would ground the story, but I'd lose much of the distinctiveness of each character's voice.

My solution was to build a third person narrative amidst the other voices, one which would not function as an authoritative voice, correcting or clarifying gaps and absences, contradictions and denials, inherent to the rest of the piece. It itself would be incomplete and

interrupted, competing also with the text's other voices. In this way, I found myself adapting a structure similar to that of Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* where the present moment is always being interrupted, broken up, by traumatic memory. The patient's experience of Hana reading novels from the villa's library is very much like reading Ondaatje's novel: "So the books for the Englishman, as he listened intently or not, had gaps of plot like sections of a road washed out by storms, missing incidents as if locusts had consumed a section of tapestry, as if plaster loosened by the bombing had fallen away from a mural at night" (Ondaatje 7). The present moment is made discontinuous with itself and the past. Interruptions and resurgences of past destabilize the now, while coherent identities are also troubled and fragmented by pasts which will not keep there.⁵ I found that a third person structure similar to Ondaatje's did not, in fact, compromise the ephemerality the first person sections spoke from, but allowed the further development of these. This new structure provided a present moment, a plot in the now, which the text didn't have before: a plot which while interrupted in and of itself, is also interrupted by the competing narrative structure of first person stream-of-consciousness. The third person pieces, for instance, offer a sense of how Alice's past trauma affects her in relationships:

At first Alice is an intangible Marie longs to be near. To Marie Alice seems as if she were always leaving, an exile without ever having fully left or having completely arrived. She's always a little more than a breath away. [...] at any moment a word, a tone, a way of touching or not touching, will set Alice off and suddenly Alice will be elsewhere, retreated. Then Marie will spend days

⁵ I found too that my text and Ondaatje's text share a similar apprehension for national intrusion into private spaces, of finding territory always already marked by nation. The patient says, "All I desired was to walk upon such an earth that had no maps" (Ondaatje 261). In a way this is the desire of *The Borders'* characters as well, even if they can't even quite articulate it. Inside a geography already surveyed, mapped, gridded, partitioned, they are lost to themselves, and to each other. Their present moment is interrupted by past traumas preventing a coherency of self and present for them. There is no cartography to will lead them back—to themselves, to each other, or to where they came from. Location for them is uncertain. In any given moment they exist also in other moments, ones they can never quite grasp and which prevent them from fully inhabiting the present. Traumatic memory has them scattered across both time and place. While the characters inhabit a kind of dislocation, arrival or return, both to geographical actualities and to self, are impossibilities, uncertain sites themselves.

reestablishing connection. (Braun 18)

Alice's trauma is inherent to space, maintained always by a perimeter around her. Her trauma is what she can't get over and remains as a thing between her and Marie, creating an impossibility of intimacy. However, the above doesn't give a sense of Alice's interiority as her monologues do.

Because I live with ghosts my thoughts swirl and eddy. They plunge and rise and cannot but whirl desperately about for a piece of solid to fix themselves upon [...] And the speechlessness of it all makes it seem unreal, nebulous and insane to a gyring mind without another to speak it to. [...] And though I know there's no fathoming or knowing this man, that I yearn to perceive him only as a man so I might know I too am not unreal—and though there's only ever dissolve and shadow, the ephemeral he and (in my obsessions for him and her and me) I as well—my mind, like his, will bend itself upon its desire until it breaks. (23)

Alice's isolation—her traumatic obsession, her need to make real what is relentlessly ephemeral—is clearer here. It both interrupts the romance narrative with Marie and gives a different sense as to why Marie finds intimacy with Alice so difficult: Alice never thinks of Marie. The pasts haunting Alice are more real to her than those closest to her. She yearns for intimacy, is angry at being denied it, but cannot see the possible intimacy before her—she cannot see Marie at all.

The resurgence of past trauma, however, troubles not only coherency of self in the moment, but constructions of nation as well. Amy Novak, to her discussion of the *The English Patient*, applies ideas by Hegel, Derrida, and Žižek, wherein history is constructed teleologically through acts of forgetting and erasure, while events at odds with that historical unity are lost. She writes, “In order to ensure the coherency of this totality, contradictory moments that do not record the present's coming to Being are erased or expelled from signification,” continuing,

This "sublime object" of History is that which is unrepresentable without shattering history conceived as a totality and as self-presence; it appears as a sign of a forgotten past and marks the site of a "fundamental antagonism" or wound

that refuses to be healed. These events and voices lurking on the margins of historical discourse function as specters in the historical text and cultural unconscious. (Novak 210)

Events and identities which do not speak to historical certainty, which speak difference, are cleaved, but nevertheless haunt historical totality as that which has been forgotten for the sake of given-ness. Relating this to the *English Patient*, Novak says:

On one narratological level (that of each character's separate tale of the past), they are lost from the larger historical narrative of the war, while on another narratological level (that of the novel as a whole), they are events that cannot be pieced together into a seamless narration. These accounts of the past do not provide an alternative linear narrative of the past, but rather, offer a supplement, which interrupts the movement of historical progression by introducing discontinuous moments into the narrative progression. (212)

Where, in *The English Patient*, each character's private history has cleaved them from the war, both literally and from its ideology, the voicing of their traumas interrupts not only the possibility for a coherent private narrative, but the certainty of a coherent "historical progression" as well.

Such a structure⁶ meant my characters could, through plot, rather than just structure, act out their own will for narrative. They could materially interact in a way they cannot in a monologue. If the narrator's own traumatic memory interrupts the first person pieces, in the third person sections, the characters interrupt each other. Each strives for a coherency of narrative already fissured by Gale's quest for narrative control in this space. Yet, in asserting their own

⁶ This structure, of various first person monologues amidst sections of third person narrations, is similar to Guy Vanderhaeghe's *The Last Crossing*, a novel also about the Canadian frontier. However, I would distinguish my text from his in that narrative in *The Last Crossing* is more or less continuous. Each voice tends to pick up where the previous left off and the third person sections don't do much that the first person sections can't. While character motivations might not be available to characters in the text—Custis, for instance, doesn't understand why Lucy leaves for the Kelso brothers' post (to him, she's vexing and hysterical)—they are to the reader. An action might be headstrong, but there is always a determinate reason for the action the reader can understand. While the characters might exist in a kind of confusion of borderland violence, the overall narrative is clear enough to the reader.

narratives, they also seek to eliminate that which complicates those narratives, namely the differences expressed by those around them. To each other they are embodied pasts they would rather forget. To delimit those intrusions, they over-assert their own narratives upon each other.

VI. Narrative Competition, Land Entitlement, & Queer Sexualities

Those with stronger connections to property in *The Borders* possess a greater sense of narrative: who they are, where they come from, and where they belong. Nina, for instance has a more secure entitlement to this space than Billy and comes to know who she is by way of a continuous kinship to Marie and the security Marie, as property owner, ensures. When Alice suggests she knows Nina's family history, Nina says, "Tell me" (Braun 33), indicating a felt entitlement to her own narrative. This contrasts with Billy's lack of access to his own family narrative (i.e., Isa's letters), a lack paralleled by his inability to enter the house. Only by breaking into the house does he ever gain access to those letters. Further, while Nina offers Billy space inside her own narrative, Billy only experiences that place-holding as a subsuming of self.

Like any storyteller, Nina desires connection. She sees it everywhere. She tells him there is picture of herself in him, and he also in her. He wants to disappear in her romance, to wrap himself in it like a blanket, but these are moments of terror to him. He feels stitched into her world like a patch on a blanket. Her stories are an invitation into her own life, a place where he too might belong. He becomes lost in the world Nina wants to believe in—placed in it like an object. She puts something between them, a line, something he can't see though he senses it, something he'll have to cross again and again. (40)

In Nina's storytelling, Billy becomes an object in her history. Further, the text indicates that the logic of Nina's narrative doesn't quite hold—"He becomes lost in the world Nina wants to believe in" (40). Her access to uninterrupted narrative comes by way of a propertied relationship that dislocates Billy from property and identity. His lack of access to an erased narrative is a spectre haunting white appropriated territory. When Nina refuses to tell Billy who his mother is,

she seeks to protect her relationship with her mother. Such knowledge threatens Marie and Nina's relationship because, as Isa's son, Billy is felt as having a kind of non-legal claim to Marie's property, property which provides Marie and Nina with the space for their kinship. In this way, Nina guards her relationship to her mother and her family's relationship to property through an erasure of Billy's own narrative and the colonial history of the space.

For varying reasons, each character competes for access to and control of Isa's narrative. As a white female Isa is central to the settlement project. In many ways, she parallels Gale: the two like a binary centre to the piece, each absent in their own way, but always present. Yet counter to Gale's narrative silence, Isa is made to produce an abundance of narrative. Hers is the absent body upon which white patrilineal genealogy stakes its claim. Gale's legacy depends on her sexuality and race, and those of her child. To others, she means access to property, belonging, identity, and resistance. "[Nina] thinks she knows what Marie means when she says, *Isa exists between them all*. She's the shape of the space between Nina and Billy, what they hide behind, what they all fight over and rip at" (64). Isa's ephemerality indicates not only the unacknowledged patriarchal violence of this space, but a plethora of possible narratives which interrupt the logic of patriarchal entitlement to it. She means different things to each character. That one version of Isa could gain primacy over others means that the validation of some traumas are sacrificed for others. Where narrative cohesion is integral also to property relationships, constructions of Isa have the capacity to grant access to space or limit it.

As each character vies over Isa, they reenact colonial or patriarchal violence. As "Remnants" (92) of Gale's design, they're diminished by their proximity to him and compete for what's left of his legacy. With Isa's letter, Alice discovers "she was only the replacement wife for a love that had sunk itself into the water" (28), confirming the erasure she's long felt. Isa

provides her with a narrative for her own experience and so Alice merges their two identities:

“I’ve spread them out before me, searched them for what they contain of her and him and me.

I’ve seen her life unfold, watched imperceptibly her world of rivers and child born into awful be replaced by my own dreaming, dreaming to inform the pieces of her, these splinters of

biography, like the quiet dialogue of an impossible romance” (27). They become like lovers in a

moment (“more spouse, to her than him”), sisters in the next (“her sister-same self she'd not

leave alone”), and even the same person (“she and I somehow the same person”) (24). But Alice,

as Gale does to her, subsumes Isa in the process: “I cannot say any longer which, if any, are still her words and which mine. I do not know which are my own thoughts and which became mine.

And I cannot know that if she were to somehow read them now, all those pages of hers which are no longer really hers anymore, she would not say, I do not recognize this Isa and that Gale” (27).

Further, as if understanding her reading of Isa doesn’t accord with others’, Alice refuses to

recognize anyone else in her construction of Isa. Marie says, “They’re Alice’s versions of who

Billy’s mother was [...] So they're bound up together, Alice and Isa. These journals, Alice’s

madnesses, are like a calendar through the years of who Alice needed Isa to be [...] Alice can’t

admit to anyone else being hurt like she has [...] She needs that dead woman to speak for her

only. Boy and Billy, they’re invisible to her” (63). Alice becomes something instead of nothing

by seeing herself in Isa, but this depends on her not seeing Billy and Boy in Isa’s narrative also.

Their relationships to Isa represent a difference in Isa’s desire and prejudice. They show Isa is

not the same as Alice and undermine Alice’s vision of herself and Isa as each other’s “dream-

image” in their respective but identical isolations.

While I wanted to stress movement in this thesis, to not allow settlement to settle, I also wanted to demonstrate that these characters have different relationships to space, depending on

race and gender. Marie and Alice present queer possibility. Against settler time and settler space, where prairie is always measured and constituted, and access to space is delimited by racialized heteronormativities, Marie and Alice, inhabit a space of alterity. Not limited to agricultural gender performativities and sex only for the sake of producing particular genealogies, Alice and Marie together exist according to the possibility of the space they create.

Long ago Marie filled the house with bodies and motion, with sound and sex. In doing so she transformed Alice's world. Alice let go of her pasts. With Marie she forgot all that. They lived in a kind of reverie. Hardly apart, they acted in concert, Marie tending the men, Alice the girls. They existed as if of the same breath. The house became an extension of their will, an expression of their spirit. It sulked. It glowed. In moments it seemed as if to sing. Nothing entered except as they wanted it. Their sex was palpable, a presence in the room. They lived in it like weather, a thing changeable and moody. It moved like seasons do. Every touch became a part of a greater touch. They created a home out of forgetting and becoming. (30)

Bound to nothing in particular, they are as they wish and, seemingly, the space responds.

Whereas the property resists Gale's design, with Marie and Alice it accepts their presence as if already inclined to their fluidity—they are as any other storm or season of the prairie. But their queer space should be qualified as white queer space whose privilege is predicated on both property ownership and the labour of others on that property. Marie constructs their space inside of national space. When the local economy fails so too does her brothel⁷ and also her relationship with Alice: "The house grew lonely, empty. The men stopped coming. Rooms were shut, forgotten. Marie and Alice grew apart. Their world shrank and so did their love" (30). Marie's access to property allows for their relationship and the particular queer possibility they represent, proved by how they're subject to the same market fluctuations.

Further, Marie and Alice's sexual freedom in the house is defined against how others are

⁷ Marie's brothel capitalizes on the agrarian project's inability to meet settler desire. If settler desires were fulfilled by Anglo-Christian enforced heteronormative marriages, Marie's business could not exist.

allowed to orient themselves on the rest of Marie's property. Nina's presumptions of Billy and their relationship act out an erasure of Billy's autonomy and his sexuality—paralleling his displacement on the property in general:

She sees him unclearly, and her attraction to him is perhaps cast in this first misperception. There's a long silence between them. He reaches for her hand. She thinks he wants to touch her, but to him it is an abrupt need to steady himself. He wants to know the point where one human being begins and he ends. He has lived without these kinds of definitions. When he tells her, "My mother lives here," she thinks he means Alice. (37)

She affects a romance with him based on her feeling, though he doesn't seem to reciprocate:

"Her chest to his back, she wants to believe that touch might overcome their separation, might make all these other things not matter. But when she wraps herself around him, he doesn't respond. His body remains inert, as if it doesn't even really contain him in it. [...] when he does wake, he turns and to her his eyes are inky as if everything in them were slowly depleting" (69).

Billy's sexuality is indicated by his discomfort in his relationship with Nina, and his lack of interest in furthering intimacy with her. Yet a description of Billy as queer is inappropriate as the text accords him no specifically queer acts or expressions of identity. His sexuality doesn't seem to be anything in particular, but what is fair to say is that it doesn't fit the one expected of him. Martin Cannon argues that since contact, aboriginal sexualities were defined in terms of their difference from European ones, by their moral perversity (Cannon 52): "The inclination to extract some modern-day notion of 'homosexual,' 'gay' or even "lesbian" Native identity from the missionary statements on "sodomy" cannot be clearly substantiated. Nor can references to Indigenous sexualities be referred to as 'homosexual' as this is known in the historical present" (54). While Nina's relationship to Billy does cross racial lines, and so challenges heteroracist logic, it also, in the ways Nina presumes a mutual interest, reinforces colonial imposition. While Nina attempts to maintain an intimacy with Billy, she also withholds from him access to his own

history (i.e. Isa's letter). In doing so, Nina furthers a history of white patriarchy, of insisted upon sexualities, and of misogynistic and racist violences.

Cannon argues that attempts to regulate or suppress First Nations sexualities were intrinsic to the colonial project—evidenced in early missionary writings and legislated into the Reserve system by Canada in 1869, 1876, and 1951 (58). Whereby “Indian” status is inherited only by way of indigenous father, but never through and indigenous mother, following these acts, First Nations retained “Indian” legitimacy only by adopting a logic of patrilineal descent in conjunction with European heterosexualities and kinship organization (57-58). While Billy is not vying for “Indian” status in a reserve space, a similar logic operates here. Billy's patrilineal descent from Boy, over his descent from Isa, constructs him as Indian. This and the fact that he is born of Isa's extramarital affair limits his entitlement to Gale's Furrow (even if Gale hadn't lost the property). Gale's Furrow would, if Gale had not lost it, be passed down to a rightful heir. Billy cannot be that rightful heir, because while he is Isa's son, he is not Gale's, and is, rather, Boy's. Yet other characters demonstrate an anxiety that his relationship to Isa confers on him some (implicit and extralegal) claim to white property (and the narrative of that space). Further, that claim is conferred upon him by way of matrilineal descent. “Nina sees what Marie won't quite admit: that Billy is an inheritor to a place where he isn't wanted. Because while Isa's letter doesn't make Billy a legal threat to Marie, as Isa's son he does threaten her in other ways” (63). Billy's presence disturbs Marie for this very reason, and Gale seemingly returns from the dead to interrupt Billy's presence on the land. Though Marie did not clear the land, did not take it away from anyone specifically, a history of land appropriation has privileged her belonging on this prairie, even as a woman. While Billy's presence does not present a legal challenge to her—property law protects her as a white settler—Billy's very presence interrupts assumed

relationships between landownership, myths of indigenous absence (and eradication), and property inheritance by way of racially surveilled bloodlines: “But to Marie he is heavy, immutable. A brick. He doesn’t need to say anything, his presence itself like an interrogation of her life, an insinuation that what she thinks is hers is actually somehow his. And then, in a second, Marie is like a cornered animal. Her glare is mean, her sound wild. She grabs him by his shirt front and forces him back towards the door” (38). The anxiety over Billy implicitly calls into question white patriarchal logic of land entitlement, but also the ways in which that logic erases sexualities that don’t reproduce that logic.

VII. Conclusion:

Settlement narrative has, at times, been the very fiction of nationhood. Settlement does the work of nation—inscribing nation onto territory, working to make nation real. It does so through both a material and figurative occupation of that land: a narrative for and reorganization of prairie space. Yet, this action is never complete; the unity between settler mind and settler land never happens. What abounds isn’t silence, emptiness, or a horizontal peace, but voice everywhere speaking trauma: dislocation, genocide, ecological devastation, and racial, gendered, and sexual erasure. Those still inside settlement territory, ghosted by their lack of inclusion, evidence the lack of completion in the settlement act.

In the moment spatial order is indicated, its narrative cohesion (as an inscription of space) fails. Whether it's the insufficiency of Gale's silence to guard a self-evidence of narrative, or an interrupting voice of difference from inside settlement, language itself reveals a disharmonious occupation of territory. Erin Manning emphasizes a politic that *errs* from “monologic state sovereignty” (xxvii), which speaks to and from positions of erasure and forgetting. It is a

language of difference already/still present in national territory. She writes, “[...] errant politics demands a continued renegotiation of the terms of containment. Errant politics is a recasting of the politics of space and time as ephemeral, inciting us to question the terms of inclusion and exclusion that define our access to narratives of home, identity, and territory;” it “[...] seeks to locate the world differently, trying to find through language a deferred text, an aberrant landscape, a configuration of the other that alters the boundary of the configuration itself, of space as configuration. Errant politics speaks to the *différance* of space through language [...]” (xxviii).

The Borders puts narrative, territory, and identity into negotiation. As a novella without a centre, it speaks interruption. It expresses prairie space as possibility and dislocation. Its characters speak their feeling of having been made ephemeral. Their relationship to space, the ways in which they don't belong, parallels how they are not heard or seen. Their arc is their struggle to step outside of Gale's narrative, an arc that never finishes. In order to voice themselves, they silence each other. Marked by patriarchal and colonial trauma, they reenact this trauma on one another by insisting on their own narrative over others'. While they themselves indicate the imposition of Gale's narrative onto territory and those in that territory, their differences of voice ensure that spatial and narrative reordering is never finished. It is, as they are, in process of becoming and undoing, reconfiguration and renegotiation.

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