

“Heed the covenant, for the dark places of the earth are the habitation of cruelty.”

Psalms 74:20

Still Night

BEN SAMUEL

*A baby screams in the still night, lubricious and waxy it spills onto a stony floor a
slippery rug of gore beneath it. It peers up with dull grey eyes on a dull grey night.
The child slithers and claws, brindled with clots of grume. It's grey skin shines in
the moonlight. Plump limbs circle the air in obscure motions like a blind, mad
conductor.*

*The woman's pale legs crumple in mute deference to the child, a pink mouth
parting. The trees bob and sway in the wind. The glistening annulus expels its
deflated amnion and now it mouths wetly. The conjoined things now fall silent.
Purple tubing jostles in the breeze. The pale thing still moves mutely as a thin slice*

is taken from the moon. A powdery feculence covers the child. The splayed legs lie stiff and sculptural. The child blinks sightlessly. No one watches over the child and it begins to mewl again.

Clouds gather with a resolute malignancy. They split and darken the night yet further. The child dozes as the frosted stone around him darkens and he himself glistens with waxy and sullied waters. He broods beneath the natural onslaught. His hands grope the air. A pale eldritch glow fills each eye. The spraddled legs do not move, they glow pale there in the half-light. The moist hole from whence the baby came now winks darkly. The dense tapestry of gore beneath the child crinkles in the breeze. The jangling rope between mother and son leads away into the black. The baby plays a tuneless lament upon it, croaking and miming meaninglessly. The sprawling creature swims myopically through the glade held aloft on moonlight frosty sparkles. Cool rock against tender skin. Its lips tremble and purse against toothless gums.

In the still night snuffling things take in the metallic odour of the tiny head, black wet noses and glassy stygian eyes, rasping tongues and blunt teeth. A palpable evil grows darkly. The baby glows in that blank and immutable solitude. The silver blade of the moon crests the serried and toothy mountaintops. The baby and mother glow luminously. The mother lies dead, her wanton loins now dry and infecund, protruding strange and jangling viscera. The smell of cunt and baby now separate in the cool night air. The baby slumbers within that strange and palpable blackness the visceral rope taught and twisted. Dull and fleshy he wriggles, grasping the rope with determined idiocy. Blinking its wan and misted eyes, flopping its crusted head metronomically. It lies there as a hoar frost gathers, its

tiny head capped in an integument of pale crystals. It grows still in its stony cleft as quiet as the rock and tethered there like an anchor of flesh made real from mans worse imaginings.

A man wanders up from the glade edge, a slouching man with an indifferent swagger. He walks hunched and undignified wearing his torn and muddy-bottomed nightware. He stops in confusion and cranes nervously at the sight. Beyond the glade his house fires burn. The infant cries within a speculum font of cracking frostwork. This hoary vagrant plucks the naked creature into his arms and swaddles it in the furs he carries. He wraps it in wolf and fox skins. The baby opens a black and toothless hole and wails a high and insensible wail an animal schreech. The man passes his drooping red-rimmed eyes over the moonlit slanted limbs of the mother, a pink mouth and the black and silky tuft above the middle. The hoarfrost sparkles within and builds with steady and inconsiderate beauty upon the exposed place. This wanton and rejected creature has birthed her mewling infant unto her death and has joined the creatures of the forest to feed and nourish them. He slices the life sapping umbilical vein with a penknife and turns to take this spurned and illegitimate progeny of the night back to his cabin. There he will nurse and warm him by his hearth, coddle and clean the mewling neonate with the rough and ill-prepared manners of a person unschooled in such matters. What convergence of fate and ill fortune spawned this infant son of the cool and spurious night, to call him hence from his cabin to find it cold and inconsolable upon the icy natal bed? The man deposits a dark spectral trail through the rime as he carries the infant to his homestead through the incommensurable blackness of the forest.

In time the mother's corpse becomes mantled with pall croaking birds. They will pick and disperse the flesh, pluck and clean the bones with fastidious disregard for her antecedence. The skull grins lipless and leathery. A nest of pale blue eggs will hatch in the sockets. The fluted ribs will fall into formless ruin like the architecture of some ancient people. The unforgiving Earth will cover the deliquescing body with a dark and fecund soil that conceals the formless female beneath, all thoughts of her shame and indignity forgotten beneath an integument of grass.

A peculiar halo surrounds the cabin. It steams beneath the moon in sharp and shadowy contrast. The chimney smokes in an unbroken line that reaches high and unending into an impalpable blackness filled with stars of startling clarity. The man shuffles and cuddles his screeching load. This bizarre purple baby born from the dark abstruse womb of the woods, manifest upon the rock by unseen design a dark and monstrous providence, still slippery beneath its swaddling skins. The man sits by the fire and regards the child by the motions of the flickering firelight. The face seems undulant and indistinct as the flames pass over the wrinkled features. The eyes move trance like, nacreous and continual, a guttering light flickers within. A child of the still night. The man peers into the sockets with rank and inseparable foreboding.

The cold gathers in dark corners and spreads its pale and twinkling carpet upon the edges of the world. Tree branches glisten with intricate sculptures of sparkling brilliance. A man wanders alone through the frost-coated pillars, a backwoodsman sullen and taciturn. He wanders with a deliberate pace. He moves like a man performing some ritual, un-enjoyed yet necessary. The cool grip of the cold tightens. The creak of moisture-less air. The crunch of frost under foot. The frost locker gives to him its frozen bounty, stiff yet strangely alive, small furry bodies caught in metal jaws coated in blood crystals paler than fresh blood. He releases them from their deaths beds, prying the rictus jaws and resetting the mechanisms. The traps remonstrate before their master then sit awaiting their prey alone upon the hardened ground a rusty jaw within a snowy bed. He checks the tracks and pries the traps; he checks the tracks and pries the traps. The silver moon forms shadows of spurious and misshaped origin.

Eyes watch him, insentient and a-goggle. Two dead boys dangle from ropes. Two marionettes of human decay swinging loosely bumping together, their frozen viscera jostling and their limbs stiff and blue. They stare forward, their eyes grey and lustreless. The bodies that spin there on their frosty ropes do so with strange and inconsiderate rhythm. They pirouette, shoeless and malformed with icy decay. Hearts as wrinkled as prunes do not beat, but shake and jangle within their bony cages suspended by the sundried muscles. The pristine snow is maculated with black syrup that drip, drips beneath the bodies.

Bats flutter overhead like shadows in motion within the black and starry solitude.

He passes between the corpses that curtain the pathway upon which he walks. He looks on them with an insouciant glance as he passes. He runs his hands along their slender ankles and parts them their flayed legs feel as hardened as tree bark. A canescence of frost gathers upon the dried muscle. He heeds not the foolish smiles of the scantily clad boys set in motion below their tree limb. He checks the traps that lay beneath them, morose and exact in his motions.

The woodsman returns to his home and reignites the fire in its hearth. He watches the flames lick the wood with recrudescant zeal rising from the ashy eye in the fireplace. The recurrent flames rise and fall and consume the wood he throws there. The windows of the cabin are etched with webbings of frostwork that emerge as the night bears on. A whistling emanates from the tenebrous wilds beyond the pane. The fire reaches higher and the chimney flu sucks the flames into its star occluded throat. The woodsman sits mute and solemn staring at the flames like an aureate idol of obscure and forgotten history. He sits alone in the cabin morose and solitary. On the mantle the eyeless skull of his father watches over him, the honeycomb passageways within the pale dome echo dully, empty but for the mould that grows within. The mould now fills the spaces where thoughts once flitted and the sockets peer onto the unending asperity of the dark and changing world.

The woodsman sleeps in his chair and wakes as a circle of pale light shifts across the hearth. The fire glows and bakes the remaining charcoal the ash ascends the chimney the smoke received into a blue and infinite void.

A knock on the door heralds the presence of a stranger. The woodsman rouses from his sleep and stumbles to the door. He perceives a uniformed man beyond the doorframe, an official in shirt and tie holding aloft a badge. Behind him in the frost a palimpsest of foot and hoof marks fading in the morning sunlight.

The officer asks questions about bodies in the woods, bodies that swing from trees. Two boys, he says, lost and never found, missing until now, found by bloodhounds. The woodsman shrugs and spits on his doorstep with senseless disregard for normal social conduct. The officer watches him with no small amount of sanctimony and suspicion. The woodsman's breath hangs about him as a cloud clings to a mountainside. He passes the officer in the doorframe and begins to urinate from his porch in a arc of streaming gold that glitters in the morning light foaming and steaming upon the ground. The officer holds a hand to his nose and coughs as he retreats from the stench of booze infused morning piss.

The woodsman does not finish the conversation but instead re-enters his house and shuts the door. The officer passes a note beneath the door and the woodsman picks it up and regards it for a moment confused. Then he takes it and burns it. He cannot read and cares little to learn.

II

Many people live in this place, littered across the mountainside as disparate and concealed from each other as they are from the town. No sense of community exists there and the townsfolk wander through the forest wearily and with suspicion.

Fires light the mountain at night and the townsfolk peer up at the black and perceptible triangle of darkness and see asterisms of flames hanging there. The mountain people pariah's with no desire to return, people whose purlieu is the night and who live there in rank and foreboding concealment.

At the foothills of the mountain near to the town the slopes are littered with potholes and cave entrances. The town's children play within the caves. They scurry through the tunnels like moles. They scratch their names over the paintings they find there, moose and wolf rendered in ochre pigment upon dank slate. The children etch their names over the pictures and pay little attention to the footprints and scratches they find there. They crunch bone beneath their feet.

The caves carom with screams and laughter. They contain abstruse secrets. A boy lies in that unreachable blackness, reclined and decaying his fluted bones looping his neck and leg broken. The child lies cloaked in darkness within the stone ossuary. A stalagmite grows through his ribcage. His bones mingle with those of another child, a curious child like him. She too explored the alluring darkness but found nothing below her feet as she crept there. She too decomposes in obscurity. She wears about her neck a leather strap threaded with carved bones and animal claws. Two soulless bodies separately slipping into the silt consumed within the nihilism of the earth's cavernous foundations.

The woodsman goes about his daily routine. He checks his traps, bobbing and stooping like a bird, collecting the frosty bodies he finds there. The midmorning light brings warmth and the man steams in the sunlight as he walks.

He watches the stream pass below, a twinkling line of sparkles in constancy.

Opposite, beneath a tree two people lie in passionate embrace a struggling writhing coupling of human bodies. The woodsman squats and watches with interest from the opposite bank. The couple entwine rhythmically bobbing and shuddering. A squirrel jumps amongst the branches above them paying little attention to their salacious activities. The man whimpers and relaxes. His buttocks quiver and he collapses between the spraddled legs of the woman.

There beneath the tree, her fertile, yearnsome womb is filled with a seed of growing sin, its waits there within the obscurity of her body awaiting its release.

The woodsman squats and drops the sack he carries. He feels a yearning and enjoys the sight, he coughs in a sudden punctuation of the silence and the two people struggle suddenly to conceal their private parts.

The man shouts abuse as he struggles his trousers over his penis. His face is flushed and the woodsman laughs. Pointless and ineffectual insults are thrown across the stream and a beer bottle smashes against a rock nearby, the sound is as sudden and incongruent as the cough and hangs in the silence. The woodsman watches smiling, squatting beneath a willow. The woman struggles to her feet as a wet patch spreads across her skirt front. Her loins glisten beneath. The stones below are latticed with glittering slug trails. Her crooked pink vagina drools the pale spent seed upon the floor. She conceals her swinging bosom as she shouts obscenities in anger and excitement. He watches them, an almost forgotten arousal

growing within. He produces it from his trousers and strokes a fulgent rope of semen across the copper coloured forest floor a question mark of white.

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The others grow silent and retreat to the trees as the woodsman stands and buttons away his penis. The woman's eyes linger a moment longer than the man's. A solitary bird passes along the jagged blue line between the trees as the woodsman saunters away.

The woodsman hair rises peculiarly about his head. The air crackles with the suck of a growing storm. He pulls at an indistinct creature removing viscera efficiently from the body. A line of dead threaded upon a stick, pink and stiff, clotted and musty, wide eyed and empty of their vitals a furry mound of skins below. The trees shimmer in anticipation, they writhe below the coming storm. He watches the clouds darken and swirl, an iris of thunder and rain. The rains come and the naked bodies grow slick with running water.

The fire roars within its place, immense and incandescent the only light within the cabin. A supper of roasted rabbit. He hunches over his roasted flesh the savoury-sweet suck and sticky juices trace his beard. Within his dark eyes a flame dances. The reek of unwashed skin and tanned leather emanates from him in the solitude he keeps. Beyond his chair an aliform shadow fills the empty space.

Within this cabin the world exists, beyond the glass a blackness of immense solidity. The panes flash pale white as lightning flashes and four squares of light flicker upon the floor. A rat is revealed in one such square, its bristles glow in the light. Its perfidious eyes sparkle.

The woodsman throws each fleshless bone into the flames. They blacken and burn and the embers consume them. The rat shuffles from the bright revelations and into the shadow behind the chair. The woodsman stands and takes his fathers' skull from the mantle he examines it. He holds the venerable skull to the light and peers into the ever-shifting cavities that increase and decrease as the fire grows and shrinks. He looks on it as though it might speak.

The rat shifts through the shadows and slips beneath the floorboards lithesome, undulant, a rasp of fur as it passes. There it sits in complete abandon grooming its face with its tiny hands pushing its whiskers against its face. Below the floorboards a predator lurks with sly and greedy eyes winking in the blackness there. The pupils are wide and the rat grooms in ignorance. Yellow incisors open to a screech of fear and pain, then the body hangs limply in the cat's mouth. The cat holds its head high to drag away its prize. A trail appears, left behind by the rat's lifeblood. Other things lurk beneath the floorboards in the ever-gathering shadows, malefic, barbarous, sly and cruel.

A curtain of rain trails from floor to ceiling. He does not look up from his skull. He passes a finger into the eye sockets as the water pours. A bat unfolds and drops from its perch, it rotates the room deft and agile then it glides silently through a hole in a windowpane and away into the night. The woodsman replaces the skull and returns to his chair. He opens up a rabbits skull and sups the brain

from the cavity, cauliflower crumble and galvanic tang. The skull then cinders upon the fire, crisping to a black and ashy diminishment. The woodsman slurps a foul and cloudy fermentation a sour and turpentine tasting libation of his own concoction. It burns the throat and dulls the senses. His father's skull upon the mantle gnaws the woodwork with its blunted crooked teeth. The rear of the head is cracked inwards, the greening fragments nestle within the cavity, the bone stained with a rusty hue. The woodsman thinks about the couple fucking beneath the trees as he drinks his sour fermentation.

III

The woodsman wanders towards town through shafts of slanting sunlight. He is grubby and unclean. Blood stains his fingers and the tongues of his shoes flap at his ankles like those of an excited dog. He shuffles within a shadow cast by an unseen object as though he casts a shadow made by his own wanton and deviant thoughts. He seems incongruous, like a corpse brought to life from some distant unmarked grave. As he approaches, people shun and scurry away from him or stare in disbelief.

He moves along the shop front beneath the awnings. The flapping of his shoes sounds rhythmic and unharmonious. He does not regard the townsfolk he passes.

He passes into the store and there he wanders between the isles limping a little from an old injury to his knee and paying little interest to his fellow patrons.

Old men gather about an iron stove and watch the woodsman in attitudes of mistrust. They warm their hands but all eyes are trained on this filthy miscreant. He finds the right isle; magazines and books line the shelves there. He leafs through the magazines he sees lining the shelves, housekeeping and fashion. He lingers on the pictures of the models within the glossy pages and weighs delicately in the scale between hand and mind, the price against the weight of each volume.

Then he sees other volumes concealed on the top shelf and his eyes widen. He takes two without a thought. He crams the original volumes back into the shelves and pays for his salacious merchandise without a word to the storekeeper. The storekeeper regards the woodsman one eye is glassy the other half blind with glaucoma. He sees the woodsman vaguely and in silhouette. He claws away the mildewed crumpled notes that the woodsman throws his way. But he doesn't speak for fear of what the woodsman might say. The woodsman also buys also a bottle of whiskey and a spade. Then he wanders back to the mountain with flagrant disregard for the townsfolk. He holds the magazines before him and enjoys the aesthetic delights contained within as he goes. Mrs Penock watches as he goes a wan smile etched in red lipstick stretched across her face.

He sits again within his armchair as he thumbs the pages of his magazines. The images he sees startle and amaze him with their graphic carnal content. The images are venereal, immodest and detailed. He swigs his whiskey and remembers feelings long forgotten but now recrudescence within his loins, a yearning without release.

He thinks of the couple beneath the tree as he ejaculates onto the floorboards by his chair.

In the still darkness he digs a hole besides his shack, the window glows from within and lights the ground where he digs. He removes a square of earth and places a box beneath it. The box contains his shameful purchase and he hurriedly pats the earth back into place concealing his guilty pleasure within the raw earth then returns to his shack.

He closes the door on his lust and longing but thinks endlessly of the box beneath the frost covered earth as he tries to sleep. Before the nights end he will peel back the earth and once more pleasure himself between the rumpled pages.

He watches as a maggot pulses and crinkles within the cavity of a squirrel corpse besides his bed. He sleeps upon the ground amongst his dirty and ragged sheets. He shares his bed with fleas and bugs, a plague of insects with parasitic intent that dine hungrily on him. He thinks of his box of sin beneath the ground. Upon his shelf, high and venerable his father looks on with crooked toothy grin. His teeth green and his honeycomb skull contain only traces of moulding meat within the fractured dome. The shack raises a stink rank and sour, as does the man who inhabits it.

He wakes at noon, as is his want. His first act of the day is to urinate magnificently from his porch then he passes through the trees to where he squats like a frog and shits.

As he returns he sees people approach his shack. Nervous as birds they push and shove one another closer laughing and hushing. They are young folk from the town. He squats and watches them in silence from beneath a tree sitting within the dappled light there. They scurry and shove each other closer. They peer through the fogged glass and one boy raps on the door. They scurry away like frightened rabbits laughing and whooping as though go. He waits for them to leave then he returns to his shack without glancing in the direction they went in.

The rats beneath his shack multiply and the cat hunts there within the shadows. The carcasses it leaves behind stink. A burlap bag sits in the shadows a life's worth of savings in coins and paper. The rats have shredded the paper and they use it for their nests. Green renditions of great and noble men peer at the mewling rats offspring. The rats nestle within the myriad folds suckling at their mother's teats.

The seed of sin grows. It takes an aberrant human form, malformation on top of malformation. A sin manifested within the velvet darkness. The people notice the swelling and some begin to talk.

The woodsman wanders the mountainside gathering his food and continues his routine. He sleeps long hours and often does not see the sunlight in these short winter days. As he walks his trail he sees only the stars and the moon and carries with him a lantern that burns with an incongruent light upon the winter snows.

As he follows the tracks left in the snow he comes across the home of another mountain dwellers such as himself. He does not speak but instead watches from the still night. He stands wraithlike within the light of the windows and watches them about their routine.

He watches as a mother cooks a stew above an open fire. A child sits at her feet grinning toothlessly a string of drool swinging from its swollen lips. The woodsman watches from without. He holds a gory sack at his feet and opens and shuts its hemp mouth revealing the visceral load contained within. The still living viscera squirms inside, disclosed to the corruption of the air.

He watches the mother tend the fire and he sees her motherly bosom swing. He thinks of the salacious magazines he keeps below ground. They decay now beneath the soil, his seed vouchsafe to the earths crust pressed flat between the hallowed pages like specimens of herbs and flora, the glue that holds the pages together barring all further enjoyment.

The mothers face hovers over the stove, red, like a boil. She kicks the child away as it claws at her ankles. It's toothless mouth draws open into a howl. She slurps her stew and pays it no heed. Her pendulous bosom swings beneath her clothing. He drops his sack and fumbles at his trousers trying to unleash his excited member but falls forward as he does so, sprawling into the frosty

mud. The chickens nearby squawk and flutter as though in mocking laughter at this obscene lubricious phantom. He struggles his trousers up again as he raises to his feet. The mother runs to the door hearing the calls of her frightened fowl. With plump and doughy hands cupped around her face she peers through the soft falling snow towards the chickens.

He pulls his trousers back in place and squats behind a tree as he re-ties the string about his waist. He holds his sack by his legs like a peddler. The chickens continue their choral of squawks as he watches with licentious interest his flushed and plump-bodied siren. As she scans the clearing for an errant fox or intruder he watches her full and corpulent body in all its glory. Her oversized breasts strain against her clothing. Her flushed plump flesh glowing in the cold night air.

She sees his breath hanging beneath the tree and calls for her husband who languishes inside in a stupor of booze and lethargy. The woodsman steals short and tentative breaths beneath his tree and blows out in small stealthy clouds to hide his presence. He opens and closes the hemp annulus of his gory sack. Inside the squirming bowels reek of sweet, fetid digestion a steam emanates from the opening and drifts skywards. The chickens flap and flutter in agitation and the plump woman calls forth her drunken husband to ward away the intruder. The man stumbles to the doorway and throws a bottle into the trees. The woodsman runs like some demented Santa Claus through the snow and trees and away from the family. The woman screams and the man hurls abuse and empty bottles after him. He runs until there is no sound but the gentle sibilance of the wind through the pines and the crunch of snow underfoot.

The townsfolk talk of the dead boys in tones of fear and apprehension. They describe in detail the mutilations metered out on the boys, the eviscerated bodies, the torn and molested rectums. The details are faint and incorrect but the talk grows and the details grow. They feed one another the details they have heard and feel empowered in the knowing. Are they the first to tell? Do the words they whisper invoke in the listener excitement or fear or a lugubrious wail of indignation? The crimes the boys suffered become as legend, their torments indescribable yet distant from their real sufferings.

They suffer further ignominy as they lie in state on the mortuary slab. They are sliced and measured by disinterested men in white coats.

The police chief, a man of some intelligence and experience listens to the talk and remembers a boy long since forgotten. Upon returning to his office he finds the file pertaining to the disappearance. He thumbs through the old files and documents and sees a pattern.

The boy wandered up the mountainside 5 years ago in search of birds' eggs. His mother was a drunk and indecent person inclined to violence and had since passed on in a manner in keeping with her lifestyle. Perhaps the boy waits for his discovery somewhere on the mountainside. The woodlands are thick and vast and hide many things within their tenebrous slopes, hidden treasures and dark secrets. Perhaps if the chief looks he might find a clue and a pattern. He thinks of the woodsman pissing from his porch. That odious bearded miscreant ignoring normal social conduct.

The woodsman sits in a drunken slumber before his fire. He drools a little as he sleeps. The fire smokes in near extinction beneath the mantle. He awakens in time to see a rat scurry across the floorboards and he follows it with a well-aimed shoe. The rat secretes itself beneath the floor as the shoe slides through the dust towards it. The calls and hollering grow louder as though a war between phantoms rages beyond the windowpane. The baleful howls of hunting dogs are underscored by the shouts of men. The enfilade of sound draws near. He wanders confused and still half dreaming to the door and opens it to a bright snowy midday. Across his homestead a pack of wild and moiling dogs howl and sniff the ground.

Men in police uniform cross the pristine snow before his porch and the dogs' strain at their leads. They pass in a line and some turn to see this black and filthy man urinating in a spectacular arc from his porch. He buttons back his trousers. Then he fills a clay pipe and smokes indulgently as they pass. He watches this break in his solitude. The woodsman recognises the chief. He lifts a begrimed hand and waves. The chief peers back with sullen and weary expression. He watches the man as the search continues. The chief watches resting on his walking cane mute and sullen. He squints with one eye as though he intends to take aim at the woodsman.

Pheasants break from the undergrowth with startled cries and the dogs are sent into an ecstasy of barks as the two birds flutter away against the clear blue sky. The line of men passes out of view and on into the forest. The chief stands and watches in silence. The woodsman tries again to bid the man good morning but the

chief just watches until the woodsman returns to his ramshackle abode and shuts the door on the outside world.

Over a thin and murky soup the woodsman hunches. The fire burns meekly, the last vestiges of wood crumbling loudly to ash. He stares blankly at his bowl as wisps of steam rise to his face. He listens to the rats' scratch and scurry beneath his feet. They claw at the wood in incessant rhythm. Below his feet they shuffle, their fur rasping against the wood, their tails rasping against the wood also. They mate in inconsiderate orgies of insatiable procreative intercourse. The stench of rat piss seeps through the floorboards and stings his eyes. He takes a spoonful of soup and sucks chunks of carrot into his mouth. The broth spills in tiny rivulets down his beard. The fire then fizzles out and smokes.

A bat circles the rafters on membranous wings a strange vassal of the separate and formless shadows taken wing.

The woodsman starts in fear and confusion as a tree branch shatters the window pane and a tinkle of glass falls tunefully across the floor. The elements rage outside and a cold wind swirls the cabin dusting the floorboards with new falling snow.

IV

The woodsman wanders through the pristine snow depositing muddy indentations behind him as the snow falls within the silent darkness. He wanders the snowy vista in search of a lake. The path he takes is indirect and he ambles through the snow unable to find his usual track. This confused and directionless route takes him close to the towns edge and he sees the rising chimney smoke of the houses here and there and a faint whiff of wood smoke cuts through the cold crisp air. As the tree trunks give way to fence posts the Woodsman regards a man moving with industry through the falling snow.

A corpulent and bearded man sullen and silent side from the shuck! Shuck! of a plane against wood. The Woodsman pauses within the slanting tree limbs to watch this man. The man goes about his business in seeming ignorance of the world about him. He puffs and pants and he moves back and forth above the fence line, red and swollen cheeked with effort. The woodsman squats and watches as one might watch an animal about its business. The man moves about the mottled and mud fowled snow at work upon a crooked and ill made coffin. His tools lie amongst the wood shavings and wooden planks. The box under construction fills with snow. The sides of the raw timbre are mud fowled and warped. He passes an arm across his nose as he toils, planeing the edges of the wood and smoothing the joins.

Chickens cluck amongst the wood chippings and a Rooster pecks the earth knocking over a beerbottle that glugs and foams against the coffin edge. The man pays no heed to the Rooster, such is the level of his concentration.

The coffin itself shows no sign of a craftsman's touch, warped and badly bevelled as it is. The man intends to take no comforts with him, no velvet cushions or brass handles, just plain unvarnished wood. He intends to spend the afterlife within a box of his own construction decaying in silence beneath the soil of his own back garden. He runs a finger along the coffin top and feeling no splinters there, slowly but surely steps into the coffin and there lies there in the utter silence of that snowy morning. The rooster regards him foolishly tilting its head with its wattles shaking. The woodsman watched bemused and freezing against his chosen tree, like a lone unwanted relative at a surprise funeral. The coffin barley contains the man's corpulent flesh and his belly rises and falls above the wooden sides, snow nestles within the impression of his bellybutton. The seams of this box are bevelled and caulked with wax but so poorly made are the seams that the nails are visible and the untreated wood creaks, as the man appears to slumber. The Woodsman cranes his neck to see the man contained within his handmade eternal resting place. He wonders at the ritual and at the meaning of this obscure and absurd vessel. He sees the man there reach his pendulous fleshy arms from within the box and pull the lid into place. The lid fits unevenly and through the gaps the man's stomach rises and falls lifting the lid away from the base like dough rising within a lidded pot. Within that morbid silence the man weeps and the warped coffin lid shakes and slaps the base like a chattering clamshell. The man weeps, perhaps because he intends to leave this world and lie forever contained within this ill-conceived and poorly constructed receptacle. The woodsman does not know. But he leaves the man to weep within his box and continues along the mountains edge as the mewling fades.

He finds the lake beyond the trees and stands mute and sullen at the icy edge. He stands like a black stain against the unbroken white. The lake lies immense and immaculate like a great white yawning chasm amongst the tree.

The woodsman picks a slippery path towards the lakes edge but loses his footing and slithers like some ungainly legless creature down and onto the ice. He slides the snow away beneath his feet to reveal the surface and peers through the blue hued vitreous ice.

He takes out his pickaxe and hammers away at it. The fish that inhabit the lake move slowly below turning in deliberate circles. A crack of sunlight reaches through the murk and shifts obliquely through the sombre waters. The rhythmic thumps reverberate through the lake and the fish move in startled motions away from the sound. The pickaxe breaks through and a jet of water ejaculates from the tip. The woodsman works away at the ice scratching and scraping at the edges widening the hole rasping furrows, clawing at the edges until the hole is wide enough. Below him the ice creaks and groans in a tremulous fragility, solid yet precarious. The woodsman hunches over the hole and scoops the slush from it.

By the lakeside a deer wanders in nervous movements testing the air and placing it's feet onto the ice daintily. It wanders in ignorance across the lake a chill death awaits it beneath the ice. It sniffs the ground for food but finds nothing. The woodsman slips forward suddenly into the hole and releases a series of barking curses and blasphemous incantations. The deer turns sharply away from him and runs silently away across the lake shrinking in size with each bound a black dot

fading to nothing through the snow into a pale and infinite nothing. The woodsman sees nothing of this and continues his work.

Bleak and cold though this place is he sits in a pleasant reverie watching the snows build along the shaft of his fishing rod. The fishing line hangs as transparent as a spider's thread, the end concealed beneath the slush. Though he doesn't know it the ice cracks a little below his feet, the patterns intricate and beautiful beneath the snow. The fish turn laboriously about his line like sleek glass sculptures they pass through the shifting light. One fish strikes the bait and is hooked. The woodsman heaves it to the surface. The fishy blade of flesh flops through the slush and onto the surface birthed into the unfamiliar and savage cold. It flaps and maculates the snow with its lifeblood. The woodsman slices its belly and spills its organs. Grime and blood seep through the snow. With hands trembling he scoops more of the solidifying slush out of the ever-diminishing hole then returns the line and bait to the water. His face is creased with grime and blood. He is the grimy spectre of a forgotten mother, a forgotten father.

In hours of silence he sits pulling and gutting the fish that emerge from the ice, living, moving things born from the obscurity, appearing fully formed into an alien world dying within the unfamiliar elements in fear and ignominy.

He farts as he sits on his hams and he muses on the pornographic booklets below ground within his locker of sin. The animals that venture onto the ice do so without heed and they cross the ice without fear or understanding. Beneath the ice the waters lap and the fish move in stuporous circles of cold induced lethargy. The ice cracks in places and thins to a trembling fragility, concealed beneath the snow is the icy death that awaits the wandering animals. The fumarolic gusts from the

earth's mantle rise from the lake bottom and thin the ice above setting a trap for wandering beasts.

He squats before his ice hole and pulls out his supper. His seamed and filthy face creases still further as his pleasure increases. The bounty he regards slither and mound like polished stones iridescent in the pale white sunlight. The man sits in a horrific isolation, a lone blot upon a white canvass, an incongruous being in a tangible solitude. He watches as a small bird takes flight from the trees. It hangs within the falling snow seeming not to move but only to flutter within a moted suspension.

The townsfolk talk of an impending doom, a growing fear contained within the darkness beyond the town.

Mrs Penock talks in hushed tones before the supermarket doorway. She releases worrisome clucks and shakes her head in mute and disapproving jerks. Her grey and bespectacled sisters nod to one another and point towards the mountain with crooked arthritic fingers like those of a crow. As they talk they pass between them a vanity mirror and admire a simulacrum of their own features within. Their eyes wrinkle in cant talk that brings pleasure to each with sly and lipless smiles. They talk of the murders and they talk of other mysteries, a swollen belly and a sin in embryonic form. A secret, hidden behind stretched and swelling skin. The fatherless thing grows in manifest sin. Mrs Penock nods and whispers of the brother. But the days of sin and revelation are upon the grey, nodding sisters and they pat each other's hands as they go on their way, peering at the people they

pass with pious and censorious eyes concealed behind blank reflective glass. Like eyeless chickens they walk the streets clucking and shaking their heads.

The town sits beneath a blanket of flaccid and muddied snow. The cars pass by with a sibilant creep like beetles of nightmarish proportions. Their shiny carapaces glint below the streetlights as the young folk cruise for amatory delights.

A man slumbers like an errant bear within the sepulchred shadows of an alleyway. A dog licks at a pool of white vomit that surrounds his head an aureole of impious behaviour vomited upon the tarmac. The dog finishes its meal as it peers coldly into the shadows. A beard of white foam surrounds its mouth. It trots along stopping once to urinate besides a drainpipe. Along the alley it walks and sniffs. It's nostrils twitch as it takes in the scent of cunt and dick. A couple fuck beyond the streetlights and the dog passes between their legs and on without a glance to the libidinous pair of shadowy fuckers. The dog catches sight of a cat and gives chase. The cat scurries with horrent fur between wooden railing and up along the fence top on fleet and dainty feet. The dog barks impotently beneath and watches as the cat saunters away with tail high and button ass on show. The cat stops in complacency and cleans itself as the dog watches, snapping at the air with foolish rage. A rectangle of orange light spills into the alleyway as a room light flicks on. The whistling pitch of an air gun caroms the darkness and the dog runs away yelping. The cat tilts its head and a second shot ricochets across the tarmac. It drops from the fence in limp and lifeless surrender. It weeps pink, gelatinous goo and the ruptured matter contained within seeps forth in a hideous pink flow. A creeping

pencil smile of abject victory appears above the rifle sight, the insinuated pleasures of a thoughtless wretched man in wanton display of his monstrous lusts.

The street fuckers finish in ignorance and tumble in drunken and conceited warmth into the streetlights and stars. The town is reflected in splodges of light upon the wet and shimmering tarmac. There's the peeling note of car tyres on asphalt and the metronomic flash of neon upon the pitch. The punctuation of a bone crunch beneath wheels as a mouse in a mistimed adventure ends in the grinding of meat and the abrupt interruption of its final intention. Its body and mind uncouple from the world in an instant and its gory pigment maculates the tarmac. Flecks of needle fine rain glitter beneath the streetlamps as a rainbow cascade of infinite reflections passes through the light. A barely perceptible downpour fills each shaft and gives sheen to the myriad surfaces it touches. High above the hardware store from an open window a child cries then is silenced, a lady shrieks with playful abandon a beer bottle smashes and the glass tinkles as tunefully as a music box. This is the symphony of a night in the town the musicality of a tone-deaf orchestra playing with discordant and tuneless instruments. Beneath the floorboards of the houses rats gnaw and fuck, they chew the wood and spawn their pink and mewling offspring into the dark and filthy basements of the townsfolk.

Mrs Penock returns home from this night and locks the door behind her. She turns her back on the depravity of the night. The bolt slides across the door and a pinhole of light hits the wall as a miniature depiction of the world spills into the darkness. She places a milk carton on the kitchen table and pours a porcelain white puddle into a bowl. There she watches her face undulate within the milk and the world swims with her within the pale reflection.

The woodsman wanders happily through the niveous trees that sway and creak beneath their heavily burdened branches. He carries a rifle over his shoulder. A bird rises and dips above the trees with wings that slap against the breeze. The snow crunches as the tale of his wanderings is carved into the impermanent crust. He hunts game and follows the brown stained intaglio marks they leave behind. The quarry he seeks also wanders a lonely path, unaware of the man that stalks it. The trail leads him northwards towards a stream and he finds it. It bubbles ceaselessly beneath the snow-covered banks. He watches the water babble and sees above him a cave mouth. He makes his way to it and sits within the opening on his bent and frozen hams. He holds his rifle across his back and sits within the space like a pupil within a black and depthless eye or like a relic within a holy shrine.

The dull grey smoke trails of fellow mountain dwellers trickle skywards against the white snow flecked sky. The cave mouth yawns to swallow this squatting ignoble man. He lifts the rifle from his shoulders and trails the sight on the trees below. He peers through the slanting tree trunks towards a shack. He sees there a man, Bernal Hayes, in muddy overalls squatting and shitting like a dog. The woodsman passes the thin black crosshairs over the body and hovers over the eye. The man's face contorts in response to the painful stool he passes. The man re-buckles his belt and kicks snow over the shameful pile he leaves behind.

The woodsman scratches his nose with his thumb as snowflakes land there. He comes here often and has observed Bernal unnoticed. He keeps hogs penned

within a small square corral. Barbed wire tied from tree to tree . The hogs writhe together maculated and malodorous, snuffling the ground and snorting, they fart and squeal like horrendous manifestations of some scatological orgy. Their tiny pink offspring run amock beneath the wire and amongst the trees eager yet uneasy. Those that are crushed in the pen are crunched between their parent's teeth with apathy and disinterest.

The woodsman comes here often to watch the strange and undignified ritual that Bernal performs. Today Bernal retraces his steps through the new-formed snow with choleric and forceful exactness as though perhaps he hates the pigs that are his charge for the corrosion of his moral self. He stands hand on hip and he strokes his beard in an attitude of mock connoisseurship, regarding the jostling beasts as one might regard a whore in a brothel.

He picks one plump sow and scales the quivering wire fence. He places his jacket on one of the wire barbs and places his hands on his chosen pig. He pulls it into place and begins to rub along its flanks and rump in strange and dissolute rhythms. The hog turns a rotten turnip nonchalantly in its mouth impervious to the amorous being behind it, it's snub nose twitching, moistly, two foaming trails of saliva swing from its mouth as it chomps stupidly. It senses Bernal's lascivious intent with disinterest.

The woodsman watches through the gun sight training the crosshairs from ground to head to take in the full spectacle. He laughs to himself as he traces the trigger with his finger. Bernal Hayes slowly and stealthily removes his overalls to his ankles and angrily yanks his chosen hog into place, the hog squeals. A gunshot ricochets through the forest and a thin cloud of smoke trails from the cave mouth.

The hog scurries forward in fright and Bernal slumps into the mud half naked, undignified and frightened. He leaves an imprint in the steaming slops.

The pigs trample and squeal in recrudescant activity and Bernal Hayes struggles his overalls back into place and squats into forced abnegation in fearful guiltlessness wondering at the cause of the divine intervention and perhaps the judgment that may follow. He hears laughter from above and sees the woodsman regurgitated from the hollowed snow. He knows this man. He has seen him wandering the mountainside. The woodsman laughs again standing with gun slung across his shoulders and head bowed forward in stark and thoughtless incongruity with his surroundings. Bernal watches him, his brow creases with anger.