

Black Medicine

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

University of Washington

2016

Committee:

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Interdisciplinary Arts & Sciences, Bothell

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**Abstract**

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Black Medicine is a novella that combines elements of both the Western genre and the Gothic ghost story. The intention of the tale was to place the claustrophobia of Gothic ghost stories within the open spaces of the Western to see how they would complicate the natural progress of the other. The work culminates in the biographical essay “Cowboys Talking to Ghosts of Themselves.”

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## Black Medicine

Part I: Marianne 2016

There was a knock at the door. Marianne dragged her legs over the edge of the bed, rubbed her face with her palms, and stood. Her bones cracked and shifted. She was going to wring the neck of the person who felt it necessary to disturb her. She glanced at the alarm clock—3:30 in the morning. Her hands clenched into little skeletal fists. “3:30,” she said. There was another knock. Her eyes widened. She grabbed the clock and held it close to her face to check that she had read the time correctly. She had. “3:30,” she repeated.

A few shuffling steps and she opened the door. She poked her head into the dimly lit corridor and looked both directions slowly, like a kid preparing to cross an empty road. Nothing. Clear in both directions. She looked around for somewhere to direct her anger. Finally, she stomped her foot on the carpeted floor but hardly made a sound. Only she knew the force of the rage her body could no longer display. “Try it again, dipstick,” she yelled down the hall. “See what happens.”

With no thought of the other residents, she slammed the door and slowly made her way back to the bed. But just as she straightened the comforter to get back in, she caught a glimpse of movement outside her window. She stood still and watched a silhouetted figure pace back and forth. Her eyes darted to her clock. 3:32. “Now, how did you get from there to there?” she whispered to herself. “Tricky little shit.”

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Clifton double-knotted Marianne’s shoes, just the way she liked them. She derived a great deal of pleasure from people tying her laces and he didn’t mind allowing

her the satisfaction from time to time, though he knew she was more capable of the task than most people she lived with.

“Now these?” he asked, holding a small white pill cup with three capsules inside.

She placed her hand over her ear and concentrated on the sound of her circulatory system. Finally, she said, “my blood pressure feels fine today. I’ve been getting consistent results from my ear method, you know.”

He forced a smile. “You know it doesn’t work that way.”

“Do you like being called nurse?”

“I don’t mind,” he said and sat the pill cup on the table. He knew it would have to be a game of strategy. “It’s the career I chose. It was a conscious decision.”

“Was it?”

He nodded.

“You know, Cliff...” She paused. “May I call you Cliff?”

“I prefer Clifton. You know that.”

“Why would your mother do that?”

“It was her grandfather’s name. You know that, too.”

“I’m feeling very vengeful right now, Clifton. I’m not sure about what, but you might be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

“You can consider me warned,” said Clifton.

“Good. If I do something dangerous you could get caught in the crossfire.” She drank the Dixie cup of water that was intended for washing down her pills and adjusted her necklace of plastic pearls.

“Are you getting nervous about your visitor?”

Marianne grabbed the pill cup and swallowed all three capsules at once.

“Sometime you should try saying something that makes even a little goddamn bit of sense.” She flicked the paper cup onto the floor. “You hear me, Cliff?”

---

Marianne was sitting in the common room when she saw a man in a blue jacket walk in. She knew who it was by the way he scanned the room for a worker to speak to. He didn’t seem to be looking for the familiar face of a frail mother or the dentured grin of his old man. Clifton met him at the door. They spoke for a minute, then Clifton walked the man over to Marianne. He remained standing, fumbling with his hat.

“Hello. Marianne?”

“Yes.”

“My name is Wally. Wally Keego. It’s very... interesting to finally meet you.”

“I suppose it would be based on the cockamamie story you told me on the phone.”

He looked down at the floor. “I know it sounds odd, but—“

“But nothing,” Marianne interrupted, “I was a teacher. Thirty-two years. Was your mother told that too, through this hole in the wall of the spirit world she’s been peeping through?”

Wally sighed and lifted his head. “I know—“

Marianne held up her finger to stop him. “Before you tell me what you know, it bears repeating, I was a teacher. Thirty-two years. I have heard a lot of bullshit in my life.” She smiled. “Continue.”

“I’m only here because of my mother,” he said, almost as an apology.

“Do you believe her?”

“I don’t know. This guy starts teaching these genealogy seminars over where she lives and next thing I know I’m driving her over to Black Medicine once a month to go through records in the basement of city hall or the library. She says you’re from there.”

He paused.

“Am I supposed to chime in here?” asked Marianne.

“Well, are you from Black Medicine?”

“My family is. I’m not.”

The man shifted in his seat uncomfortably. “My mother was getting into this family history stuff and finds out that my great grandfather and your grandfather were big deals in Black Medicine.”

“Big deals in a little place,” Marianne said.

“... and they didn’t like each other,” the man finished.

Marianne smiled. “That sounds very possible.” She leaned back in her chair. “But that isn’t the end of the story, is it?”

“No,” said Wally. “Now she says she’s receiving visitations.” He was tapping his foot. Marianne looked at his shoes until he stopped.

“And what visits her?”

---

Marianne slowly walked toward the window to get a closer look at the dark shape pacing outside. She had no weapon to speak of but that didn’t stop her. She was still in the mood to wring a neck, and if hers happened to get wrung first then the world would once again have to be chalked up as being indecent. She concentrated on her own breaths,

short in-out sounds. The walls of the room seemed to expand and contract along with her heartbeat.

“Look what I found,” a voice said.

Marianne spun around so quickly that she lost her balance and fell.

“That bruise will help you remember this tomorrow.”

Marianne saw a woman sitting at her desk, holding her small mirror. She was wearing an old looking dress and a flimsy black hat. Marianne looked back at the window. An old woman was staring in at them.

“Pay no mind to her, she just travels with me.” Both visitors looked like a faded photograph.

“I was actually wondering who you’re supposed to be,” said Marianne from the floor.

“I am a caller and an old acquaintance of your grandfather.”

Marianne realized she was probably dreaming. Wally had planted a seed and her sleeping mind was cultivating it.

“What was his name?” Marianne asked.

“Why do you want proof? Don’t be silly.”

“What should I ask then?”

“Everyone asks the worst questions.” The woman stood up and smashed Marianne’s mirror on the desk.

“What should I ask?”

The woman walked to the window and lifted it. The other lady was there waiting.

“What is your name?” Marianne asked.

“That’s better,” the woman said, climbing out the window. “I used to be Dee. But your grandfather helped me rid myself of that.”

“You climbed out of the window like I would.”

But Dee and the old woman were gone.

---

Marianne yelled for Clifton.

Raymond ran over from the adjacent room.

“Oh, go get Clifton,” she said, swatting her hand.

Clifton found Marianne sprawled on the floor.

“Forgive me for saying this,” Clifton said, “but you are too old to pull stunts like this.”

“Just get my shoes. There are pieces of my mirror everywhere.”

“What happened?”

“Shoes, Cliff.”

She got up and sat in the chair. He put her shoes on her feet and started to tie them. Marianne closed her eyes and daydreamed in the early morning of vanishing while feeling this good.

## Part II: Fever 1901

### Chapter 1

I was twenty-three and very hard-up. I had recently arrived in Black Medicine, one of the most aptly named, rain-slogged towns I had ever spit on the streets of, and I was scrabbling around for any work that might be available to a roustabout such as myself.

At the finish of a particularly poor day in job procurement, I was drinking the cheapest beer available at the local place, which led me to overhearing a conversation of great interest to me. But first, this happened:

“You been sipping that beer an hour now,” the tender told me. “It’s another or it’s out you go.”

I tipped the glass back and drank the contents down to an inch from the bottom, turned the glass upside down, spilling the remaining beer on the bar, and slid the glass through the puddle to the barkeep. I stood and adjusted my belt and turned to the door.

“You better get your ass out that door!” the tender yelled.

I stopped and half turned. “You ought not tell someone to do something already being done. It reflects as weak and amateur.”

His face flamed but he said nothing else to me. He just wiped up the cheap beer from the bar with a stained rag and a scowl and cursed to himself.

Outside the beer place I checked the bottom of my boots for undesirable remains, found some and thoroughly scraped them off on the edge of the doorway. I stepped to the

side, leaned against the rail and pulled out my little sack of mint leaves. A doctor I had met in another saloon had told me that chewing mint leaves after beer is good for the teeth and odor of the breath. I can't say for the teeth but it has made some improvements in the other area. I've become so accustomed to chewing on the little tingly leaves that you might call it a habit. And, luckily, there are bushels of the stuff growing in the woods surrounding Black Medicine.

As I was putting my mint bag away, two men stopped on the street behind me and commenced to arguing about animal pelts. Black Medicine was located in the foothills of the Cascades, and since the gold fever was going on a little further north, all the business types in town could talk about was pelts. These two men were no different.

"She's going to be here Wednesday," one of them said.

"Why Wednesday?"

"Well, why the hell not Wednesday! That's when she arrives."

"I've never liked Wednesdays. I never have."

"Why are you bellyaching over the day of week?"

But he seemed to finally accept the day after he realized it would be no other.

I silently chewed on mint leaves, casting my glance off in a vague direction but listened close.

The two men continued bickering down the road. They saw eye to eye on nothing. I was the only one who seemed to benefit from their conversation. I followed along undetected not two feet behind them they were so riled up. These two buffoons gave me good reason to revisit the motto I had lived by for so long but was now trying to abandon with honest work: *If you can't earn it, borrow it permanently.*

## Chapter 2

That night I bivouacked half a mile outside town in an abandoned logging camp. There was still a small cabin there with one side completely torn off but the roof was mostly intact. Though wind and rain howled and slanted in on me, it passed for decent shelter.

As the night made its long, slow approach, I sat huddled in a corner, listening to a light rain tapping above me, while I ran through the scenario in my head. She was going to arrive Wednesday afternoon. From what I gathered she was an old woman who could see future signs with the help of special candles and was looking to sell the pelt of some rare type animal of which furs are hard to come by. I would have to be there waiting. They were meeting at the hotel so it shouldn't be difficult. I knew the layout of the place from the few times I'd been there inquiring about work. I fell asleep while wondering what kind of beast this mysterious pelt belonged to.

The next morning, Tuesday it was, I felt something in my sleep but ignored it and rolled over. Another nudge complicated my sound slumber even further. I opened my eyes to a brunette woman staring down at me. Her face was dirty and irregular, a well-used hat sat atop of her head.

“Look what I found,” she said, holding my knife up in the air.

I sat up and asked for the knife. I had bought it on my eighteenth birthday with the little money I had. I didn't like to see it in any hand other than my own. When I spoke she backed away.

“Come on now, the knife,” I said, rising to my feet.

She said nothing for a few long moments then finally asked, “Where’re the bears?”

“What?”

“Bears.” She closed her eyes for a moment after saying the word again. Just as I realized I had a chance she opened them again and looked straight at me. I could tell whatever cork she had left wasn’t floating properly.

“Why you looking for bears?”

“To conjoin.”

I confess no words came to me.

“You ain’t a bear is you?” she asked.

“No,” I said. “Why are you looking to conjoin with a bear?”

She swiped the knife through the air. I took two steps back until the wall of the cabin stopped me.

“I’m done making jokes. Drop that knife,” I said.

“You reckon you can tell me whatever you want, don’t you?” She giggled in a way that was in no part funny. “But you can’t. My future son’s gonna be part bear.” She paused for a moment, confused, then regained her nerve. “He’ll help his mother journey back to all you men who did me bad. Then you’ll know bad.”

She lunged at me with the knife. I moved to the side, avoiding the blade by the width of a hair but I didn’t foresee her reflexes being so swift—she reversed her hand with the knife and stuck my own blade into the back of my shoulder.

I screamed. I felt the plunge of that knife all the way down to the tips of my big toes. I looked at her and she smiled, her mouth crooked, teeth half rotted out.

“Now you know bad,” she said and started walking away.

The next thing that happened is regrettable. I ran after her, knife still in my shoulder, pain searing the nerves in my body, caught her by the arm and threw her face first into the wall. She was a small woman and I threw her much harder than I had expected.

My body gave out and I fell. All my energy had been flung with that simple woman and I was shaking. My teeth were clenching so hard I swear I heard one of them crack though I found no evidence of this later. I reached around my shoulder, grabbed the handle of the knife and yanked it out. The world went mute. A buzzing crept into my skull and everything turned dark and was gone.

### Chapter 3

I lifted my head and saw I was still in the cabin. All the colors in the three-sided room seemed faded, like my eyes weren't working right. I rolled onto my back and became aware of the throbbing in my shoulder. I saw the lady with the threadbare mind slumped next to me, as still as Sunday work. I placed two fingers on her neck, searching for life, but found none. She wasn't cold but she also wasn't as warm as she should've been. My own blood temperature dropped. I sat up, wincing at the wires of pain crossing my shoulder, arcing off one another. I'd once seen a picture of an electricity demonstration, sparks of light stretched and shot in all directions. My left shoulder felt how that electricity had looked. I leaned a good portion of my weight on my right arm, which slid out from under me and I landed hard on my hurt shoulder. I let out a squeal but no one else was alive to hear it. I saw a smear of dark red next to my face. My fall had been caused by the slickness of my own blood.

I slowly got to my feet, found my extra shirt, folded it as close to a square as I could, and shoved it down the shirt I had on just behind my left shoulder. I was lightheaded and a murderer but all I could think about was having just ruined both of my shirts. They were comfortable shirts, which are hard to come by. I ate a stale biscuit I had brought back with me the night before. With the little energy gained, I dragged the woman around the cabin using my good arm and rolled her down the slope that lay behind. I had no aim to get neck-tied over a woman who wanted to conjoin with a bear.

The rain had fallen light and steady overnight, leaving the ground wet and hard to manage. The top of the slope behind the cabin was particularly treacherous. When I

pushed that dead woman down the hill my left boot suctioned into the mud, leaving me with a precarious balance that on a normal day I could have salvaged. But that was no regular day. I tipped over and tumbled down the muddy hill with the woman. Her dead lump of flesh finally stopped me at the bottom. When I opened my eyes there were trees bobbing in the wind, birds eyeing me from the bloated gray sky above.

I sat up and reflected on my situation. *What a mess*, I thought. I had killed a woman and now I was rolling in the mud with her. Every stitch of clothing I owned was soaked through. I held my tongue for I knew nothing good would come out.

A tear slid down my muddy cheek.

After quite a lot of groaning I crested the slope, using my left arm as infrequently as possible, trying to utilize the right every time the muddy decline tried to yank my balance out from under me. I grabbed my wool blanket that I used as a bedroll from the cabin and threw it over my shoulders. With my sopping clothes and the blanket concealing my shoulder wound, I walked back into town, lightheaded and nauseated.

## Chapter 4

The owner of the general store, Herbert Ipper, had a house at the edge of town. His daughter Emmaline Ipper was a part-time seamstress who would spend mornings taking dresses or jackets in or out or whichever way they needed going, at his residence. If any luck was to be had it would be there.

I stood across the muddy street and looked into the windows of the house. I didn't see any movement from within. I pulled my mint pouch out from my pocket. It was saturated with water and the leaves were moist. I put three leaves in my mouth anyway and chewed. Anything I could do to improve my impression on the young lady. I crossed the road and climbed the steps to the house. After a few moments hesitation I knocked on the door.

The door opened quickly. "You?" A young girl asked.

"What about me?"

"I spied you standing over on the far side of the street for going on five minutes, staring over here like an inbred."

Pain traveled through my shoulder. It wasn't a sharp feeling, more like a small object being pulled through my tissues. The pain came upon me so suddenly I didn't even answer her.

She looked me over and said, "Most remove their clothes and wash them before they bring them around for a stitch."

I groaned slightly.

The girl straightened up and looked me over more closely. “You are looking poorly.”

“You done with your inbreeding jabs?”

“Ease your mind, I was just checking what type of person stood on my front porch, you being a man that I don’t know knocking on my door.” She moved forward and lifted the wool blanket from my left shoulder. I sensed no fear in her. “Oh dear...” she said. “You are pale as the afterlife and may have more blood outside your skin than inside.”

She ushered me inside the house and sat me on a plain wooden stool. I turned my gaze to the cushioned chair in the corner.

“Nuh-uh,” she said when she gathered what I was looking at. “Not in your state.” She walked over to a desk and pulled out a little handbag. She returned swiftly and took a large needle and some black thread out of the bag. “I’m betting you’re here to be sewed up. Am I right?”

I nodded, and nearly fell backward off the stool.

“Sew up one and suddenly they all start showing up. Middle of the night sometimes. Daddy has about lost his mind with this.”

“Is there a doctor in town? I’ve been here over a week and heard not a word of one.”

“That’s another boiling point for Daddy. Mr. Moller, the doctor, is used-up and old. His feeble bones don’t leave his bed most days now. Any medical emergencies, we have to run someone up to his house and he writes out instructions on their hand or arm and they run back down, if it ain’t too late, to do what is still possible. Not always much.”

“What about the animal doctor?” I asked.

“The veterinarian is also the preacher and he is infinitely in fear of God. He refuses to work on patients who come by injuries in devilish ways.”

She pulled off my coat and removed both my shirts, not without wincing and involuntary tears on my part.

“I suppose your injuries came about by furthering God’s will?” she asked.

“The truth is somewhere in there.”

She smiled. She must have been a heathen herself.

I watched her thread the needle with my watering eyes. “How much will this hurt?”

“Probably as much as you expect.” She left the room for a minute and returned with a bottle and a small glass. She poured brown liquid into the glass. “One for me,” she said, drinking down the contents. “One for you.” She refilled the glass and I drank it. “One for the wound.” She filled the glass a third time and poured it on my injury. I bit my lip and twisted my face but it didn’t help. The pain, looking back, might be described as a swarm of angry bees being let loose into my shoulder. Not a fond memory.

She proceeded to sew up my shoulder like a hem on a garment. It hurt like hellfire. She gave me a wooden spoon to bite on but it was already covered in tooth markings that turned me off to the idea. Later, I asked if the needle was clean. She just hushed me and said it was cleaner than I was. The point was taken. After she had finished I tried to stand but was unsteady on my feet. She demanded I sit back down. She left for a couple minutes and returned with a biscuit with preserves on it and a dented metal cup filled with water.

“Eat this,” she said. “Then out you go.”

“I appreciate it but I can’t eat any more biscuits. I been living off these sons-a-bitches for a going on a week now.”

“Well, they are gonna have to get you by a little longer, less you can pay for the stitch job.”

I lowered my head a decent amount. “No ma’am, I can’t.”

“Lift up your head and save your sons-a-bitches for some real sons-a-bitches next time,” she said. “Eat up.”

This girl was braver than I at her age. I was more than a little impressed with her and thought maybe she could further my knowledge of my own situation. “On the way into town, about a week ago, I came across a lady walking the road on the outskirts of town talking nonsense. She had on a funny black hat, cocked to the side and shabby. Any idea who she is?” I tried to act unaffected about the subject but vaguely interested.

“Sounds like Dee. Why do you want to know about Dee?”

“Just curiosity,” I said.

“She’s best ignored. She spends her days and nights looking for bears for reasons I won’t go into. I’ll leave it at that.”

“Dee.”

“Yes, Dee,” she said. “Shall I say it again?”

“No,” I said, and finished the biscuit and water. “Does she have family members here to care for her?”

“Do people roaming the countryside looking for bears to defile them usually have family close by?”

“I don’t know,” said I. “I haven’t known many of the type.” I finished the biscuit and water and sat the cup on the stool after I stood. I was still lightheaded and very sore but felt a little better. “I’ll pay you when I can. I promise.”

“Promises don’t buy bread.”

I nodded. “Will you toss that blanket across my shoulders?”

She did and I walked to the door, unsteady on my feet.

“I don’t believe I will ever see you again,” she said.

“You don’t believe that,” I said.

I walked back to the cabin wavering like a drunk.

## Chapter 5

Upon returning, I went around the back of the cabin and looked down the slope at what I had done. I could hardly stand to look at the pile that used to be a lady. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by fatigue. My body had given all it could that day. It had given blood and sweat and murder. What more could I ask of it?

I made my way into the cabin and threw my bloody blanket on the floor. The puddle and streak of my blood still soaked into the old boards where my hand had slipped on it. I supposed I would never clean it up. It was still fairly early in the day but I fell back and nodded off as if I had been without sleep for weeks.

I awoke various times throughout the day and night from strange sensations, not only of pain and disorientation, but also of my bones and body manufacturing new blood for itself to replace the spilled. I have foggy visions of myself walking around the cabin when I couldn't get back to sleep but I can't say I remember it. A body low on blood is a mysterious thing.

When wakefulness with clarity came, it was about an hour before sunup. As far as I knew it was Wednesday but with the oddness of my sleep I wasn't sure. I walked to the back of the cabin again and looked down the slope but it was too dark to make anything out. I lifted my eyes to the stars that were slowly fading above and felt a pang of sadness for they were stuck looking down on us forever. What a goddamn curse.

## Chapter 6

When the sun was fully up, I started walking back to town, shoulder burning the entire way.

When I arrived, I loitered around the edge of the hotel, out of view of the man who ran the place. I plucked an apple from a tree on the way in, an apple that was a little past its day but still able to be eaten. I started in on my breakfast and caught the attention of a young boy of about twelve walking by. I asked for the day and he gave it to me as Wednesday. Wednesday, I thought, a day with strange shadows.

“You don’t look right,” the boy said.

“I asked for the day not an opinion.”

The boy moved along quickly. I wiped the sweat from my brow and felt the heat from my fever on the back of my hand. An unwell feeling can be on you like a lightning strike sometimes. I leaned back against the hotel for a short respite and caught a glimpse of an arrowhead of birds flying well above in the blue. Then they were gone. The air smelled of rain.

I leaned against the building for longer than intended. All the scales in my body were tilted too far to one side or the other and I couldn’t balance them. I finally walked over to the building next to the hotel, I believe it was a boarding house, and had a seat on the wooden walkway that made its way around the side.

After a good amount of time the two men that I had previously followed came down the street and entered the hotel. Though I felt no reprieve from my fever, maybe worse, I perked up a little and watched more intently. I stood and walked over to the edge

of the hotel after I had worked up my nerve. I surveyed the people walking the streets—men, women and youth went about their days with no account for myself, but I saw no old women.

After a few more minutes a small, faded black carriage stopped in front of the hotel. An old woman held the reins to the horse that led. She jumped out of the carriage like someone much younger, pulled a worn board of approximately three feet in length from the cart, stuck it through the spokes of the front wheel to lock it in place. She then retrieved a small sack from the rear of the carriage.

I knew it was her. I still felt overheated and poorly but it was my chance and I could not let it pass. Now that I was looking at the old lady I could sense more hesitance in myself than I thought I would. Some people like the act of thieving more than the idea of it. I'm the opposite. But I needed the valuable pelt as a way of pushing my life down the hill to get some speed going. After I had the speed, I might move back to the fairly straight and mostly narrow. But first came the old woman. I removed my knife from my belt and made my slow approach as she prepared her sack and the furry contents.

“Lady, give it up,” I said low, making my knife known.

She turned to me and exposed a silly grin on her face.

“Last time. The sack,” I said, emphasizing the knife in my hand. She pulled a gun out of the sack, something small like a Derringer. I was not expecting her to be armed.

“I knew this was going to happen,” she said. “Take this, Vauxhall.” She handed me the gun.

I looked at the little copper-colored shooter in my hand. Somehow she knew my true Christian name that I hadn't used in years.

“Take your aim and your spoils,” she said.

I stood motionless. “What do you mean, you knew this would happen?”

“I saw it all in the candlewax. The whole scenario dripped onto my arm last night.”

I looked at her arm. There were reddish burn marks dotting it. They formed the map of a landscape that I could not make out, but she claimed to have seen our present in her past through them.

Suddenly, I felt had. Was this some sort of a fix-up job? Had those two buffoons been more intelligent than I had supposed?

The old woman clicked her teeth. “Turn to find your future,” she said.

I turned toward the hotel as the two pelters were moving swiftly out the doors. “Hey!” one of them yelled. I cocked the little copper piece. It didn’t feel real, just a small dream with a trigger in my hand. I squeezed and fired a shot into the thigh of the bigger of the two pelters. I don’t even remember making a decision to fire the gun, I just did. He fell to the ground and moaned sweet bloody cusses at me. His smaller friend turned on the head of a nail and ran the opposite way as fast as his short legs would carry him.

The old woman dropped the bag with the pelt and threw her hands to the sky in surrender. “Have whatever you want,” she said. A small crowd had gathered and she wanted to make sure they knew it was a robbery. Little did they know this was of her devising.

The day had turned into a drama, so I decided to play the character I had only half chosen. “Any person comes any closer,” I yelled, “they might well catch a bullet in the

leg also.” A sudden uneasiness squeezed at my insides. I leaned over and vomited the apple. It must have been a sight to behold. I snatched up the sack and ran down the road.

I kept a quick clip the length of two buildings before I peered over my shoulder. The injured pelter had a small crowd that had come to his aid. All the rest were watching me retreat. My plan had gone so wrong it was hard to fathom. Two-dozen people watched me rob an old woman and let go of my meager breakfast in the space of sixty seconds. I decided I would not be including my shabby doings in Black Medicine in the next letter I wrote my mother. But sometimes mothers just seem to know.

I bolted down an alley, paused, and put a hand to my forehead. Who was that old woman and how did she know who I was? I was sweating much more than I should have been for my exertions, and I was roughly the temperature of a desert rock at noon. I adjusted the bag with the pelt in my arms and continued round to the back of the buildings and into woods that bunched up behind. My eyesight gave me trouble and the landscape had an odd appearance. Everything seemed to be hovering, like the world was a show being put on by an illusionist. I trekked through the woods until I met up with the path that led back to the cabin. I checked in all directions, looking for signs of pursuers but found no evidence of any. I don't recall much of the walk back to the cabin but I do remember pulling the pelt out of the bag when I returned. My sleeping conditions had been so poor that the idea of the pelt under my head for rest was too good to pass on. I closed my eyes as soon as I lay down.

## Chapter 7

I don't know how long my fitful rest lasted. I was awoken by a shuffling sound. I opened my eyes. They seemed to focus better than earlier. My shoulder felt as if it was being stabbed again. The gloaming had descended and it was seeping through the crisp air. The woods around me had the low hum of life coming and going. Then I heard the shuffling again. On the far side of the cabin I saw the outline of a figure in the moonlight. I was caught groggy and unprepared. The figure said, in the voice of a woman, "I bet you a dollar this one makes you wonder."

I watched the woman's figure from the corner of the cabin. I had no instinct to fly or go for a weapon. My tongue lay motionless in my dry mouth. Something didn't seem quite acceptable about what I was seeing and no words felt right. Suddenly, I thought it must be the old woman. Why would she give me her pelt then follow me? But the voice didn't fit the old woman. I worked up my nerve and said, "Who are you?"

She didn't reply, just stood still to give the moon something to outline.

"Are you that old woman?" I asked. I didn't believe she was but I felt something in my gut like I'd felt around the old woman. She was unpleasantly tickling my innards.

She started walking to me. The moonlight gave her a glowing edge with a center that was black and devoid of detail. I pressed myself in the corner. I couldn't get far enough away. She grabbed my knife from the table and held it up in the light from the moon. The wound in my shoulder began pain me in an ungodly way. "Look what I found," she said.

My hand went for the gun and I pointed the shooter at the glowing shadow. “Who are you?”

She sat the knife down. “Don’t be silly,” she said. She turned her head and let the moon light her face by degrees to slowly reveal a caved-in forehead.

My mouth went slack and I fell over on my side.

## Chapter 8

When my eyes reopened the woman was back standing in the torn open side of the cabin. Parts of her seemed dark and still devoid of detail, but other parts were clear to my vision now. From her waist up she seemed normal and I could see her hands but everything else was still in some way not present. The moon still gave her an unearthly outline and backlit her presence. The night before had been overcast and rainy, but this night the sky was clear and the moon nearly full. The air was crisp and my shoulder wound felt frostbitten and sharp. I cleared my throat. Her eyes darted toward me.

“Are you Dee?” I asked, fearing her reply.

“What a misuse of a question.” She started pacing back and forth at the open end of the cabin, keeping her clear eyes on me.

“What’s a good use?”

“You might ask if I’m going to hurt you.”

“Are you?”

“You might also ask where I came from.”

The color drained from my face. The more ominous she made my near future seem, the less I wanted to speak.

She still had my knife in her hand. After some moments of silence she suddenly charged at me. She was neither quite walking nor floating, but was simply in one place then shifted somehow to another. I saw the whole thing but can’t describe it. She threw the knife into the floorboard and it stuck with a shiver. She put her face inches in front of mine. Sweat poured out of me. My veins tightened up like stretched rubber bands, my

nerves taut as fiddle strings. I couldn't look her in the eyes, so I lowered mine down and stared into the black abyss of nothing that was her lower half. It seemed to go on forever, like staring into the night sky.

"You won't find anything there," she said.

I forced myself to look into her blue eyes. She didn't seem to be breathing. She was very still. It gave me a brief but slight kind of peace.

"What are you looking for?"

I shook my head. I think I understood the question, but had no answer for the things I had done. I was so tensed up I was vibrating.

"What are the true questions?"

I kept shaking my head. She glanced at my shoulder. My wound burned, the pain became unbearable.

"Stop!" I yelled. She didn't touch me but something pushed me over and knocked my head on the floor. My shoulder was singing with pain but my head slamming on the wood floor put a stop that. The pelt was on the ground next to my face and its fur was blowing around wildly, as if in a harsh wind from many directions, but I couldn't feel even the slightest breeze on my face.

"Is that a question?" the apparition of Dee whispered in my ear.

I couldn't take my eyes off of the mysterious pelt.

I faded out again.

## Chapter 9

My name being called out woke me. “Vauxhall Benton!” I looked around the cabin and saw no sign of Dee except my knife stuck in the floorboard next to the pelt on the ground, lying still and silent as a shy child. “I can see you,” said the voice.

“I can see you, too,” I said. There was a man in a long tan overcoat about twenty paces from the front of the cabin. Light was just breaking. Was it already Thursday? “Why are we looking at each other? You got nothing better to do?”

The man laughed. “I don’t.”

“Then you need better stimulations in your life.”

“That is very likely true. Why don’t you step out here and we can discuss what gives you pleasure in life.”

I stood up, cautiously. “I’m not much for being woken up by strange men at first daylight. That may seem odd to you.”

The man smiled but didn’t laugh. “It does. Come out and shoot the morning breeze a while.”

I was at an end with meeting strangers at the cabin. I went to grab the copper shooter from the waist of my pants but the man beat me to his own. I raised my hands, hoping to not get shot. He held his gun confidently, almost an afterthought.

“I just wanted to talk and you had to go and do something dull-headed.” He paused, watching me. “Why did you do that?”

I shrugged, which made my shoulder boil with pain.

“Now step on out and let’s do what I suggested in the first place.”

I walked to the very front edge of the cabin. The man held up his hand. I stopped.

“See, I know you,” the man said. “Vauxhall Benton reportedly bleeds from his left shoulder when he gets real nervous and then vomits on his own boots. You fit that description. But you don’t know me. I’m sheriff Keego.” He took off his hat in a theatrical gesture. “But, see, I’m not the only one who wants to talk.” He pointed his gun quickly to the left. There was a man crouched next to a tree with a shotgun pointed at me. “He wants to talk also.”

Thirty minutes later, I was sitting in Sheriff Keego’s cell. His man was still pointing his shotgun in my direction. “Why you still pointing that gun at me? You already got me behind iron,” I said.

“It just feels good.”

I left it at that, leaned my head back against the wall and dozed off. My injuries and lack of restful sleep had left me able to repose anywhere.

## Chapter 10

I heard the door in the jail being opened. Keego and his man were gone by that time. Out harassing people I supposed. The old lady who had given me the pelt and the gun walked in. She shut the door behind her and looked at me. She was silent.

“You work with these sons-a-bitches?” I yelled.

“We don’t work with anyone except the future itself.”

As she said this, Dee appeared next to her. She didn’t walk in, just appeared.

“These men are going to let you go. The candle has told me this,” the old lady said.

“Where are they?” I asked.

She casually peered around the room. “Not here, evidently.”

“Will you help get me out?”

“She has already told you,” Dee said. “These men will let you go.”

“I don’t know if I trust your candle as much as you do.”

“We’re not asking you to trust anything,” Dee said.

“I’m in here because of you!”

Dee and the old lady said nothing. The old lady walked over to the Sheriff’s cabinet and opened it, looked around and took her pelt and copper gun.

“I’m here because of you,” I said again.

The old lady walked over to my cell. “You see this gun?”

“Of course I see the gun.”

She pointed it at my chest.

I held up my hands. “Now, I was only trying to say I need your help. That’s all.”

“This gun only hits what I want it to,” the old lady said.

She fired the gun and I closed my eyes tight, expecting a searing pain to go through me, like my blade but worse.

“You see?”

I opened my eyes and felt my solid chest plate. No holes, no blood. It took a few moments for my pulse to slow. “You loaded some sort of fake bullet to scare me.”

“Look behind you.”

I turned to the wall and saw a fresh hole. I touched it with my finger, it was still warm.

“You will walk out of town just to walk right back in,” the old lady said.

“What?” I was still shaking from the bullet nearly killing me dead.

“All your paths lead to Black Medicine. You will never know another place.” She walked up and spit on my boots.

“Now what’d you do that for?”

She looked at me for a moment, then put the gun and pelt in her bag. She walked to the door and opened it, looked back once and left. Dee followed, also looking back before she left. “See you around,” she said, and shut the door.

I sat in the corner of the cell, periodically looking up at the bullet hole, expecting it to not be there—but there it was, every time. Some time after dark, Lester Keego finally walked in with his man.

“Where you been?” I asked.

The sheriff didn’t answer.

“I asked where you been.”

His man pointed his shotgun at me and smiled.

“That ain’t the first gun that’s been pointed at me in this cell. You shouldn’t look so proud.”

The man cocked the shotgun.

“That’s enough, Wells,” said Keego.

Keego removed his tan jacket and placed it on the back of a wooden chair. “It don’t matter where I been. But, if you must have it, I stopped by Benjamin Leaf’s place and he said you raised Cain the other night when you had a beer he served you like a gentleman.” He paused to let that soak in. “Then I saw Emmaline Ipper, the girl who sewed up your mutilated shoulder. She tells it that you haven’t paid up for that service. Finally, I spoke to Gerald Wilkamp, the man you shot in the leg.”

“Well, how many lies did they tell about me?”

“Son,” he said, “I suspect you lie so much you feel as blameless as the Lord Jesus Christ when you do so. But that isn’t real. I see blood running from your mouth with each word you utter. I see the light of Lucifer in your eyes.”

“I believe you’re seeing me in the wrong way. It’s been mostly some fix up job to do with you or your man, Wells.”

Wells leveled his shotgun at me again.

“While you were away the old lady came and took the gun and the pelt.”

“Oh, did she?” asked Wells.

“So, let me clear this in my mind,” said Keego. “An old lady broke into my jail and stole two things that I’m completely unaware of?”

“What are you trying to pull here, Keego? The damn gun and pelt you took from me at the cabin.”

“I took a knife,” said Keego. He went to his cabinet and pulled out my blade. “Which is now property of the Sheriff’s office of Black Medicine.”

“She spit on my boot, too. Look at my left foot. Look at the hole in the wall.” I pointed over my shoulder.

“Wells, we have spittle on a boot and a hole in a wall,” croaked Keego. “I believe we have a mystery on our hands. Out with the bloodhounds.”

“Make light all you want, you crooked pile of horse shit!” I yelled. “I know you both have something to do with it.”

Keego lost all appearance of humor. “Listen here. I don’t mind shooting the breeze with someone half-cocked, but you have now lost all privileges. Your knife is mine. Your belongings are mine. I never wanted to look for you anyway but you had to make a scene and vomit on yourself and shoot a man in the leg. You forced my hand. Wilkamp also wanted me to chase you down but he’s almost as much of an idiot as you are.”

Wells started laughing. The barrel of his gun shook a little when he did. It was like a finger wagging at me.

“Here’s the plan. Wells is going to take you for a walk into the woods. That’s when I give you the opportunity to run as fast as you can out of here, and by God, if I see your face in Black Medicine again, I will do something very evil to you. Do you understand what I mean by evil?”

I spit on the floor. I was sick of these two.

Keego unlocked my cell, and slapped me hard across the face. The sting and sound rang through my head. “Wells,” Keego said.

“Up,” said Wells.

I stood and walked out the door as I was led. I was taken out into the woods behind the Sheriff’s office. From the window Keego yelled, “give him something for the trip.” “Yes, sir,” said Wells. He walked me about ten minutes into the woods and told me to stop. “Turn around,” he said. I did. “Keep walking until the sun comes up. If I see you again, I’m unloading both barrels at you for attacking a sheriff’s deputy. Get it?”

“Yes,” I said, reluctantly.

“Now,” said Wells, “we don’t want to send you off completely empty-handed. We know it’s a cruel world and damn difficult to get by in it. Hold out your hand.”

I hesitated but did. When I showed Wells my palm, he slammed the back end of his rifle into my cheek. I dropped to my knees. The world spun and I fell over.

“Happy trails,” Wells said and walked off.

I remained on the ground until the sun came up. My head had hurt too much to lift. Finally, I was able to get up on both feet. I walked straight ahead for a very long time, supporting myself with the trunks of trees as I went. A walking path came into view. It was lined with blackberry bushes but was wide and straight enough to see for some way down.

I saw a figure dressed in black walking my way. She was too far away to make out but I could tell it was a woman in a dress. I sat down and pulled off my boot. Inside the sole I had hidden a silver dollar for emergencies. I pulled out the coin and sat it in the middle of the path. I crawled back off to the side and up a small slope to keep an eye on

the walkway. I didn't know what kind of world I was living in. I was young and didn't understand life or curses. I didn't know how long the universe would allow my heart to keep beating, I only knew I owed Emmaline Ipper for stitching me up, and I hoped that was her coming down the path and that she would find the silver dollar, and if it wasn't, I prayed it would find its way to her. I just wanted to do right by one person.

“Look what I found,” a familiar voice said.

### Part III: The Freeze 1901

#### Chapter 1

I awoke on the side of the path. My shoulder still hurt and my ribs were throbbing from lying on them awkwardly. I stood slowly and took in the air. It ran through my lungs and felt clean. I cautiously made my way down to the path, around the bushes lined with stickers and tangled shrubs clinging to the small decline. My silver dollar was gone. No sign that any money had ever been in this place. A chilly gust barreled down the path from the west and gave me gooseflesh. I could see nobody in either direction and decided to continue down the path, away from Black Medicine and the many curses it had brought me.

The path from town led west and those waves of wind tried their best to blow right through me. I wasn't giving way but that wind didn't want to either. I looked up and saw the tops of large evergreen trees swinging back and forth like upside-down pendulums. I was in awe of the force of everything.

I had not the slightest clue where I would sleep. I kept my eyes open for any kind of shelter. I was too down on my luck to feel bad, or, honestly, anything about it. I made a pact with myself to never get in a situation like this again, if I could help it.

I also kept an eye out for moving objects. Keego's henchman Wells had walked back toward Black Medicine but I wouldn't trust a cur like him for all the riches known to man. Every once in a while I caught movement but I could not get clean sight of it. Just a shadow and a whoosh and the wind would push me around a little more. This carried on for about an hour. I kept my body moving to maintain my temperature. Then

that old woman's voice entered my head and suddenly before me was the town of Black Medicine. I stopped for a moment to think back on my path and could see no reason that I should end up there. Now that town was within eyeshot, I became fearful and made my way off the path about thirty paces. I huddled behind a disintegrating tree stump and thought through my options. I could either walk into town or reverse my path and backtrack, looking for where I may have veered off the right path.

After checking in all directions, I made my way to the path and lit off away from town. I kept an even quicker pace this go-around.

I lumbered back down the same path, this time with the wind at my back, pushing my steps along. I saw many of the same landmarks and knew that I was traversing the same path in reverse. I kept my pace at a better clip the second time due to the wind's assistance and came upon an eerie sight. It might have been some form of what the French call *déjà vu* because I came upon the road into Black Medicine that I had just walked away from.

I found a felled tree just off the path and sat down, tired and frustrated. I had hiked about two hours only to walk twice into the edge of the town I wanted to leave. The birds were making their songs in the trees above me, and the wind played tricks with the tunes. I felt strange listening to the nature sounds and pinched my cheek to verify I was in fact in the real world. Apparently, I was.

The words of the old woman kept coming back to me. *All your paths lead to Black Medicine. You will never know another place.* Sure, she had performed quite the magician's trick with that gun bit in the jail and had known my name for no damn good

reason, but did she really have the power to curse me back into this town against my will?  
I tried to shut that thought out and leave Black Medicine one more time.

I followed the narrow path against the wind again and found the gusts more reluctant to let me by. My pace was slower due to this but I made my way regardless, wanting to distance myself from town and find rudimentary shelter for the night. A little over an hour later the same road to Black Medicine came into view.

I threw my hands into the air and kicked the trunk of a tree with my boot. I saw a small boulder a few paces off and made my way over and flopped down. I sat for a few minutes and thought about nothing. Just watched time pass.

A voice called out: "Where are you going?"

I crouched down the best I could and remained silent.

"That rock won't hide you."

"What is it to you where I go?"

"Not much at all. But I've seen you walk by three times. And, honestly, you're making me nervous."

"Who are you?" I asked.

No answer.

I remained still.

"So where are you going?" the voice asked.

"Nowhere in particular." I thought it was a man talking to me but a word here and there made me wonder if it wasn't a woman.

"You sure are making a roundabout way to it."

"Maybe I like it that way."

“What way is that?”

“The way that suits myself.”

“Seems to me you’re walking away into the arms of Black Medicine. Am I right?”

“You work for that goddamn Keego?”

“I do not, but I know the man. From a distance. I don’t know Black Medicine much anymore either. Except from a distance also.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It’s not a riddle. It’s just as I speak it.”

“Maybe we don’t speak quite the same language.”

“Black Medicine is a wicked little wrench and I keep my distance from it.”

“Do you have proof that you aren’t the same?”

“No.”

“You don’t defend yourself?”

“To you? No.”

I stood up from being half hid behind the rock. “I’ve got nothing to hide.”

“I don’t trust in you.”

“Should I trust you much as I have? You got a shooter pointed at my gut?”

“We’ll get to me soon enough,” the voice said.

The wind began to pick up again.

“You have a weapon?”

“What makes you think I’m stupid enough to come out here unweaponed?”

The mysterious person chuckled. “My bet says that a man like you, if weaponed, has it out by now.”

“Don’t make bets you can’t count on.”

The voice said, “you are not leaving Black Medicine behind.”

“What makes you an authority on leaving places?”

“I’m guessing that you saw some things you never seen before in that place and an old woman paid you a visit and said some things that made your soul shake inside your rack of bones. Am I close?”

“Why would her words make me shake?”

“Because you haven’t built up the armor to block fate.”

“Show yourself and we can talk about this face to face.”

“I don’t believe you have any say in when or how I show myself.”

The voice saw my red hands, my gooseflesh, my empty belly, and had said its piece, leaving me with no recourse but to stand and wait for what came next.

“Look to your left, up on that small ridge in the shrubs,” the voice said.

I looked and saw nothing but ridge and shrubs. “What am I looking for?”

The voice said something but I couldn’t make it out over the screaming wind that blew across me.

“What?” I said.

“Now look behind you.”

I turned and nearly soiled my one pair of shorts. Not five feet behind me stood the largest moose I had ever laid eyes on. It must have been eight feet tall. I backed away slowly. I heard they could be mean during certain seasons.

“That is Squirrel,” the voice said. “Now stand your ground and make nice.”

I kept my eyes on the animal. It just snorted a couple times and turned to walk away. The moose made its way through a rough looking group of bushes without flinching, trailblazing.

“Squirrel is your ticket to shelter. You had better follow.”

I almost opened my mouth to argue but thought better of it. I adjusted my belt and made my way after the moose. He forged his way up through some dense undergrowth and occasionally turned around to snort at me, as if I wasn't following to his liking.

“Where we headed?” I yelled out a few minutes later. The voice didn't answer but Squirrel turned again, let out a grunt, then resumed his walk. He didn't turn around again for the remainder of the trip. He kept a steady pace knowing that I had no choice but to keep up.

## Chapter 2

We walked for twenty minutes, Squirrel keeping his steady pace and me following like a disgraced animal. The longer we walked the crisper the air got and the further the sun dropped taking the temperature with it. We eventually came up to the mouth of a small cave, not tall enough for me to walk into completely upright. Squirrel stopped at the entrance and motioned his head toward the cave.

“You expect me to rest my head in a bear cave?”

There was no reply. Squirrel urged me into the cave with movements of his head.

“HUH?” I yelled louder. “That the idea?”

“Would you quit the shouting?” said the voice. It was coming from behind me. I turned to see if I could catch a glimpse but I saw only trees and brooding sky.

“What are you looking for?”

“What do you think?” I said.

I made my way into the cave, cautiously. It was no holiday by any stretch but it seemed temperate and would keep my pulse from stalling. I sniffed the air and it smelled faintly sweet. I was trying to put a finger on the aroma when the voice spoke again.

“There are logs and two pieces of spark-rock along the cave wall.”

I felt around and found the logs and the rocks. “Hot damn,” I whispered to myself.

“You’re welcome,” the voice said. “I’ll be back at sunup.”

“Where’re you going?”

“I’m not going to sleep in a cave with you.”

I didn't hear the voice again that night. I poked my head out later and the moose was gone too. It took a few minutes to get the logs to catch but soon enough I had a good blaze going. I warmed myself to the point of sweating and later fell asleep with my stomach groaning.

### Chapter 3

The next morning was cold when I woke. There was a dark, sooty pile next to me that used to be a fire. I sat up and looked around the cave. It only went about fifteen feet deep and was about five feet tall and eight feet wide. I was surrounded by cold, hard stone.

“Vauxhall,” yelled the voice, from outside the cave.

“How do you know my name?” How did so many people know the name I hadn’t used in years?

“Never mind that. Come out here and see what Mother Nature left for you.”

I walked hunched over to the edge of the cave to avoid banging my head and emerged into vast whiteness, like some unfortunate child. I had seen snow before but never put down so fine and even and thick. The bare tree branches were lined with it, the boughs of the large evergreens were weighed down, occasionally bending and spilling, but the sky was as clear and naked.

“Where are you?” I asked the voice. I saw no footsteps in the snow, yet the voice had sounded so close. Then Squirrel made his way around a large tree and up to me. He had a saddlebag hanging on his large, high back.

“That’s for you,” the voice said.

“You always send your animal in your stead.”

“That animal has done only good by you.”

“Where are you hiding?”

“Just take the things from the bag. Focus on what’s important.”

I reached into the bag and found a large canteen and a small hide pouch with cornbread inside. My stomach called out when I saw it all. I walked around to the other side of Squirrel and found a well-worn jacket made of leather hanging from the bag. I put the jacket on and it fit well enough. Big in the shoulders. But a thought hit me. What does the voice want? Why the free food and clothes? “What is the catch?”

“Does there have to be one?”

“Usually there is.”

“You are not just a stranger. You are a man on a snow-covered hill without a coat. I do not know about you but my mind would tug at me all day if I didn’t offer something to help a traveller withstand.”

“Well, aren’t you a do-gooder.”

“I think you should eat the food, put on the coat, go for a walk and think about your situation.”

“What’s there to think about?”

The voice did not answer.

“You not in the mood to talk? Is that it?”

Silence.

The moose turned and began walking away. I ran after and grabbed the coat. There might be a catch but without the coat I might freeze right through before I figured out what it was.

I followed Squirrel, keeping a safe distance. I was curious to see where and what he might lead me to. I trailed him for about twenty minutes before the sky started to cloud over. The clouds were thick and gray and of the storm variety. Within minutes I was

being powdered with snow. The footing was already somewhat difficult and now my vision was being tested. For a while I could make out Squirrel before me but then I lost him in the haze of snow.

I stopped under an evergreen tree for relief from the storm. It was not as windy as it was the previous day, thankfully. I kicked away the little snow there was next to the base of the tree and hunkered down, pulling the collar of my coat tight against my neck. I've never been able to predict the onset of a storm like my grandfather used to. He could predict the minute rain was going to start or hear wind bearing down in his direction an hour before it arrived. It was some sort of gift, one that I never received.

I wondered where Squirrel could have gone. Do moose have dens? He was probably back to wherever he put his head down at night, dry and content. Maybe even asleep.

I decided after a ten minute respite to set off back in the general direction I had come from. My tracks had been covered and my face was being cold-worked by the snow. I wandered around for what felt like half the day. Possibly retracing my steps without my even knowing. It was likely about an hour. My hands and cheeks and feet were numb. My eyeballs were so cold that the eyelids had a difficult time closing over them. I found another large evergreen to retreat under.

"Damn," I said, putting my head against the tree, cursing my deficit of luck. I warmed my hands as best I could in between my calves and thighs as I squatted down. Then once they were as warm as they were going to get, I rubbed them on my cheeks. They were as cold as steaks fresh from an icebox. I scanned across the landscape before

me and saw no sure routes. I was not even sure which direction was which. It was all a cold oblivion.

I decided to go find tree boughs and put together a basic shelter to keep the storm off. As I walked around a cluster of underbrush I heard coughing and I jumped behind some of the undergrowth to hide. Moments later, about ten yards off, I saw Squirrel come into the clearing with a rider, a medium-sized man with a significant beard in a bearskin coat. He had an ax strapped to his back.

“Hey, is that you?” I yelled.

They made no sign that they had heard me.

“Hey, you!” I came out from my hiding place and tottered after them the best I was able.

“Hey,” I yelled again.

Squirrel stopped. The man with the ax turned. His beard blocked all expression on his face except his eyes that darted around the landscape. They were green and stood out significantly from his brown hair, beard and coat. He looked like someone who kept a very close account of his surroundings.

“Well, shitfire! This is what you look like?”

“Yes,” said the man. Squirrel just watched with his blank moose face.

“Well, I am damn cold. Can I follow you to some shelter?”

“We were coming to you.” He kicked something hard in the saddlebag. “More wood.”

“That was thoughtful. I wouldn’t be opposed to lighting those logs right here and now.”

“We are not lighting them here.”

“Ain’t I got some sort of say in the matter?”

Squirrel started walking.

“Hey,” I yelled. “I’m about two degrees away from turning to ice.”

“Then keep walking.”

I followed their lead for a good while. The walking did help to warm me a little, particularly at the pace they traveled—and I had no plans on losing sight of Squirrel this time. The man didn’t say another word to me as we walked. I was curious about his name but decided that I was not going to be the one to talk next. He had made it clear conversating was not a priority. I had made the assumption that the man was the person who was helping me previously, though he sounded different.

The snow stopped and the air felt brittle. All was silent save the packing sounds our feet made on the fresh snow and our breathing. Plumes of steam left our mouths and nostrils and drifted off. Occasionally the moose would stop and shake its head, then resume its course. The man did not look back to see if I followed. I am sure he could hear my steps but was none too worried about me walking behind him. He must have been very trusting.

We made our way around the edge of an embankment and the mouth of the cave came into view. I have never been so happy to see such poor lodgings. “There it is!” I blurted out. I was truly happy.

The man jumped down from Squirrel and hit the ground with a thud. He pulled some small logs out of the saddlebag and handed them to me.

“First things first,” he said. “Take those in and start the fire.” He removed a cloth sack from the saddlebag.

“Is that grub?” I asked.

“First things first,” he said, pointing at the small pile of logs in my arms.

It took a couple minutes to start the fire. The man arranged some things behind me as I worked.

“That firewood will not last long,” he said. “After you warm up you have some collecting to do.”

I sat down and saw that he had put the cloth sack flat on the cave floor and placed some sort of jerked meat and a hunk of bread on it. He watched me as I realized the bounty. I tried to hide how excited I was about heat and food.

He glared at me until I looked back at the fire. I sat for ten minutes warming my limbs, reclaiming them from the cold. The man didn't talk to me, just continued at his tasks while I watched the flames. When some feeling came back to my hands I stretched them and made fists to see how well they were working. The man saw this.

“If you can make a fist, you can collect wood,” he said.

“Well, damn, I'm still cold.”

The man stood, ax still strapped to his back, fur jacket and beard blowing in the wind that snuck in through the cave entrance. He apparently didn't want to hear my side of it.

“If that's the way you'll have it, have it,” I said. “If you need me I'll be out there in the damn elements whistling to get the Grim Reaper's attention.”

He didn't say anything as I left. Squirrel was gone when I got outside. Who knows where he went. I followed him once but never again. I nearly killed myself following that animal. He knew his way around a storm better than I ever would.

"If you get lost, yell."

I looked back and the man was in the mouth of the cave.

"You'll probably get yourself lost," he said.

"How are you going to hear me over this wind?" I asked.

"Just yell." He walked back in the cave, never doubting about his ability to hear me from who knows how far away. Maybe he did have the hearing of a bat, but that might make him something else entirely.

I scavenged for about half an hour, never letting the cluster of trees near the cave's entrance out of sight. I didn't find much. A few branches that had broken off. Only a small armful. The snow had covered everything and only an occasional branch poked out above the surface. The time outside passed slowly as my fingers and toes grew colder. It was a struggle to stay out as long as I did, and for such little reward.

After I had felt I spent enough time looking to be considered an honest attempt, I walked back to the cave. As I entered the man sat next to the fire and watched me.

"There wasn't much," I said. I dropped the sad stack of branches next to the fire to dry out. Then I sat and began to warm my hands again.

"I see that," the man said. "You don't know how to ask for things."

"What?"

He pulled his ax out of its holster and held it out for me to look at and regret. I had never even thought to ask. I was probably too cold to think straight. That didn't make me feel any less like a fool. "You expect me to go back out there?" I said.

He shook his head. "It's too late. The sun will vanish soon."

"Some food then?"

He extended his hand toward the small bounty. I collected a few bits of jerked meat and a piece of the bread, ate them, and felt my energy rise immediately. Once my energy stores had been replenished my brain began to do its job again.

"Your voice ain't right," I said. "I thought it was you at first but now I know it ain't you."

"That's right."

"What are you doing riding Squirrel around? You in cahoots with the voice?"

"The voice you refer to is my boss. And she has a name."

He didn't continue. I finished chewing on a piece of bread and swallowed. "This stuff ain't bad," I said and held up the last of my bread.

"It's alright."

"So who is your boss?"

"Who is our boss?"

"No. I ain't got a boss."

"Her name is Beryl."

"Her name could be Virgin Mary, she still ain't my boss," I said. I threw the last piece of bread in my mouth and chewed.

He thought about what I said and took his time responding. “We won’t bring food then. The firewood stops coming. You can freeze your belly with snow for water.”

I shrugged. The small gesture enraged him. He didn’t yell, just became more stern.

“You are useless. Without Beryl you would be dead. We watched you walk back and forth on the path for an entire afternoon seeing if you could do anything to help yourself, and you showed yourself to be incompetent. But Beryl has ideas for you that she’s already invested in.”

“Why hasn’t she shown herself to me?” I asked.

“She has. You are trying to see her as if you are looking at a tree. She doesn’t reveal herself that way.” The man started to inspect the sharp edge of his ax in a way that made me uncomfortable. Images floated through my head of being murdered right there, even though he had just stated that his boss had a purpose for me.

“What is your name?” I asked, hoping to divert his mind from his ax.

He looked up from his ax and studied me for a moment. “Sawyer.”

“Well then, Sawyer, how do I see Beryl?”

He laughed. “You have seen her, only not in the woods. She handed you a gun in town when you tried to rob her. Then she came and retrieved it from the jail.”

I would have guessed it was either the old lady or Dee, only the voice didn’t sound like either of them. “I didn’t recognize her sound when she called to me,” I said.

“She can sound like many things.”

“Are you her messenger? She has seen me before, why not come to me now?”

“Because she sent me,” Sawyer said, with no doubt of why it was so.

“And what would she have me do as her employee?”

He resumed studying his ax, rubbing his calloused finger across the blade. His mind appeared lost momentarily in a vision of falling a tree. Then his eyes met mine.

“She would have you dispose of Wells.”

“What? The deputy?”

He pulled out the little copper shooter from inside his fur jacket. He held it out to me.

“She means for me to kill him?”

“Beryl says you have seen the capabilities of the gun.”

“I also saw a wraith by the name of Dee in the room at the time. I don’t know what I saw or what to believe.”

Sawyer’s beard parted into a smile. “Believe it all.”

“The only time I pulled the trigger on that piece I shot a man in the leg. It don’t seem to have any enchantment for me.”

“You were nervous and jumpy. Next time it will obey you.” He motioned for me to take the gun.

I knew I had no choice, that they had me in a tough spot so I told him as much.

“You all have me in a pinch and seem to be using it to your advantage.”

“We know.”

“The only reason I’m lost out here in the cold is because of her,” I said. I stood up and started to pace on my side of the fire.

“Beryl looked into the days that have not happened yet and decided to take pity on you.” Sawyer did not look away as he spoke, never broke contact. “She saw when your life ended and she took you on in exchange for your death.”

“I was never made privy to this deal.”

“She does not ask permission.”

“What if I wanted to die?” I asked. I was still walking in circles trying to understand what he was telling me. Things such as this are hard to ponder, especially about your own life.

“No man your age wants to die, they just do,” Sawyer said.

Finally I spotted the obvious. Sawyer was a man like myself. A discarded person with whom the world was fine letting get swept away in the dust of time. Beryl collected these people and used them to complete her will, but what was that will? “Did you want to die?”

This made Sawyer stop talking.

“You were a hopeless case too?”

He looked into the fire but didn’t acknowledge my words. He finally got up and threw the branches I had collected on the blaze. They took a good minute but the fire finally accepted them.

“You were like me then?” I asked. Moments earlier he was telling me about my own weaknesses, but now his strength seemed to be disappearing. He looked a little smaller than he had previously, shrinking in stature and force slowly by degrees.

“I wasn’t like you. But Beryl did take my waning path and trailblazed me through to another. Now I walk hers, it’s the only path left for me. The only that continues while I’m on it.”

“You’re her slave?”

“No, I’m her messenger. And my message for you is the blood of Wells needs to be relieved of his body.” Sawyer had sat back down and was looking into the fire. His face was so close it must have singed part of his stately beard but he did not flinch from the heat, only seemed to grow strong again. “We have one more tool for you and your task, Dead Man. Vauxhall. One quarter mile west out of the mouth of this cave lies a frozen stream. There is strange red bush in the shape of a Y next to it that will look out of place. You can read, can’t you?”

He seemed so pleased with his question that I must have forgotten to answer.

“Shoot the stream with the gun and reach in through the hole in the ice. Something awaits you there.” Sawyer stood up and spit in the fire. It made a small hissing sound. “My graciousness as messenger has been exhausted. Let your shoulder heal for a week. Then complete the task.”

“What am I supposed to eat and keep warm with for a week?” I asked, a little weakly. I had almost forgotten about my gashed-up shoulder.

“You will be seen after,” he said and vanished through the mouth of the cave.

## Chapter 4

To my happiness and discontent, I was looked after. Each morning I found a small collection of food just outside the cave. Mostly breads, dried meats and fruits, and on one special occasion, the seventh and last day of my convalescence, a chocolate bar. I had never eaten one before and I finished it so quickly it made my stomach upset.

The days passed slowly. At night I would set the canteen full of snow next to the fire and in the morning I had water of a pleasing temperature. I went out each afternoon and collected wood. All of the wood was cold and wet from the snow and it usually took a considerable amount of time to get a fire going. I gathered together all of the small stones in the cave and made rules for simple games I could play with them, built little stone structures and flung the rocks against the cave walls trying to make them ricochet into appointed corners. These were my central means of entertainment. I stayed in the cave as much as I could, trying to give my shoulder the best chance at healing.

Sometimes I would take out the little copper gun. It didn't seem big enough or full of enough potential power to do considerable damage. It seemed like a child's toy. Once or twice I looked at it so long that I almost forgot what it did. Overthought to the point of diminishment. But eventually the gun would remind me of the task I was given and I would replace it in my coat pocket. I also put off visiting the creek to retrieve the other tool I was left until absolutely necessary.

That was how I spent six days. I was personally visited by no voices, spirits, bearded men or animals during that stretch. I was isolated and had an overabundance of

time for thought that made me begin to doubt my memories of the strange happenings.

On the seventh day I was reminded.

## Chapter 5

On the seventh morning I felt much better and rested. My shoulder was still sore but I moved it around and it didn't seem as bad as it was. I ate the breakfast that was left for me the night before. After the morning meal I decided it was time to visit the frozen stream. I walked west, as instructed, crushing through the hard top layer of frozen snow with each step. I watched each of my breaths shoot out into the chill air and quickly fade away.

After fifteen minutes of hard-fought walking, I arrived at the stream. It was only about four feet wide and snow had blown across its smooth surface making it nearly impossible to make out from the rest of the terrain, save a small dip in the landscape. I looked both directions for a red bush in the shape of the letter Y. I only saw a few possibilities but they were completely covered in snow. I had to kick the snow off of each to get a better look at their color and shape. After removing the snow from half a dozen bushes, I found one that did resemble a letter Y. But only a vague resemblance. I removed the gun from my coat pocket and surveyed the frozen water, looking for a clue as to where I should aim. I shot a hole in the ice where the shadow of the Y's three lines connect. The hole wasn't big enough for my hand so I gouged it wider with the heel of my boot. I got down on one knee and plunged my hand into the frigid water before my nerves took hold. The water was so cold my hand went numb. I moved my senseless hand around the bottom of the creek. It was about a foot deep so I could feel nothing up to my mid-forearm but I could reach bottom. I had been too senseless to ask Sawyer what it was I was supposed to find, so after finding nothing, I dug into the creek bottom a few inches.

Nothing was there that I could tell. I latched on to a handful of pebbles and pulled my arm out of the fiery cold water. I dropped the rocks on the ground and put my icy hand under my arm to try and warm it.

I paced around the side of the creek, trying to generate bloodflow. First it was just my hand that was cold but the sensation started to work its way through my body. As I was walking in circles a reflection of light caught my eye. I stopped. I watched in the direction it had seemed to come from. Everything was still and calm, the sky clear, no birds chirped. Another flash. I knelt down and picked up a single black stone from the pile of rocks I had taken from the creek. It was perfectly round. It was cool but not cold and colored a dark green that seemed to shift in appearance at each moment. One second still and opaque, the next, radiating with a light shimmer, occasionally shooting small flashes of light. It looked like a storm brewing inside of a miniature fortune teller's ball. I had no doubt this was the item I was sent for. I had no idea what its use was but I knew it was something beyond my understanding. So I put it in my pocket with the gun and slowly trudged back to the cave.

When the grotto came into view, Sawyer and Squirrel were waiting for me. I grasped tightly onto the mysterious stone.

## Part IV: Black Smoke 1901

### Chapter 1

I approached the cave. Sawyer and Squirrel made no big show at my arrival. Simply stood and waited.

“She’s waiting inside,” said Sawyer.

“Who?” As soon as I spoke I realized how dumb it must have sounded. Who else could it be? I looked at Squirrel but he made no sign of recognition, then bowed his head to the ground and ate a mouthful pine cones. I looked back to Sawyer.

“He loves the things,” he said, shrugging. “I don’t get it either.” Then he nodded his head toward the entrance to the cave.

There was a small fire when I entered the cave. Light was dancing on the walls in a ghostly arrangement. “Sit,” a voice said. So I sat. And then she was there, sitting across the fire from me. It was the same old woman who had given me the gun in town and later shot at me point blank. She showed me a black stick of some kind, and held it over the fire.

“Here I am,” I said.

“Shut your mouth.” She pulled the black stick back from the fire and I saw it was a candle that glowed curiously. The flame flickered in a way that was unlike other candles I had seen. As I was trying to get sense of the flame, she tilted the candle and dripped black wax on her forearm. Her flesh sizzled as the scalding wax made contact.

My own flesh began to feel too warm and I scooted back from the fire. Her eyes darted from her arm to me. “Do you know why you’re here?” she asked.

“To kill a man.”

“Not precisely.” She continued letting hot wax fall on her arm. Finally she let up and returned her eyes to me. “Because I have questions. About you and every other person. You’re experiments to me. All of you.”

“I don’t think I like that.”

“Don’t talk. This isn’t the time for an opinion.” She studied her arm at some length. I had a million things to say but did not open my mouth. “That stone in your pocket, it revokes your opinion when I wish it to. But it is many things, as you will find.”

I watched her – the way she talked, the study she put into the wax on her arm, the way the fire made her image tremble. I felt a faint pulse coming from the stone in my pocket.

“Your life is yours,” she said. “I have but briefly borrowed it. It will be returned to you.”

I put my fingers on the stone in my pocket and rubbed them across the smooth surface. It calmed me.

“The most common result of an experiment is failure. You are doomed to fail me. But I have read the rest of your story in the wax.” She showed her arm to me. “This is the rest of your life. I know how many days there are, how many heartbeats are left.” She held her forearm over the fire and rotated it back and forth like a spit that can’t make up its mind which way to spin. Then she took her other hand and rubbed the wax into a thin, even film on her skin. She took the arm away from the fire and blew on it to cool the

overlay. After a few moments, she pulled the waxy layer off, rolled it into a ball and held it up. “This is your life. The stone in your coat pocket is someone else’s.”

I pulled the round stone out and pressed it tightly in my palm. When I built up the nerve I opened my hand and looked into the stone. I saw light swirling and intermittent flashes.

“Do you see her?”

I couldn’t see anything in the stone but my mind filled with images of Dee, though I couldn’t picture her clearly. Everything was blurred and moving too quickly to focus on, but I knew it was Dee.

“The next person will see you in this,” Beryl said, rotating the wax ball in her fingers, “just like you see her now.”

“I don’t see anything.”

She looked at me like a parent does to a child. “I told you not to speak and you disobey me with a lie?”

I didn’t say anything. It took more energy than usual to say what I had before. The cave felt different to me. The air hung heavy and there was a feeling of what I can only describe as compression. A kind of squeezing.

“Your time in here is done. You’ll never set foot in this cave again. We have reached the moment when you go into Black Medicine and fulfill your role as my experiment.”

I stood even though I didn’t want to. My brain told me not to follow her commands but my body did anyway. I put the small stone back in my pocket.

“Don’t lose her,” Beryl said. “She will guide you to the necessary place in town.”

I started to leave the cave and she said my name.

“Vauxhall Benton.”

I turned around.

“Go live the life I’ve let you have,” she said. I could see the fire reflecting in her eyes and it didn’t seem out of place.

I walked out and stood next to Squirrel. He was still eating the pine cones. Sawyer was watching with an amused look on his face. It was the most relaxed I had seen him.

“Did you get a word in?” Sawyer asked.

“Not many.”

He nodded.

I reached up patted Squirrel on his side. He moved his body away from me as much as he could while still keeping his mouth within range of the pine cones.

“Animals know what they want. And what they don’t,” Sawyer said.

I calmed myself again with the smooth surface of the stone, and started walking toward town.

“Don’t get lost,” Sawyer yelled to me just before I was out of range.

I turned and held the stone up to him.

He didn’t respond, just watched me until I started walking again.

## Chapter 2

I didn't notice at first but the stone in my pocket was leading me back to town. It urged me on in the right direction. Eventually I was on the same road into Black Medicine that I could not avoid seven days earlier. But it looked different now. Snow covered the town and it almost looked inviting. Smoke poured out from nearly every chimney and I dearly wanted a good hot meal. I watched closely for people who might recognize me as I walked through the streets. Luckily, with the streets covered in snow and ice, there were fewer people around than last time and the citizens that were out were closely watching their step to avoid slipping and falling.

The stone took me down the main street to the other end of town, which was only about a five-minute walk. Once I was nearly out the other side of town, I sensed a need to stop. I paused in the street and viewed my surroundings. On the left side of the road were two small, empty buildings. On the right, there was a gambling house and a post office. The windows of the gambling house were soaped and I thought that was the likelier place for Wells to be.

I slowly walked to the side of the building. My hand was on the gun in my pocket. I tried to peek around the corner and through the window but the windows were thoroughly soaped, obscuring all vision. I was debating how long I should hold out and whether this was a good place to confront Wells when the door to the post office opened. There he was in the flesh, standing in the doorway, talking to the postmaster. I was in plain view if he happened to look my way but he didn't. I quietly sneaked over to the corner of the post office.

When Wells descended the stairs I walked out into the open and lifted my gun. He saw me and stopped.

“I knew you were too stupid to stay away,” he said.

He didn't have his shotgun with him. “Where's your iron?”

“On my hip.” He was wearing a long dirty duster jacket that covered him down to his knees. He didn't appear scared at all.

“Remove it slowly and toss it on the ground.”

“Or what? You going to shoot me with that cute little thing?”

I spotted a crow perched twenty feet behind on a post. I fired a shot just over Wells' shoulder and plugged the bird. It squawked loudly and fell over in a cloud of feathers. Two young boys ran out, quickly grabbed the bird and disappeared. Wells slowly took his gun from its holster and tossed it on the ground.

A small crowd was gathering. The post office and the gambling house had emptied and we had eight or nine onlookers. A few more were slowly making their way down to see what was happening. Then I saw Herbert and Emmaline Ipper walking toward the crowd. I began to feel stomach sick. I regretted being there. I bent over and picked up Wells' gun and tossed it to the side, well out of his reach.

“What do we do now?” asked Wells.

I turned and looked at Emmaline. “I wish I could pay you.”

“What?” Emmaline looked confused.

“I tried but I don't think you got it,” I said, knowing that the coin I left on the path was long gone and probably spent by now. I started to tear up and I couldn't stop. “I

thought I might die so I left a silver dollar for you on a path in the woods.”

Wells started laughing.

“Shut up,” I yelled at him. “Just shut up!”

Emmaline picked up Wells’ gun and pointed it at me.

“I tried to pay you. I want to do right by you,” I pleaded.

“Looks like she really wants her money,” Wells said.

Emmaline was making a face I couldn’t read. Was it anger or fear? I couldn’t tell.

She pointed the gun at my leg and shot me in the thigh. I grabbed my leg and fell down.

The pain was beyond any I had felt before. Emmaline ran to my side. She pointed her gun at Wells and told him to back up. “You are an idiot,” she said.

“You shot me,” I said.

“Sheriff Keego is running this way right now. If he had caught you with a gun on Wells, he would have shot you dead and been perfectly justified.”

I glanced behind me and saw Keego running down the street in our direction with a shotgun.

“What is wrong with you?”

At that question, the stone started to vibrate in my pocket. I took it out and looked into it. The storm inside was more intense, the flashes more frequent.

“What is that?” she asked.

“A problem.” I sat the stone on the ground, aimed the copper shooter at it and squeezed. It exploded into a great cloud of concentrated black smoke that was so dark it seemed unreal. A scream was heard from a long distance away. Seconds later, the ghost of Dee was barreling down the road at a great speed toward the cloud. She flew through

the black smoke and came out the other side only to tumble on the ground. She looked dazed. She slowly stood up and glanced at the crowd before picking up her shabby black hat and wiped the snow off. She placed it on her head.

“Where am I?” Dee asked.

Sherrif Keego had arrived and everyone waited for him to answer. He squinted, trying to bring this strange scene into focus. “You’re in Black Medicine, Dee.”

Dee inhaled then bent over and grabbed two handfuls of snow. She looked surprised and happy. But before Dee could enjoy her physical form, Beryl walked out of the cloud of black smoke. She had the copper gun in her hand. I looked down at my own which was now empty.

Beryl looked at me and said, “The experiment has failed but I’ve learned a little about why.”

“Who is that?” asked Emmaline.

Before I could answer Emmaline, Beryl shot Dee in the chest. Keego yelled for Beryl to halt but she walked back into the smoke and vanished.

Dee was probably dead before she hit the ground. Three or four people ran to help her but it was no use. Dee was one of the discarded people, never meant to be alive or dead, but somewhere in between.

### Chapter 3

*Emmaline,*

*I'm not sure I'll ever be able to explain what happened. I wrote it all down but I have a hard time believing when I read it back to myself. I've tried to leave town countless times but I always end up back here again. In Black Medicine. I also don't know what happened to my bullet and knife wounds. They faded away as quickly as that black smoke, like a tent revival miracle. I know that doesn't make you feel better, though. The mysteries are many and the answers are few. And I'm left trying to make sense of it. I haven't seen Dee, Beryl, Sawyer or Squirrel since that day in front of the post office. They've abandoned me after abusing my senses and stripping me of what I thought was my sanity. Now I know there is no such thing as insane, just various levels of uncanny people who see and know different things. I went out for a walk the other day and saw a moose. I tried to get its attention but I only made it angry. I probably could have gotten myself killed, but here I am writing about it. Here I am writing about all of it. Sitting in a chair, thinking about my future, wishing I had a black candle to tell me what to do.*

## Part V: Marianne 2016

John Bismarck was the unofficial town historian of Black Medicine. He spent his free hours after shifts at the concrete plant leafing through census reports, minutes of city meetings, and any other documents he could get his hands on. When he received a call from Marianne Beech concerning a genealogy that led back to his town, he was happy to assist.

Marianne met him on an overcast Sunday. The town was nearly empty as Clifton drove down Main Street toward City Hall. Marianne was in the passenger seat working on a crossword puzzle. John waved to them as they parked.

John was close friends with the Mayor and was able to borrow the keys to the hall to accommodate Marianne's visit. After brief introductions, they walked down to the basement. John pulled a blue binder off a bookshelf and sat it on a table for Marianne.

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"Where's the rest of the letter?" Marianne asked.

"That's all we have," John said. "No one knows what happened to the remaining pages."

Marianne thought about what she had just read. The long account of Vauxhall's first few weeks in Black Medicine. The beginning of a letter he had written to her grandmother, Emmaline.

"Those are the only two documents in your grandfather's belongings that refer to any supernatural happenings. After that, at least on paper, he let it go," said John.

"Was he crazy?" Marianne asked.

“I don’t think so. He was a good mayor, and helped this town a lot in the 1920’s. But there are no records of him leaving this place once he arrived. And there are others who have spoken of supernatural occurrences in Black Medicine, but not with the detail of Vauxhall Benton. Then he buried the story in himself. No one knew of this account until he passed. It was supposedly found in a file behind his bookshelf.”

“Have you ever seen anything strange, Mr. Bismarck?”

“I can’t say that I have.”

Marianne turned to Clifton. “I’m ready to go now, Cliff.”

Clifton smiled awkwardly at Mr. Bismarck. “It was a long drive. We should be going.”

John and Clifton shook hands while Marianne started walking up the staircase.

When they got in the car, Marianne found a silver dollar on her seat. It was a Morgan silver dollar from 1897. She squeezed it in her hand. She could feel a faint pulse. She looked up and saw John Bismarck on the steps of City Hall, waving goodbye. The building was old and she lowered her head so she could see the whole facade through the glass of the windshield. Inside one of the top windows she saw two figures watching. Two people she had seen before and now she knew both of their names. Beryl and Dee.

Clifton backed the car out of the parking space, and drove down the road that led home.

Afterword (Poetics)

Cowboys Talking to Ghosts of Themselves

I was brought up around campfires. By the side of a lake, with gutted and fileted trout cooking in a black pan. Tales of the Holy Ghost swirled around the fire and it was hard to separate the spirit from the smoke. Bull-riders, lumberjacks and people that pushed forward were around the fire. My father played country music in his truck on the way there and the way home. Other mornings we would sit in a hunting blind. Decoy ducks floated and bobbed on the water as gracefully as the real waterfowl, and we would sometimes mistakenly fill the plastic imposters with birdshot. But usually it was a real duck. One moment in the sky, the next, webbed feet up in a pond. This was my childhood: outside on the hills, swimming the lakes, rowing a boat to a promising trolling hole. Then, when I was twenty-one, I moved to the city and everything changed. Things were tighter, faster, gridlocked. The air was stuffy and smelled like machinery. Grocery stores had long lines and I had no idea where the vegetables came from. I felt the same sense of claustrophobia I got from long road trips in small vehicles with few stops. Two totally different ways of life forced into one body. Open spaces were gone, and the city was now my reality. But when memories are strong it is sometimes difficult to keep them at bay.

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Westerns are often about the land as much as the character. Sometimes it's difficult to separate the two at all. In *Playing Cowboys*, Robert Murray Davis says, "In the traditional western, the very expanse and grandeur of the country refines and deepens the hero's character" (Pg. 58). Maybe that open space attracted me. When I was young we would sometimes watch a John Wayne or Clint Eastwood western film. Those movies are full of open country. They were only passing entertainment to me at the time, but I

think the landscapes buried themselves deep in my mind to be dug up years later. Movies like *The Searchers*, packed with sand, enormous rock formations and frontier houses lost in the vastness like bottles at sea. Or *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, with its final showdown in what looks like an arena full of tombstones. The characters have to endure the land, survive it. But they always come back to it. In *True Grit*, Rooster Cogburn is never at his best in town. He's a drunkard and lives in a squalid room behind a grocery. Town is a dungeon that must be escaped from for his talents to surface. It's a place where drink and comfort and entertainment are easy and they breed laziness in him. He's content to be sloshed and amused. But the land makes him work. The openness makes him better, makes him useful.

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I didn't start reading westerns until I moved to the city. I started with Louis L'Amour books such as *Hondo* and *Ride the Dark Trail*. My grandfather read Louis L'Amour books, which I suppose is where I got the idea to give them a try. Those were the only books my grandfather would read. He's probably read every one of L'Amour's books five times, and L'Amour wrote a passel of them. My problem with those stories were the typical issues that get associated with genre writing: interesting concepts filled with lackluster, stereotypical characters. Davis later says in *Playing Cowboys*, "... the plains, without obvious forms of definition, threaten the mind because they give it nothing to reflect on or perhaps because they reflect nothing to the mind and thus expose its emptiness" (Pg. 60). This excerpt is discussing the effect on the mind from the land but I couldn't help thinking of the characters in some of L'Amour's westerns. The main character with the obvious traits: a weather-beaten, laconic loner. Those stories had the

landscape but they lacked the strangeness and complexity and possibility of great books. They didn't reflect anything back to me. Then I found Larry McMurtry, in particular, his novels *Leaving Cheyenne* and *Lonesome Dove*, the latter still a contender for my favorite book. Both of those novels had gray area, the tug and pull of conscience, oddity, and great women characters—something that had been missing from many previous westerns I had experienced. The women had story arcs of their own, struggles unique to each, and conversed with each other about things other than just the men. There were also male characters that had more to them than just being tough.

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I didn't grow up in the west of those stories. But I did grow up in the west and saw remnants of that time period scattered throughout the landscape just below the busy surface. Artifacts like my uncle's nineteenth century lumberjack saws. Or the Wells Fargo bank in French Corral, California, near where we lived, built in 1849 or so. The Red Bluff rodeo each spring. The characters in western films and novels were admirable. They were simple, could make do, had no time for frivolous things. They were as essential as the saw, the old bank, or the rodeo – or so the books and movies told me. The western is about good against evil. Historically, morally ambiguous or conflicted characters were not used in these stories. I wanted to play with the moral clarity of Vauxhall Benton. Make him an anti-hero by way of him cutting corners to gain a living and by stifling him with the inability to complete planned law breaking by him not being able to stomach the situation. I wanted a character that was scared of ghosts and of his decisions in life.

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The domestic ghost story typically takes place in a house. Sprawling Victorian mansions of western culture with mysterious doors left unopened and staircases that rise to corridors leading to the unknown. In *Playing Cowboys*, Davis says, "... the building is so isolated that there is nowhere to go. Space is a trap." He later says, "The climax comes when the spell is broken, the walls breached actually or metaphorically, light shines in the darkness, and the values of the simpler, purer, and more pious outside world—public, collective, modern, and rational—are reasserted" (Pg. 61). The world of the supernatural prefers the confines of limited domestic space, as opposed to the vast landscapes that refined the characters of western stories. Horrors like to keep you close but open land pushes you ahead. The horror story uses space to bind you, to keep you within reach, to set you up. In *Lost in the Funhouse*, John Barth says the character "... continues to swim—but only because blind habit, blind instinct, blind fear of drowning are still more strong than the horror of the journey" (Pg. 5). The horror story and reader know this. You are expected to keep moving, in circles. They are counting on it. And what is a funhouse if not a house of horrors? Mirrors that distort our image, latticework hallways designed to disorient us. Barth says that while you're in the funhouse "You think you're yourself, but there are other persons in you" (Pg. 81). The confined space and grave possibility bring out aspects of our personalities we might not usually see. Things that we have buried deep down that our brains think we need to escape. A cunning side, a cowardly response, our greatest ability to make poor decisions, a surprising viciousness. Enclosed space is a trap. One you may not recognize as you enter. And breaking the spell might not be as simple as you would hope.

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Cowboy movies weren't the only ones playing in my childhood home. I watched *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* movies. My mother hated them and, just to goad me, claimed that she had fallen asleep in 1977 while watching *Star Wars* in a theater. Then, at about the age of twelve, I stopped watching them and became a sports fanatic. But these space operas also dug into a comfortable hibernation spot in my brain only to reemerge later. In *Zen in the Art of Writing*, Ray Bradbury says, "Buck Rogers, I realized, might know a second life, if I give it to him. So I breathed in his mouth and, lo!, he sat up and talked" (Pg. XII). I was never made to feel ashamed of watching cowboy or science fiction movies like Bradbury was, so I didn't need to rescue or revive my love, I just had to remember it. What was it about those types of stories that spoke to me? I think it had to do with distance. Seeing lives and dramas played out through a spyglass from a great distance of time or dimension. The people in those stories were like me, but at the same time they weren't. The places the action unfolded was unlike the location I watched from, but they also had a thread of similarity that pulled me through the story with a feeling of connection with the landscapes and characters.

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I needed to remember the things that spoke directly to me. I had to go sifting through all of the trinkets and detritus that had piled up in my life, the things that aren't missed when they're peeled away. I didn't have to revive the things I found, they were never dead, just resting, waiting. What I discovered when I dug into myself was open space, places not confined in micro-apartments and sub-compact cars traveling five miles-per-hour through six o'clock traffic after a long day in a cubicle, a sub-category of the modern horror story. A western might have been the way I wished to feel, but it

wasn't my reality. My reality was gridlock, and slow hours under fluorescent lights with mid-level supervisors pushing us to keep a maddening pace. I wondered what might happen if cowboy characters were put in a tight spot, in a funhouse, a house of horrors that reflects back images that are not life-sized, but much greater or smaller—distortions. I wanted to puncture the thin film between the supernatural and the natural, and leave these characters that are used to unlimited space enclosed in a small logging town that won't let them leave. I wanted to put a western, a ghost story and pieces of meta-fiction in a bottle, shake it, and see what happens. The western brought me back to my history, even if one I never truly experienced; the ghost story lined up with my current, smaller, confined life; and meta-fiction opens up an area that I've yet to explore but have great hope for. It is turning out to be something other than what I thought it might or could be, which is good and bad. I have to fight myself to kill cliché whenever possible, to breathe something interesting into characters, and prevent it from turning into a murky brown on the palette. But I also have to remind myself that murky brown is a necessary element to many interesting things.

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I know westerns and ghost stories like Carol Maso knew her father. In *The Art Lover*, Maso tells her dad, “It came from your love of seeing, your love of simile and metaphor. Your love of me, I'd like to think” (Pg. 50). This is a sobering excerpt. I have a certain kind of love for genre fiction, for what it can do, how it can paint pictures in our mind and make arguments more approachable by the disguise they wear. But no matter how you dress it up—in a wizard's cloak, or cowboy boots—they are all ways of telling the same stories. They are the dressing that makes the vegetables more palatable. Maybe I

daydream about the open land of westerns because it reminds me of being young or I'm being coaxed to find a way back. It could just be a fascination with a bygone era that has taken on a mythic status but in reality was mostly hardscrabble living and scraping by off the land. Is it just a form of escapism? I would like it if I knew for sure that I used genre as a medium for understanding the world and myself better. But I don't. I might just be a little boy playing with action figures on the page, putting them in deadly situations to see if I'm in the mood to help them find a way to safety or redemption—or if I'm in the mood to let them suffer and learn things the hardest way possible, if at all. Am I trapping characters in the town of Black Medicine like I might have trapped an ant under a glass when I was younger? Is there something to be gleaned from watching a helpless creature scurry around under surveillance, and do I feel that I'm now the ant under the glass, trapped and being observed? I'm not sure how it would help me if that were the case. If I can't exit the funhouse, it might be advantageous to leave closer observation alone and let everything just play out as it will. Let ignorance be the compass and allow chance to decide the outcome. But I think every person has a hard time doing this to varying degrees. We are hardwired to be curious, built with the materials of exploration. I want to locate a new place that resembles another and find out why it is different and interesting. I want to discover what haunts the place, and what the ghosts look like, and what they have to say, and why. I want to get back to places I've never been and see them all over again.

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That is why I love genre. That is the reason I went looking for it again. The reason it's necessary. There is a certain thing that I'll find when a man walks into Black

Medicine and can't leave. I'm not sure what it is but I want to examine everything along the way. I want to see why both a ghost story and a western are crammed into one person and why they are difficult to untangle. Dressing things up helps me see them for what they are with clearer vision. And when I pull back the layers, it's almost always a mirror inside.

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