Spring 2018

The Last Cherokee of Blue Ridge

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THE LAST CHEROKEE OF BLUE RIDGE

by

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B.A. May 2014, Coastal Carolina University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2018

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ABSTRACT

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This work is an exploration into the life of a young queer man in the United States Army charged with aiding in the removal of the Cherokee Native Americans during the 1830s Indian Removal. It is my hope that my characters and setting bring attention to the politics of queerness and nativism in a way that has not been allowed by mainstream fiction.

This thesis is dedicated to God,

Karen, Josh, Mary, Ernest, Armatha, and Debby.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am indebted to the director of my thesis committee Janet Peery for her patience and years of guidance on my research and editing of this manuscript. Thank you to my mother and father, who taught me to always work hard and to never give up on what I believed in despite the number of obstacles that may be in my way. Thank you to Connor Pederson, who was the first reader of this manuscript, provided me my first feedback, and who I could always rely on to help calm my mind by comforting me with hugs, video games, and red wine. And special thanks to Drew Lopenzina, who exposed me to Native American scholarship for the first time, and in turn, gave the setting of this manuscript life.

Further debts are due to Annie Proulx's "Brokeback Mountain," Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, Christopher Isherwood's *Goodbye to Berlin*, Ron Rash's *Burning Bright*, and Garth Greenwell's *What Belongs To You*; to John McManus, who assisted me in finding a fully-funded position for my third year of the M.F.A program so that I could steadily write without worrying about finances (too much); to my fellow fiction-writing-classmates Ethan Ross, Chris Giofreda, Will Yarborough, Jackie Mohan, Christina Marable, and James Adams, whose courage, pencils, and minds assisted me in weaving together this tale of queerness, lies, and truths with strings of language and history; to Jennifer Slivka, for her eye for detail and love of literature.

The most thanks goes to God, who has blessed me with the ability to tell stories and without whom this could not exist, and upon whom all this depends.

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CHAPTER ONE

1838| A compulsion drew Gaskin from his Bible, made him get off his knees and go for a walk to the edge of the plain. The oilflame flickered and dimmed as he left his tent. He passed by the other soldiers, sleeping after their long day of traveling, walked nearly half a mile until stopping in front of a large elm. There was no bark. Only gray fungus around its base and on its roots, the wood a pasty white and gray. He turned the knob of the burner, reducing the flame to a light no bigger than a toothpick. For several days a foreboding image dominated his thoughts, the forest leading to Blue Ridge, referred to in stories as the wall between the realm of men and the realm of savages.

It was early morning and cold and breezy. Not far away a coyote howled. He placed the lantern on the ground then stood with his Bible in his hand. “What time I am afraid, I will trust in you, Lord,” he said.

The tapping of branches against one another filled the silence of the dark. He pressed his ear against the elm to hear the freezing of water collecting along the edges of its hollowed, burned out insides. He stood with his Bible pressed to his chest and prayed there for a long time.

As he turned to go and rest until first light, he saw a pair of eyes peeking at him through the bushes—a dog. He held up the lantern and waited to see where it would go. The dog sniffed the ground, sneezed, walked slowly. The creature seemed old and appeared to be finding a place to die. Twice its legs gave way and it lay there moaning and shaking and looking up at the stars. The sky stretched to the black shapes in the distance—the end of the Appalachian Mountains—to the east coast where the land was flat and warmer from the fires that had changed fields of tobacco, corn, and cotton to plots of fertilizer for next summer’s crop. The dog licked its nose

and paws damped of blood and dirt, and then stood and walked in circles. Gaskin shivered, watching the creature till it heard a noise and left. Then he turned and went back to his tent.

When the morning light broke the dark, Gaskin rolled up his bed and did not eat with others. He sat alone across from the wagon that carried his bag with all to his name: a blanket and pillow, a map of the state of Georgia, and his Bible. Once he left to go piss. Then he came back and waited until the rest of the company was done with their meals and had put away their tents. Northern winds had blown in to the camp after yesterday's rain. Men covered their faces with scarves and bandannas, but with the wind blowing against them, their skin burned, turned dry and flaky. They marched onto the road through the woods. The wind caused the trees to lean and the canvases of the packed tents to flap. Since they were traveling into it behind the horses pulling the wagons, the wind shoved the smell of dirt and the breath of the horses and shit and the leather of the reins into the soldiers' eyes and noses. Gales carried spits of rain and sleet in the air with blown up dust. Gaskin wiped his face, coppered by the sun, and followed the bend in the road to an opening where stood a barn and a cornfield. A cow and horses called with sudden violence, like cocks calling at first light.

Four Indians occupied the land, at least that was how many Gaskin could see. One of them was an old brown woman standing between the barn and field with her lips pressed tight and her hands gripping the handle of a pail of milk. The other three were children, girls cutting cobs off brown stalks.

Seeing the soldiers enter the field, the old woman called out to the girls in her native language. When she struggled for words, she rocked back and forth, causing the milk to slosh over the rim of the pail and onto the dirt. A thick vein ran down the side of her neck. She

trembled all over with nervousness, until the corporal, mounted on his black stud, moved before them and said, sternly, “It’s time to gather your things and leave.”

Corporal Clinton had a face of stone. His hair was gray and thin, beginning in a widow’s peak. His eyes were hazel, full of scorn, and an intimidating scowl that seemed to frighten the Indians. When he swallowed the spit in his mouth, the edges of the white prickles of hair on his cheeks and chin caught the sunlight and appeared to glow. He was a tireless, old man who Gaskin always tried to mind and flatter, addressed as corporal or sir, never questioned.

This morning the soldiers had come to remove Indians from their homes and force them to travel to a territory over a thousand miles away, west of Arkansas. People were calling it Indian Territory. Beside the corporal was Elijah, a childhood friend of Gaskin’s from outside of Savannah, wearing a threadbare butternut jacket and a cap. From kneeling during his morning prayer, grass stains smeared on the kneecaps of his trousers. The corporal ordered Elijah to take half the group to the barn to search for more Indians, while he stayed behind and listened and tended to the three girls and woman, who had put down her pail and was begging the corporal to not harm her family and their animals and land.

This was the first time Gaskin had seen an Indian. He’d heard stories from his father that they were lean and stupid, unable to read and write, like vermin riddled with diseases, and quick to fight. The four before him seemed quite the opposite: the oldest wore an apron and a rag over her head, a piece of straw dangling off the side of it, while the three youngest had on brown trousers, moccasins, and loose shirts that made it easy for someone to mistake them for young boys. Over their shoulders were sacks filled with corncobs. Behind them, rows of pulled up, empty stalks meant to be ground up and scattered about the field. The sun burned against the blue and green mist above the mountains. Light shone down on the cracked, dirt path covered in dead leaves and

dust that ran beside the barn, to a wood cabin that was presumed to be the home of the four Indians, to a small town less than a mile away.

"How long do we have?" asked one of the girls.

"Give ye ten minutes," said Corporal. "Drop what ye're doin' and then start heading west."

"I won't leave," said another one of the girls. She appeared the youngest, with two long braids and a mole below her left eye.

"Miss, ye'll march. Ain't no one staying behind."

The old woman gestured for the girls to be quiet. Corporal and those surrounding him followed.

Gaskin was part of the group sent to the barn, which was yellow with black shutters. Inside, the soldiers surrounded an old brown man standing in a heap of hay and carrying a pitchfork. Gaskin took out his bayonet. A wave of late morning light shone down through a hole in the barn's roof, hitting the spread of the brown man's face between his nose and forehead and revealing a scar running slanted down the right side of his face. The man poked a mound of hay with the pitchfork and slid it over the side of a stall holding heifers. Elijah strutted toward the Indian and it was soon after he began talking to the old man that, despite the threat in front of him, it dawned on Gaskin the quilt of muscle covering Elijah's torso thinned and flattened suddenly at his hips and small backside; however, down his legs were beautiful, strong, defined lines the same color as his chest poking through the top of his jacket, the rough skin on the palms of his hands, which were peach from the cold.

The old man appeared confused. He poked another mound of hay. Elijah stopped him. The man resisted. He managed to get one word out that Gaskin understood: stop. But Elijah did not let go of the pitchfork. Other soldiers approached the man and grabbed him by his arms and

dragged him toward the cabin. He pointed at the animals. Screamed their names. Gaskin put away his bayonet. Didn't the man know he and his family had to go? That they did not own this land anymore? The old man yanked his arms free from the soldiers and ran in Gaskin's direction. His face angry, his arms reaching out in front of him. He knocked past Gaskin, took hold of the latch on one of the barn stalls, and let out a hound dog that had just enough meat to cover its bones. The dog lifted one paw for the old man, then slid down onto its stomach. Elijah grabbed the back of the Indian's collar and yanked.

"Up," he said.

But the Indian's feet would not walk. Elijah let go and pulled his rifle from over his shoulder. He held it with both hands. Gaskin stayed on the ground. The dog soiled itself with urine. It looked up at Elijah with two round, familiar, brown eyes then turned its attention to the Indian, who held his hands up over his head as he stared into the barrel of the gun aimed at the space between his eyes.

"I said up."

"I'll go," said the Indian, "but let him come with me."

"No."

"Please."

"We ain't taken 'im. Old rag stinks."

The Indian struggled to find the words in English. He was given a second before Elijah fired a bullet into the ground. Overhead, three doves cooed, flew in circles, then landed beside the moaning dog. Gaskin stood and caught the attention of the old man. He stepped toward the edge of the group of soldiers, motioned for the old man to stand up before much worse happened to him than a purposefully missed bullet. The Indian lifted himself up onto his knees, then feet. He

pleaded for mercy, for help, saying few comprehensible words—Gaskin squirmed—but Elijah took the Indian outside the barn. The soldiers followed, while the hound called for his master.

"Used to have one like that when I was little," said Elijah. "Taught him how to hunt when he was no taller than a weed. Best damn dog I ever had. That thing there don't know what fun is anymore. Someone ort to shoot it."

The doves clamped a grasshopper with their beaks, tearing it in half. They slid the remains of the insect down their throats while watching the hound dog cry. Elijah slid another shell into the rifle's chamber—*click*. The doves flew off.

"Would be nice to have something that could help us catch supper," said Gaskin, feeling sorry for the family. "Could find us a rabbit burrow or a deer."

"Waste of time," said Elijah, aiming his rifle at the old man.

"Could help us find hideaways too. Corporal would love that."

Elijah lowered his weapon. He was conceited, Gaskin thought. All the time he worked to impress the corporal, enforcing training and protocol no matter the day or time or if the company had been given time off. He smoked and drank more than anyone else, too, which helped him build an immunity to situations like this. Elijah narrowed his eyes on the hound, pulled out a can full of tobacco from his back pocket, took a pinch of the black stuff, and slid it behind his lower lip. He used his tongue to adjust the wad in his mouth then sucked.

"All right then. Let's see the damn thing run."

He told the old man to go to his wife. The Indian begged that his family be allowed to live on their land. To keep their barn. Their farm. To not be forced to part with his great grandfather's butter churn. His aunt's corn grinder. His mother's spinning wheel, cloths, and needles.

Elijah spat on the ground, said, “Ain’t got a say in all that. Now get to steppin’. I want to see that bitch chase after ye.”

The hound stood. It let out a howl, took a few steps forward, and then slowly sat down. Another agonizing moan. The Indian walked backward to his family, calling for the dog to run to his side. Gaskin couldn’t understand why the Indian called on his old friend to join him as he had done so many times before. It seemed foolish. Surely he knew the dog would not make it to him, probably walk only a foot or two before collapsing, but then again, there was something was to be said about the Indian—vulnerable and weak—acting brazenly recklessness against a group of armed men.

The hound got up and waddled for a few more seconds, managing to make it several yards past the group of soldiers before its legs buckled. Elijah shook his head at the dog, then spat again. He motioned for Gaskin to go over to it.

“Put the poor thing out of its misery,” said Elijah. He pointed at the spot above the knot in his throat. “Place your bayonet right there and raise its head. Shouldn’t even tremor.”

Gaskin walked to the hound and stared down at himself in the bayonet’s blade. The weapon used to belong to his father, who told him never to use it for the wrong reasons. Gaskin called the hound over to him. He rubbed the back of its ears, used his thumb to wipe the small globs of yellow matter from the corners of its brown eyes, and then closed his left hand around the dog’s muzzle as he positioned the blade against its throat. The old man made it to his family, the children and wife who were frantic and crying.

Gaskin wanted to refuse his orders. There was no shovel to dig a hole for the hound. Its body would be left to be reclaimed by the weeds and mutilated by birds far nastier than the dove. He

pulled back the dog's head, rubbed the top of its nose with his finger, and looked at the distant mountains as he slid the blade across the hound's throat.

CHAPTER TWO

The Indians lived just south of the Appalachians on a dried-up lake bank of rich, black dirt where everything grew, six hundred forty acres of good farmland that Gaskin knew as the holy spot. According to stories, the water was blessed by the Lord himself. Folks from all over Georgia would migrate to the lake. They would pray on its shores, strip down to their trousers and soak for hours in the water, hoping that their wounds and sorrows would be cleansed. Then came the war with Britain. The plains around the lake turned to hunting grounds for Whigs and redcoats. By the time the patriots in Philadelphia drafted the Constitution, weeds had grown high around the lake, causing travelers to overlook it and soon forget that the lake existed. But two rescued it: a couple of Cherokees traveling south for food. They feasted on the lake's brim, planted a row of corn, preyed on the roaming white tails and geese. Word of the great lake traveled through the mountains, into Tennessee and the western borders of Carolina. More Cherokee came. Wooden cabins were built. The earth plowed, given seeds. The water drained from the lake to feed the crops. They allowed the dirt to dry before building more homes, a shelter for stomp dancing, and two drinking wells.

From a rusted mailbox dangling from a wooden post, Gaskin saw what was now the home to over one hundred Cherokee. He had partnered with Elijah to inspect cabins. All he wanted to do was knock on the doors and tell the folks inside to leave, but Elijah insisted they go inside and inspect the place, give Indians a reason to move faster and mind their manners when around the soldiers. Gaskin thought such barbarism was wasted energy; the Indians would pay attention to them once they saw their guns and bayonets, so he waited outside and looked around for anything out of the ordinary: an odd face staring at him through a window or a group of

unattended Indians wandering around without any military supervision. He had seen enough violence from his father, a minister who craved companionship after the loss of his late wife. So he hoped for a peaceful removal with no nonsense, little bloodshed. A removal containing warm October air that would stick around now in early December until the start of the new year so the march west could be pleasant, as pleasant as any forceful removal can be.

Elijah stepped out of the house that was guarded by the old mailbox. He was wearing new boots.

"Savages will be out soon," he said.

Gaskin glanced at the little boy in the doorway. He looked no older than five years old, and was red-eyed from crying. The boy admired the boots on Elijah's feet then tried leaving the house. He was stopped by a tall man with dark skin, stubble on his jaw and chin, and a busted lip. He limped barefoot. The rest of their family joined them: a mother and newborn swaddled in a gray, knitted blanket. Gaskin avoided looking at them as much as he could. All they could take with them contained within a burlap sack over the father's shoulder aside from a book sticking out of the side pocket of the mother's skirt. She kissed her baby, then covered its face.

"He's a handsome fella," said Elijah. "Looks just like the two of ye. Hope he and the rest of ye like where ye're headed. It's cooler there than it is here. Has more room for ye too."

Contrariness was on Gaskin; this was not the time or place for trying to make things seem not as bad as they were for the folks. "Let's take them to the others."

With his tongue, Elijah plucked a piece of tobacco from the back of his mouth and spat it on the family's yard. He then pulled his gun back in front of him, told the family in a cordial voice to march in a single-file line to the group gathering outside of the town in a pumpkin patch. They obeyed. Elijah mounted his horse and followed beside Gaskin.

"What's yer thoughts 'bout all this?"

"What do you mean?" said Gaskin.

Elijah untied a sack of water from his belt and drank. He offered Gaskin a swallow. "About the move. Never cared to ask ye."

He took the sack and held it with both hands. There was a hint of whisky.

"There isn't much to think about. Not everything that we're doing to these people is fine."

Elijah asked, "Like what?"

"Not all sure." He took a swallow of the water, ignored the sickening aftertaste of alcohol. He wished he could have more. Wasn't in the right mind to deal with the grim expressions and sounds of the Cherokee. It was fine having them live in areas apart from whites, but Gaskin didn't see the point of moving them out of Georgia. They made money for the state. Most of them didn't bother anyone. Those that did were usually shot and found dead in a ditch. The authority didn't get involved when someone found the body. The folks to whom the body belonged were usually drifters who didn't know any better about where they were staying for the night. They usually went to the undertaker, asked for the body, and took it out in the woods to lay to rest. Either that or they would never show their faces, and the body would be burned and the ashes thrown away.

Elijah held his rifle in one hand and tucked a fresh wad of tobacco against his lower lip. "It's cause ye're too young to know any better."

This peeved Gaskin. "I am not."

"Oh really?" Elijah lowered his rifle and took his sack from Gaskin. "Have ye met *the man* yet?"

"What's his name?"

"Ain't got one."

"How do you know him?"

"Cause I've gotten a little blood on my tongue. Once the same has happened to ye, ye'll meet him. Ye'll probably call him a stranger, but he ain't done it. He's the part of ye that's shrewd as a goddamn war chief." Elijah pinched the top of his nose, ran his fingers down it to remove oil and sweat. "Once ye're wet behind the ears a little bit more, ye'll meet him and be able to muster out the right words instead of pussy footing around with 'not all sure.' By then what's going on will make more sense."

Gaskin ground his teeth. He wanted to knock Elijah off his horse. "Guess you know a thing or two? Been to battle too many times to count at the ripe age of twenty?"

Elijah made a slur under his breath. He nudged his ankles into the horse's flanks and moved past Gaskin to the space in the path in front of the family. "Just as stubborn as ever. Be glad I least talk to yer face."

Several clods of orange clay lay in the grass around a nearby wooden gate. Gaskin stepped away from the group and grabbed the clay clods off the ground. He dug his thumb into them, leaned against the gate, contemplated pelting the back of Elijah's head. A trail of ants advanced toward his elbow. He could make do with them. He hovered the clods over their tiny, red bodies, dared them to bite him. Dumb sonsofbitches. But the shadow cast on the edge of the gate made the ants turn around and climb down a beam to a lower section of the gate. Outraged, Gaskin hurtled one of the clods at the roof of a cabin.

On the other side of the gate were goats. They bleated at him. Gaskin climbed over and approached them. They fled to a back corner, that is, all but two: a kid sucking milk from the nipples of his nannie. The kid stopped feeding, bleated at Gaskin, but the soldier did not cast the

first clod of clay. He thought this a testament to his tolerance. Stubbornness did not define him. He spoke well of his comrades. Gave praise to them on their successes. Before going to sleep, he often prayed for them, wished them good health for the days to come. So he felt misunderstood and pitied himself. He who thought of himself as easy going and didn't deserve any talk from anyone behind his back. His grip on the clods tightened. Some of them cracked. His strength made him madder, which brought about a euphoria that got him even madder. The kid stumbled over its legs, fell back on the nannie that pawed at the ground with her hoof. The kid's pupils widened. Gaskin saw the effects of anger and violence, then, how empowering it can make a person feel, how it instills fear and forces the weak to succumb and cower.

The nannie rammed her head into his thighs and knocked him off his feet. He lay on his back as the two goats fled. Several yards away, Elijah called out for him, asked what he was doing inside the goat pen. Gaskin slammed his fists on the ground, shattering the remaining clods of clay into pea-sized pieces, stood and brushed himself off, then looked at the family of four waiting to proceed despite their commander pulling on the reins of his horse and awaiting a response from Gaskin. The parents had their heads down while both children cried. The oldest now wanted to be carried: he held his hands up to his father, who told him that he could not pick him up unless he wished to carry the sacks over his shoulders.

"Are ye gonna pout or come on?" asked Elijah.

Gaskin worked the image of the family over in his mind as he joined his comrade's side and entered the pumpkin patch. Elijah took another swallow of the water from his sack and offered the rest to Gaskin. The gesture seemed nice, then maddening. He finished what was left of the whisky-water, then followed Elijah to the corporal while the Cherokees grouped and marched forward in a long, single-filed line. Captured mules pulled wagons filled with meat and

vegetables and wood for burning. Then as they approached the other soldiers to report on what they had observed, Elijah leaned over to Gaskin and spoke quietly.

"Ye know I could have slapped the taste out of yer mouth earlier. Have a good mind to do it to ye now." He hit Gaskin in the arm with his leg. "Best keep yer chin up. I'll be harder on ye next time."

CHAPTER THREE

Along the shore of the Skidaway River was a path through the willows and elms, a path made by a terrible flood and trampled by generations of a family named Brailford, rich folk Gaskin called tarts who made their earnings off potatoes and tobacco. Three generations lived on their plantation. The oldest was a woman bound to a bed. She spoke little to her son and his wife, who constantly tended to the affairs of their children: a young girl unable to form words, who needed a cane to walk, and two grown men in charge of the grounds and slaves. With his mother long dead, they had taken in Gaskin after his father died of a fever.

The Brailford brothers worked very little. So when they weren't tending to the needs and shortcomings of the blacks, they hunted the marsh for alligator and pigs, delicacies that they'd taught Gaskin how to butcher and smoke over a fire. The meat would be the supper for the house of seven for several days. If they weren't hunting, the brothers and Gaskin hung out on the other side of the river at Tanner's, a brothel half a mile outside of town down a dirt road surrounded by trees that made it seem dark out during the brightest hour of the day. It was a place where there were naked women in the bedrooms, duels in the front yard, and lunch served until five in the afternoon. Elijah Brailford and Gaskin were the cautious ones. They never trusted the women in the house. There were stories of men getting warts from them. Elijah's brother often begged them to join him inside the wooden house for a round of drinks, but they would decline, always saying they'd wait outside on the porch until it was time to head back home. They preferred being in the fields. There the air was clean of smoke and the smell of moonshine, and they could tend to his sister when she wished to venture outside of her room to play and help the black children in the garden.

The other children talked hard to Elijah's sister. She'd sit in the dirt, scuff up her shoes, and try to sing to them. "Shut up that moaning," they'd tell her. "If you don't hush, we'll put you someplace way over yonder." They were referring to the stable, a place of dust and hard floors, where it always smelt like shit. Once Elijah and his brother found their sister there in a stall. She was without her cane and eating a tomato. Red juice stained her white face. Elijah's brother swore he'd whip the nigger that abandoned his sister as if she were a no good bitch. Elijah took her inside and washed her up. Gaskin gathered and cooked a small pot of chicken stew and took a bowl of it up to Elijah's sister's room. Gaskin sat on the floor eating a loaf of bread, watching Elijah brush the young girl's hair until it was dry and flat. "Prettiest girl in Georgia," Elijah told her. He then read her one of her favorite stories before falling asleep next to Gaskin on the floor.

Later that night they were awakened by voices, the light of lamps through the window, climbing up the walls. Outside, Elijah's brother and father and some of the slaves gathered. The blacks held each other. One of them, a woman in her twenties, was held back by others, keeping her from running inside the slave quarters. She kept screaming, "My son! Lemme see my son!" Elijah's brother held a long, wooden paddle in his hand that he pointed at the stables.

"They left my sister there," he said to their father.

"But she wasn't hurt."

"How do you know?"

"You said there wasn't a scratch on her."

"Nigger could've touched her like she were a woman. No way to tell."

"Not *now*."

Their father told him that whupping a child to death was not the solution to what had happened in the stables. Told him he didn't realize his own strength and that senseless killings

could cause all sorts of trouble. So the next day Elijah's brother packed his things and left. He went without saying goodbye to Gaskin, Elijah, or their sister, but left a letter that said he would be leaving to start and run his own plantation, one that would not allow such leniency toward the help. He requested Elijah write to him as often as he could with details about everyone but their father. He asked Gaskin to mind himself well and to look over his little brother and sister in his absence.

Six years later, in the damp spring of 1836, Elijah and Gaskin had enrolled in service, a secret they kept from Elijah's father. Off on a hunting trip in the mountains was what they told him. Said they'd be back in three days. Their lie was in good reason. The grounds of the plantation had been making good-sized potatoes in recent years, but disease had made its way to the tobacco.

The entrance exam for the Georgia Army was held in St. Mary's, Georgia inside a squat, white church. They stood in line with other young men around their same ages beneath willows bearded with moss. The line was thirty men deep. All waited for a chance to meet with one of the army representatives sitting behind a table taking down names and sending each potential cadet inside the church to start the actual examination process.

The young men spent the first part of the morning sitting in pews, filling out questionnaires on the backs of Bibles. No one was allowed to talk. Only noise in the small sanctuary came from the scribbling of pencils and the pacing of Corporal Clinton. The questions tested only the men's family history and knowledge of the war. How much land does your family own? How many slaves does your family have? What was the position of your family on the war with England? Of the nearly fifty questions, Gaskin knew only about half of the answers. The ones he didn't

know he copied from Elijah. When they were finished, the corporal took up their papers and dismissed them from the church to a clearing where the ground was wet and muddy.

The candidates ran. Twenty laps around the two-acre plot. Gaskin's boots sucked and pulled up mud. A ring of ruined grass enclosed where the young men went to rehearse drills, lift weights, learned how to load and fire a rifle. They shot wooden targets that wore bloodied red coats. Gaskin was one of the last to finish his laps. His body cramped nearly forced him to stop moving during weightlifting. He thought he was sure he'd be one of the few asked to go home before the day was out.

In the evening, the young men spilled out into a fenced area where they stripped and bathed. Aides to the corporal handed out warm rags for the candidates to use to wash their faces. Afterward, they tossed buckets of milk-warm water on them. They all wrestled to stand in front of the soldiers to get as much of the water on them as possible. Gaskin stood next to Elijah. They brushed each other as they washed. Dirt and a few blades of grass clung to the middle of Elijah's back, damp with sweat. He asked Gaskin to wash the spot since he could not reach it, and then offered the same service in return. Gaskin was mindful not to be too rough. When he finished, Elijah kept his word and wiped away a smudge of dirt on Gaskin's neck and forehead. They dropped their rags in a wooden bucket and stepped over to the back porch of the church where there was a stack of towels and white shirts.

"Be careful," said Elijah. "Grass is wet and slick. Don't bust yer ass."

It was then that Gaskin approached him. He had no intentions, at first. He followed Elijah to the porch, keeping his head down, resisting the urge to observe the other naked men around them. As if he sensed these thoughts Elijah bent over to wipe the few blades of grass off of his legs, and for the first time Gaskin noticed, covered in blonde hairs and still pink from the warm

water of the bath, the curve of his friend's backside and the way it bounced ever so slightly with each step he took. It was then that an intention drove Gaskin to a physical desire. He wanted to touch him: place a hand on top of Elijah's backside while looking at the front of his friend's body, at the tube of wet skin dangling between his legs. He did his best to resist his desires for as long as he could, until he stood in front of him, drying off with a towel. The desire turned to an ache. Gaskin could not help but admire his friend's physique, which served as the last source of pleasure Gaskin would have until now and which he would seek out in his dreams. It brought an end to his thinking, seeing who was around him, resisting the longing that drove his body to Elijah. He lifted his towel, covering his face to walk into his friend, tensing for his touch as if expecting to be embraced. And then he flexed his cock and pressed it against his friend.

Elijah pushed him away without the thought or care about the slipperiness of the grass. Gaskin fell to his knees. He looked up helplessly, pretending to be bewildered by his friend's sudden violent behavior.

"It was an accident," said Gaskin. "I didn't mean to."

Elijah wrapped his towel around his body and got dressed in the woods away from everyone else. The other candidates looked at Gaskin with faces twisted by disgust. They said not a word to him for the next two days, neither did Elijah, despite having to share a tent with him. When the exam came to a close, each of the young men were told they had passed. The corporal placed them into groups of ten—Gaskin and Elijah separated—gave specific orders to each group. Gaskin and his group were told to return home for the time being.

"Ain't but so many I can take with me," said Corporal. "Spending is tight. You ten keep working hard. Your services will be used soon."

From that day, all the comfort that Gaskin had enjoyed with Elijah was gone. He traveled back with him to the plantation, offered to help him pack his things before heading out with the other nine members of his troop to help subdue a group of Indians in the mountains. Elijah spoke very little.

"Don't need yer help."

"Are you sure? You only have a little while to gather your things."

"Don't question me."

"I'm sorry. I just wanted to—"

"Shut it."

It was though Gaskin had lost a part of himself, the part of him that brought a sense of safety to him no matter where he traveled or what was going on around him. He felt exiled from his own feelings, and the result was that Gaskin seemed less real, as though his skeleton would collapse and his body would dissolve. Once Elijah told them the truth about the hunting trip, that look of revulsion and shock on Elijah's face showed itself to Gaskin time and time again by the other Brailfords. The security he felt between himself and the Brailfords was gone, and no matter how hard he tried to reclaim it, his efforts left him in a state of further despair. Elijah's sister withdrew herself from him, screaming at him until Mr. or Mrs. Brailford arrived and took her away. Even the slaves that he considered acquaintances were scared off by the story of the action he had committed at St. Mary's.

He spent the next year and several months back at the planation and lived in solitude. He thought about his father, felt an old, powerful darkness that made him sweat in his sleep. To help his mind, he took refuge in books and his work in the fields with the Brailfords. Then, on a warm August day he was summoned. Help was needed for the Indian removal. Reunited with Elijah,

Gaskin allowed himself to imagine that there was hope for him to experience and share intimacy with his friend once more. He kept his distance the first few days, then spoke after morning prayer. Gaskin shared all that had happened on the plantation, to which Elijah pretended was new information to him. As they traveled to Blue Ridge their conversations grew longer and more frequent, until it seemed, as Gaskin thought for both of them, that when he bumped into Elijah at St. Mary's never happened; once they talked all day and all night, making up stories about folks they knew back in Savannah and of the Indians they were about to meet.

Now, afternoon of a cool day started the little wind that knocked off leaves from the surrounding trees onto the marching Cherokee. The soldiers told them to head north and west around the mountains where shade covered the path they trod and kept the air colder. Past the mountains were several miles of grass plains and woods that led to the town of Maritole, a place much larger than Blue Ridge with Indians known for having killed a white man.

The soldiers ordered that everyone stop for a meal. Gaskin sat around a fire across from his opposite: the corporal, who walked heavily to one of the wagons and brought over cuts of meat to cook over the fire. Not much came from his mouth. Everyone knew how the corporal was feeling based on the expression on his large, pale eyes.

Elijah, to the right of Gaskin, took off his cap and wiped the sweatband with the side of his arm and rubbed the moisture onto his trousers. He picked up his sack of water, now refilled, and drank with long gulps. Finished with his drink, he looked over at Corporal and asked, "What will we do once we make it to the territory?"

"Make do until we're told to go somewhere else."

"How long do ye think that'll be?"

"Who knows."

The corporal held a cut of beef in one hand and slapped it with his other. He narrowed on the bloody cuts. The soil darkened around where the corporal sat. When he was done, he strung the meat along two sticks and poured part of a bottle of whisky on his hands. He massaged the meat, marinating its layers with the alcohol.

"Who waiting for you in Savannah?" one of the other soldiers asked Elijah.

"Just my mother and father."

"They all right?"

"Far as I know. I think if I stay out here in these woods too long, I'll end up hanging myself."

The corporal chuckled and placed the meat over the fire.

"My wife is waiting for me," said the soldier. "She's a talented gal who can sing and write and is—"

"Old."

"Old?"

Elijah took another gulp of his drink and put it away. "I've met yer wife. On the other side of the Skidaway. She was havin' drinks with some of her friends and my brother. He was an expert on her."

The soldier stood, lifted his chest up at Elijah and demanded he take back what he said.

"Won't do no such," said Elijah. "Now sit down and listen to us grown men talk. Don't want ye starting somethin' and getting hurt."

The corporal sniffed the air, and gave a look at the upset soldier that read: Sit. Now.

With his bayonet, Gaskin sharpened the stick in his hand. He poked at the smoldering rocks in the fire and moved them around so embers rose. A piece of fat sizzled, then popped. Grease fell

on the grass and a fire started; a black ring widened across the ground until Gaskin stomped it out with his boot.

"What about ye, Gaskin?" asked Elijah.

"What about me?"

"What's waiting for ye after this is over? I'm 'bout sure ye don't plan on going to Savannah."

Gaskin tossed his stick into the fire.

"I think Charleston. I want to go there and start a potato farm."

"Haven't had enough taters to last ye?"

"Can't say so. There's something magical about finding a potato. You pull the plant up and all you see is dirt. Ain't like a tomato plant and you can see the fruit just dangling there. All you see is dirt until you get your hands filthy and find those big ones that'll last you."

The corporal turned the meat.

"People in Charleston don't have any sense," said Corporal. "Was there for a week. Bunch of idiots running around drunk all the time. Thought I'd kill every last one 'for I left."

"Heard the land ain't all that great either," said Elijah. "Heard it's no better than the land up north. Full of rocks that'll break a goddamn plow. Was told farmers break their backs stacking rocks they find from out the ground. Some of them had enough to build walls around their houses."

"Sounds like a load of shit," said Gaskin.

Elijah's face broke into a delighted smile and he lead the group of men around the fire in talks about the world beyond Carolina. The North was land to new machines. Forests were being cut and replaced with railroads that ran west to rocks filled with gold and protected by Indians and mountain folk that sooner shoot you than say hello. Coal was burned and used for power. Steam

engines were turning into plants that pumped water from deep in the ground. There was talk of a steam machine in the works that could cut down cotton spinning, which would further limit the North's dependence on the South. Out west not much was known aside that the land was covered in dust. Stories had travelled to the east through nomads, who spoke of dust storms worse than any blustery day. They said the dust storms lasted for weeks, sometimes all month if there was no rain. The blue sky would turn black. Walls of dust taller than any house or building around would move in and suffocate and destroy all in its way, and when it was gone, the land would be covered in a coat of red and orange. The corporal told them that should they come across such a storm they were to keep low or get behind something and keep their eyes on the savages. He told them as he passed around the cooked meat, "Not one of them is allowed to get away."

It was night before they knew it. The temperature dropped low enough so that everyone could see their breath. By late evening, clouds turned the moon to a blue coin. A flurry of snow twirled through the camp. Gaskin placed wood on top of the glowing meat bones and rocks in the fire. He was part of first watch. He stood with his back to the flames and held his rifle with both hands. Elijah lay on the ground asleep with a blanket over his body. He'd taken it from one of the wagons. He slept with his mouth open. Gaskin would do the same thing. He thought about all the nights he had shared a room with Elijah back on the plantation. They slept in a single bed until they got too big. Mr. Brailford built a bedframe for Gaskin and got him a nice mattress. Gaskin's bed was perpendicular to Elijah's, but sometimes they would push them together and use a lantern to make shadows on the ceiling and walls.

Gaskin wanted Elijah to ask if he could go to Charleston, too. There they could have all the freedom they could want, a freedom far greater than they would ever receive staying in the familiar territory of Savannah. They would no longer have to worry about Mr. and Mrs. Brailford

telling them what to do. The plantation would no longer be a burden. By the time their work was done with the army, they would have enough money to buy several acres of land and slaves that could harvest the ground, plant beds of potatoes and rows of tobacco. Their relationship could only consist of words, and Gaskin would be fine, despite his desires to see and embrace Elijah. Words would ensure their friendship survived despite the changing atmosphere of the land and its people. Gaskin would be dutiful, domestic. He would change the sheets of their beds, wash the floors, keep the weeds from their gardens, and keep a fresh coat of paint on their house. He would do all that he could to make Elijah notice him, care for him as a man does for his wife in adulthood or very late in love.

Gaskin walked around the camp. He searched for strange faces in the nearby woods, listened closely to the movement of the Indians. But as the night went on and the moon shone directly overhead, he felt something gathering in the west. The sky grew darker, hiding the hills. The wind picked up. Snow fell.

CHAPTER FOUR

The morning brought a wintry tempest. The snow fell slanted and hard. The path was lost, so the soldiers idly walked about the woods in what they thought was the right direction. Sunlight could not break through the gray skies. At times, when the snow blinded their way, the soldiers ordered the Indians to stop marching and keep warm. Apples and loaves of bread were passed around during breakfast and lunch. Clinging to their parents, children, wrapped in blankets for warmth, gnawed on the cores and peelings. Gaskin helped an Indian man push against a wagon stuck in a mound of snow. An Indian boy stood by the mule latched to the wagon, and he patted its backside to give it initiative to pull harder. The wagon jerked forward. The mule slipped and nearly fell. The boy yelled. A wheel was on his foot.

Corporal did not allow the men to try and back the wagon off the Indian boy. He told them the damage was already done, that the bones in his foot were broken, and that the best thing they could do was have the mule pull the wagon forward until the boy was free from beneath the wheel. The boy's father got a branch from a nearby elm that was gray and dead. He and others said they could lever the wagon back—the boy yelled with pain—but the corporal denied their request and threatened to strike the next man who questioned his authority.

Gaskin gave the mule a good slap on the side, causing the beast to bray and trot on. Gaskin then took the boy and placed him on the back of the wagon. He was afraid when he inspected the boy's foot that felt like a bag of shattered chicken bones, afraid when the boy grabbed his toes stripped of their nails, bleeding, already bruising, more frightened yet when the boy grew silent and still. Gaskin called for assistance, the agony wearing his body out, but the corporal, with little sympathy in his tone, ordered everyone to keep marching. The thud in Gaskin's heart grew

heavier, brought about a fear that would never go away. It turned to relief when Elijah arrived with a look of distraught on his face, but quickly curdled when, instead of dismounting from his horse to inspect the boy's body and provide his opinion on how they should proceed with treating the wounds, he took a swallow of his whiskey water, shook his head in disappointment, and said to the boy, "I'm sorry ye're not feeling well." He advised Gaskin to pluck the splinters from the wounds before wrapping it with a cloth, and to make sure that the boy knew to keep pressure off his hurt foot while he marched. "Goddamn mule can't carry him too," said Elijah. The boy needed no translation, no repeating of words. He cried harder. Gaskin told him to relax and, using his bayonet, picked out the splinters lodged deep in the boy's skin. When he was finished, he gathered an empty sack that had once held apples and tore it. The boy tried moving to help, but Gaskin motioned him to keep still. He saw that the boy was afraid and angry, that he feared having to get off the wagon and march next to his family with a limp. His mother was already in tears and speaking in her native tongue to her husband, who was outraged by the corporal's dismissal. They were also tired, hungry, and like the rest of the Indians, mortified that they had lost everything.

"Keep an eye on him, Gaskin," said Elijah pulling his scarf up over his mouth. "He starts to fall behind, let me know."

There was no sympathy in his voice. It appalled him how Elijah could fill him with joy and hope one moment and then fill him with shame the next. Gaskin cleaned the blood off the boy's foot with water then wrapped the torn sack around it. He carried the boy to his family, offered them his assistance should they need it, then returned to his post.

They traveled few miles that day. The air, cold and dry, made their lungs feel heavy. The hours were strained by fear, as if fear was a lone, hungry coyote enclosing their camp in a tight

ring, whose hoarse yip-howl brought upon every soldier and Indian a chill that would never fade. Gaskin watched the snow rise, while others built fires and huddled around them. A pack of rolled up tobacco made its way to each soldiers. When it came time for Gaskin to take a roll, only half of a leaf remained in the box. There wasn't any point in trying to fool himself. He knew no one in the troop wanted to physically interact with him; nor was anyone willing to go the distance he was willing to travel to participate in some form of group socialization. Aside from Elijah, no one had listened to his stories of growing up motherless, dealing with an abusive father, moving to work and live on a plantation, that he enjoyed fishing and hunting, no one saw him as their equal and on spotting him upset and sitting alone by the fire, smiled at him, waited for him to smile back, and offer him a single hit from their tobacco roll to provide heat that would melt through the cold that seemed to block his windpipe.

The worst of the storm arrived on the cusp of noon. A wall of white rolled down the mountains and onto the woods. Soldiers listened to branches bend and snap; trees were pulled out of the ground and fell onto their sides from being too heavy with ice and snow. Gaskin blew into his hands, sat close to a fire, and said a silent prayer, asking God to keep him and Elijah alive through the storm and thanking him for the food in his belly and the clothes on his back. When he was finished, he saw an Indian woman drop eggs from her apron. The snow buffered their fall. For a time she stood and shook; a strong wind moved over the group. When it passed, the woman collected the eggs and took them to a fire where she placed them in a black pot of boiling water. Gaskin saw that the boy with the broken foot was one of the few awaiting one of the cooked eggs. He observed the skin around the boy's ankle: black and violet. Either frostbite or infection. Gaskin wasn't sure. So he closed his eyes and started to pray again. Halfway

through his prayer, the boy's father ran into him. He claimed he did not see him for he was shielding his eyes with his hand.

"It's nothing to worry about," said Gaskin. "I'm all right."

The father spoke to Gaskin as if he were a friend.

"You helped my son. Thank you."

"Is your son feeling well? I tried all I could."

"He may not heal."

"I'm sorry to hear that. I'll keep praying for him."

The father asked Gaskin who taught him the Bible. Then he told him that he and his family were taken to a church not long before, and there he learned the Bible's philosophy on forgiveness and prayer, read and studied stories about the apostles, and listened to talks about Jesus and the Devil.

"Have a hard time telling the difference between the two," said the father.

"Why is that?"

"Because your Jesus sent my people ministers who threw our corn down wells and raped our daughters and sons. The Devil does this, too. So I don't understand why people would pray to either."

Gaskin looked away from the Indian to the fire.

"You need to get going," said Gaskin. "Next time be careful."

The father lowered his head and left. He sat next to his son. Gaskin watched him steadily, thought of the times his own father spoke of the great joy that swept over the Indians he met and shared the Bible with. And when Gaskin's eyes met the Indian's he grimaced, as if there was a

foul stench in the air. For a moment, Gaskin thought about speaking, apologizing for his last remark, but he saw the Indian's face harden with what he knew could only be disgust.

CHAPTER FIVE

On the way to Maritole, an Indian woman died of bowel complications and her body was placed onto the back of a wagon, for the soldiers had no planks to build her a coffin. Gaskin moved clay jars filled with foods around the face of the woman so the travelers behind the wagon would not have to bear witness to the cold eating away at the woman's skin. Three other Indians died not long after her—all children from exhaustion. Their bodies were placed next to the woman's, and when the soldiers reached Maritole, they placed the dead next to a pine tree and covered them in snow. Corporal ordered that someone keep watch over the bodies while the rest of the company joined him to gather the residents.

They came across ransacked, empty houses where pots and pans littered the floors, beds were turned upside down, and rotten food clung to the walls and cabinets. The corporal and Elijah told Gaskin and the others to have their rifles in front of them and to split up and inspect each house for occupants. So Gaskin approached a wooden home where the front porch was broken by an iron stove being claimed by weeds. He crept beneath a windowsill and rested one of his ears against the wall. Someone was inside. His heart beat like a drum against his chest. He raced around to the back the house where three brick steps led to a broken door dangling from its hinges. A boot print was on the door. Slowly, he made his way inside to where the sound had come from.

A gust of wind caused the house to creak. A half empty bottle of gin fell onto its side and rolled off the kitchen counter onto the floor. Glass shattered. Gaskin placed his finger over the trigger of his rifle. He stepped into a room that was no bigger than a cupboard, and when he saw

what was inside, sitting amongst corncobs and broken plates, he lowered his weapon and said, “What has happened here?”

The stranger was a young man of light brown skin, who looked to be the same age as Gaskin. He wore a butternut shirt that swallowed his small frame, calf-high boots of military issue, the kind made of straight lasts that shaped themselves to the wearer’s feet over time. Dust covered his face and hands from where he had been sleeping. The stranger took three sharp breaths as if about to go into a panic, and when he spoke, his voice was soft and hesitant, no deeper than the voice of an adult woman. “Are you here to kill me?” he asked. “First may I close my eyes?”

Gaskin motioned the stranger to stand. He obeyed.

“You didn’t answer my question,” said the stranger.

“Neither did you.”

The demeanor of the stranger claimed Gaskin’s attention. It was at odds with the current circumstances. He was calm and sure.

“Others have already been here,” said the stranger. “They took my family. Made them take everything they could carry and leave.”

“How long ago?”

“A month or so.”

“So why are you here?”

“They thought I was dead.”

Gaskin took this in. He felt an anxiety made from the unease at the truth behind the stranger’s story. “What is your name?” The stranger scratched his nose. His face became stern. He gave his name to Gaskin: Adahy Fleur Smitt.

"I go by Addie," he said, and here he smiled and his tone seemed to shift to cordial, as if they were not in the ruins of a house, but on the banks of a river skipping stones. As Addie spoke of being the last of his people in Maritole, it dawned on Gaskin that, despite the dark creases in the palms of Addie's hands, the soft skin that rounded over his cheeks, of his throat, which was covered in dust, he looked no different than most of the people back home around Savannah. Cuts, some a light pink, others a dark red, stripped his arms. They told him things about Addie that Gaskin would not think to ask. It started with Addie recounting the night that the soldiers came, how he recognized their smell when they stepped foot on their land. Their land. But no matter how hard he and his people tried to talk to them in a civil manner, they kept their guns aimed and called them unforgiving names, like they were beasts from hell who had destroyed lives and left miles of destruction in their wake. Doing his best to keep up his composure, Addie then shared the location of Cherokee skeletons trapped beneath structures torn down and set on fire by the soldiers, who kicked in the doors to homes, pocketed items they deemed valuable and found to their fancy, beat men with their fists and wooden posts, and forced themselves onto women. As he described the faces of his people as rope was tied around their wrists and waists, his cordialness faded, and he became reserved. His voice cracked as he said to Gaskin, "Do you know where they took them?"

"West."

"Are they alive?"

"Hard to say."

Gaskin pulled off a piece of corn silk from Adahy Fleur's face. The Indian's smile returned as he said, "Thank you." Then he hissed in pain as he tried to walk. He placed a hand on Gaskin's shoulder for balance and took off one of the boots. His foot was smooth around the ankles and on

the knuckles of his toes. He rubbed his sole that was covered in white blisters and pulled back his black hair hanging over his eyes. A silence stretched between the two of them; Gaskin could not believe that the Indian had thought it wise and so easy to touch him. Addie placed his boot back on his foot and began retightening the laces, and Gaskin admired the bump at the top of Addie's right ear that made him look like an elf from the stories he had heard as a child.

"Where'd you get those things?" Gaskin asked as he eyed the boots.

"Found them."

"The men I'm with will think they are stolen."

Addie let go of the laces, then he looked out the nearby window at the icicles hanging from the roofs of neighboring homes and reflecting the light of the rising sun onto horses with saddles and other Indians tending to their young and trying to keep warm. Then he looked at the back door Gaskin had stepped through to enter the house. His eyes widened and shifted as if searching for something, or someone. It was clear that he did not wish to leave. "How many of you are there?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Do they whip and beat them?"

"Who?"

"Them outside."

He pointed to the window at the Indians.

"No. We don't hurt them," said Gaskin.

Addie picked up the laces and held them up as if he were offering them as tribute. He had introduced Gaskin, a stranger, to his seclusion and he had repaid him by making things worse. Gaskin drew a breath and waited. He hoped that Addie would not retaliate by yelling and

screaming, forcing Gaskin to drag him out of the house, then witness the reaction of the other soldiers. They'd leave him for dead, worse than he was now.

Not far away, Elijah called out, "Find something?"

Addie lowered the laces. He took the boots off his blistered feet and rubbed the sides of his body. He sucked on his front teeth as he stepped forward and popped a blister on his heel. The wound oozed a clear liquid and bled.

"Follow me and keep quiet," he told Addie. "If you know what's good for you."

Addie's chin trembled. He leaned back his head. His eyes were damp.

They met Elijah at a pack house that had a dead hornet nest hanging from the corner of its shelter. Looking at the front of the tiny building was a wall of dead hibiscus and an empty doorframe that opened up to a room of barrels placed beneath gutted, partially skinned cows and pigs empty of blood and black. Gaskin breathed as little as he could as they walked by the front of the building to Elijah, who had his trousers lowered below his waist.

"Found somebody," said Gaskin.

Elijah adjusted his stance.

"Now ye gone and done something right," said Elijah.

"Said he's the only one here."

Elijah spat. "Ye ain't about to tell me ye trusted a word that came out that savage's mouth are ye?" He shook his cock of piss, pulled up his trousers, and turned to the two of them. A shadow covered half of his face; he had not shaven today. Wind made his cheeks and nose pink as a new born baby's skin, and his brown hair was pulled back and decorated with white flakes that made Gaskin feel a faint heat inside himself that made him forget about the rotting meat and not mind

the cold. Elijah pointed at Addie. He asked Gaskin for the Indian's name and if he had shared anything about what happened to the town.

"A group beat us here," said Gaskin.

"Sonsofbitches could have sent a letter," said Elijah. "Now we've wasted time stopping."

"The weather may have forced them here."

"Doesn't matter. We'll find out the real reason sooner than later. Meanwhile, ye and that savage get on back with the others. I'll speak with Corporal. Got a feeling if we don't get moving soon, we'll be stuck here all night. Maybe later." As he left to see the corporal, he patted Gaskin's chest—a friendly gesture. But as he was spellbound, Gaskin flinched, freeing himself of Elijah's touch. Taken aback, Elijah asked if there was something the matter or if there was something that needed to be said. Gaskin suspected his friend felt confused and somewhat concerned, feeling as if he had upset him by touching him in a queer manner. But Gaskin did not want to discourage him from placing a part of his body against his own, so he blurted out that he was fine, suffering from chest pains, and then made an expression of someone trying to cover up a grimace of pain.

Elijah gave every sign that he believed in his act. He said not another word, leaving Gaskin to his duty and to ponder on how he could get a grip on his body, grip how his nerves and muscles produced far more disturbing pleasures than they ever had before.

CHAPTER SIX

Now came the days of endless walking. Despite the poor weather, Corporal demanded that the company not stop until they tracked a hundred miles. Slowly, the terrain shifted from hills to flatland. They came across a road that they followed to a small town outside of Mooresville. There they purchased supplies: tents, food, ammunition, and wood. Little boys played in the streets. They greeted the soldiers with salutes and applause while their parents spoke of a river, not far to the north, where the water was shallow enough to cross, and on the other side of that river were towns with more people, rich folk with many acres of land that the soldiers could hunt and seek better shelter should worse storms come their way. Then the boys saw the Indians. At first they said nothing at the passing line. An Indian girl waved at them, and that's when the boys began to speak in curses—tree nigger, savage, crow.

On going up from the town to the referred river, the soldiers witnessed the snow let up. The air warmed. The day became pleasant, but not before another child, the boy with the broken foot, died. His parents washed his face with water. They used a rag to scrub off as much chapped skin from off his body. Then they tucked in his shirt, fixed his hair so that none stuck to the side of his face. As they prepared the body, a soldier built a five by two-foot box. A blanket was placed in it, then the boy. His parents kissed his cheeks one last time then the soldier nailed the lid on the box.

The ground was too wet for a body to be buried. So the corporal agreed that the dead child be carried across the river. Gaskin and another soldier raised the coffin to their shoulders. The water was colder than Gaskin expected, and quickly became deeper, up to his hips, the current rushing under the calm surface. Despite the casket being light, the soldiers moved slowly.

"Ye two are the weakest shits I've ever met," said Elijah traveling behind them.

He offered to assist. Gaskin told him all was well; however, he thought about advising Elijah to tell everyone to turn around. They were almost halfway across. He continued the unhurried pace for he could not in good conscience risk damaging the body of the dead boy. He exchanged hushed precautionary words with the soldiers behind him as though the boy was only taking a nap, and he kept his eyes down at the dark, muddy water and felt for dips and holes. The water rose to above his abdomen. Corporal ordered the wagons and mules to pull back to shore.

"I ain't riskin' losing everything," said the corporal. "I've spent too much money."

He told the soldiers to pull back as well, but Elijah insisted they go on.

"We are almost there, sir," he said. "Water can't get any higher."

Elijah's horse took another step forward. So did Gaskin. The bottom was no longer there and the company of soldiers and Indians were pulled downstream to a spot where the water rose to chest-level. Children were the first to go under; their faces broke the surface several feet away from the company and they kicked and swam against the current. Water poured into their mouths. They called for their parents before being swallowed and carried off by the current. Their parents went after them. They, too, did not surface. Elijah told everyone to hold on to each other and to keeping marching. Gaskin held onto the casket with all his might as he spat water from his mouth. Suddenly the current became too strong and the casket began to wobble. He heard the body inside it slide left to right. Gaskin wanted the body to be placed in the ground, so that if he couldn't stop thinking about the boy and worrying about the next time he'd have to look at the boy's parents, at least his burial would help bring some peace of mind. He wanted to bury the boy himself, even, so as to let the boy's spirit know how much his suffering bothered him, how unbearable his ease with everything and everyone a part of the removal. If Gaskin

didn't bury him, then he'd at least say a silent prayer over the grave, so that the Lord knew that he was trying to make things right. If he were to pray for the boy's soul, he would feel superior to his comrades, a feeling he barely knew, being granted the ability to sleep at night with no regrets, remorse, or fear for one's life during the removal, after the removal, after death. But less than ten yards from clearing the river, the current threatened to take Gaskin. His feet slipped. His head fell below the surface, and the casket and water held him there. He told himself don't breathe but the need to rose inside him. A pain and burning formed in his gut then climbed up through his chest and throat and as it reached the back of his tongue and nose his mouth opened. Bright colors clouded his vision. His only thought: air. He dropped the casket, used his arms and legs to swim upward. When he broke the surface, his feet dragged the bottom like an anchor searching for a rock jut and, over the sound of horse neighs and curses, he heard the boy's family cry out for someone to retrieve their son. Elijah sat motionless on top of his horse watching the casket slip further and further away from the company. He said to the soldiers, "Nothin' we can do for 'em now," and then he commanded they keep the line moving and march before they all ended up drowning.

When all was said and done, the river claimed nine.

On land, Elijah dismounted. He checked on the soldiers, told them to keep close tabs on the Indians while they all waited for the corporal and those steering the mules and wagons to rejoin them.

"Ain't nothin' like some kids drowning to make folks mad," said Elijah to Gaskin, whose head was in a torment. He walked away from Elijah to a stump. He sat and vomited. All he could think about was the casket and the bobbing heads of the children and their parents before they were sucked beneath the water's surface. He tried to catch Addie's eye, but it was on the dead

boy's mother. He felt a twinge of the feeling he felt the day of arriving at Blue Ridge, for in his stare Gaskin did not see what commonly came after a tragedy, which was sorrow and sympathy, but saw disdain and anger.

He prayed afterward; each word spat from his mouth as though they could do more than bring him peace of mind.

After the company was reunited, Elijah was scolded by the corporal. A dollar was docked from his day's pay for insubordination. Corporal said he was doing him a favor by not beating him with his fists.

They traveled twenty miles and stopped in the front yard of a ruinous, two-story house that stood on a plot of weeds and burned grass. Gaskin followed behind the corporal and Elijah to the front door, and there he stood blinking up at the ceiling of the porch and the tall, rotting walls with their cracks and missing bricks. They knocked. Crows flew through the open windows of the top floor and landed on the ribs of a deer carcass. They picked at dark meat on the bones, looked up and cawed at the Indians.

A man with a long, white beard that was filled with cracker crumbs and ashes answered the door. He took the gloves off his hands and welcomed his guests.

"What brings you fellows here?"

"A night's rest if you can spare space," said Corporal.

"For all of you?" He glanced over at the Indians.

"Just me and my men."

"I can do that."

Gaskin was sent back to inform the rest of the soldiers of their good fortune. Instead of going off inside the house with his things, Corporal assigned Gaskin the duty to stay behind and supervise the Indians as they set up their tents. Addie sat away from the rest of the group. The cordialness he suggested in Maritole seemed to be taken by the river, for Gaskin came to him and offered water to wet his dry tongue. He did not speak. He held up a hand: a sign to move on. Gaskin did not wish to bother the Indian, so he helped a family set up their tent, and then passed around sacks of bread and squash. No one was allowed more than one piece of each. He told them it had to last them until morning.

With the sacks tied and placed back in the wagons, Gaskin went inside the house where he found the parlor missing of what he considered to be the usual furniture, which were two rocking chairs, side ends, and a small table with a kettle of tea and matching cups. Instead there was straw on the floor and slabs of warped iron in a pile by the stairs. Hammers, handsaws, and weights lay on shelves surrounding an anvil stained with rust. From a fire burning in the fireplace, heat surged toward the front door. Black smoke stained the ruined ceiling and white walls. Cobwebs hung between banisters. In the kitchen was a wooden table with a few plates already set and along the back wall were skulls of past meals: coyote, deer, rabbit, fox.

At the super table, the old man offered a seat to Elijah and the corporal. The wife of the old man stood at the kitchen sink rinsing blood out of a towel. At her sides were her children; the boy and girl scrubbed and polished the dishes in the sink and placed them in the surrounding cabinets. When their father ordered them to fetch their guests a plate, they obeyed. Their faces were paler than their father's. A blue vein ran across the boy's forehead. The girl's hair was blonde, thin, matted. Both had dust and soot on their clothes and skin; their eyes were big, round, and blue, and beneath the beds of their nails was dust and dried black blood and raw meat.

Gaskin observed them from the parlor as he made his bed: two blankets and a red chair cushion no bigger than his hand.

The wife brought to the table a plate of meat. Her husband stuck his knife into the backstrap and placed one on Elijah and the corporal's plates.

"Thank ye," said Elijah.

"Best meat in 'Bama," said the man.

"What is it?"

"White tail. Been seasonin' her since last week."

The corporal cut into his meat with a knife and fork given to him by the wife. Blood dripped from the chunk of venison onto his trousers.

"You did well," said the corporal.

"I appreciate it. What brings you fine men to these parts?"

"Headed out west," said the corporal. "New law says that's where the savages got to go."

"Sonsofbitches used to be on this land," said the man. "More of 'em than rabbits. My father and his father had to run 'em off."

The wife and children gathered behind the man, keeping quiet, watching the food disappear from their plates.

"Why don't they join us?" asked Elijah to the man.

"Respect, boy. Man's wife and seeds wait 'til he's had his fill before eating."

"I see." Elijah cut his meat into pieces then touched the meat: cold on the inside. He pressed his knife down on the slices draining them of blood, then asked for water to go with his meal. The wife left her husband and gathered a glass and pitcher of water. Elijah thanked her, and

broke the sound of knives and forks scratching against the ceramic plates by asking for the man's name.

"Richard O'Connor. Born and raised in Virginia. Moved here with my family and my father's family and his father's family. Been makin' tools to deliver to the nearby towns. Ain't much money. Would be makin' more if I had two or three good niggers around."

"Ye trust a nigger with your tools?" asked Elijah.

"Hell no. Don't trust a goddamn one of 'em. But I could deliver tools to more places at once, and they could do us some good when it's winters like this and food ain't always around."

"What do ye mean?"

"What I mean is meat is meat. Ain't a bad taste a few good spices can't fix."

O'Connor dragged his teeth over his fork and slid the piece of meat into his mouth. Blood got into his beard and fell onto his shirt. But he didn't care. He wiped his red lips with the side of his arm then let out a loud sneeze and cough that dampened the table and the edges of Elijah's plate. Seeing the disgust on his guest's face, O'Connor apologized and told Elijah to hold his meat. He obeyed. O'Connor then snatched the dirty plate and slammed it on the floor beside him, told his wife to clean up her mess and grabbed his son by the collar of his shirt.

"Give him a new one," he said. And his son ran to the cabinet and brought over to Elijah a new plate. The boy's chin trembled and his stomach growled. He sucked on the roof of his mouth, making a popping sound, then stuck out his tongue, dry and gray, using it to wipe away the white crust lining his bottom lip. Gaskin saw Elijah slip two pieces of meat into the boy's hand and thought it the nicest thing he'd seen his friend do in a long time. The boy returned to stand beside his sister with a smile on his face. He gave one of the pieces of meat to her, and they turned around, just for a moment, and ate.

Before taking the first bite of the meat himself, Elijah bowed his head and prayed. O'Connor chuckled and interrupted.

"Ain't no need for that."

"Excuse me?"

"I said there ain't no need for that. God ain't in these lands." He spoke of how the land had been nearly uninhabitable the past few years. Indians near about hunted the land of all its animals. So they tried planting beans and corn, but disease killed them both and they lost so much money they had to work as hired help in the fields. During the summers when the days were longer and the air was thick with moisture, violent showers arrived and brought with them twisted winds that struck the ground and uprooted trees, turned ditches into empty ponds, and pulled bricks and wooden boards from houses. Winters were a little better. Cold as hell but held off with snow and ice until the start of the new year so that cabbage and lettuce and crops could be harvested and stored. This year was one of the worst years O'Connor claimed to have ever witnessed. Said it had snowed twice since the start of the month and there were signs in the sky and a bitter chill in the air that said more snow was on the way.

"Used to be a church a piece up the road," said O'Connor. "Pastor there used to stand at the pulpit and drink himself silly every Sunday. One evening in passing, I asked him why. He says to me drinkin' is only way he could get through a sermon. Said the goddamn Bible always made him madder than hell. Told me he didn't even believe in what it had to say but needed some income to keep food on his table."

Gaskin had enough of the conversation being held at the supper table and ate the apple and pear given to him as the night's meal. He noticed that his bed was apart from everyone else. He opened his mouth to speak to the closest soldier, but the man pretended not to see him and turned

away. Gaskin called out to him, walked over, and tapped him on the shoulder, causing the soldier to grab Gaskin's wrist and bend back his hand.

"Don't be touching me," said the soldier.

"I don't understand."

The soldier stood up and pushed Gaskin away from him.

"Just go back to your corner, cock sucker."

The name was like a knife to the gut. The other soldiers setting up their beds looked at Gaskin and were unfazed by his reserved state. Elijah and the corporal stopped their conversation with O'Connor. They told the men to quiet down. No one else said a word to Gaskin, who was suddenly ashamed that he had ever offered to help the soldier. Cock sucker. He knew that name. For most people who didn't know him, it seemed to roll off the tongue with ease. It was defining and insinuating, and suggested that he was no better than a whore a man finds in the streets with her breasts exposed, her legs spread apart, disease crusted on her lips and cunt, and like her, he was an outcast unworthy of the grace of God, unworthy of being treated decently by those who shared the same street, unfit to serve his country.

The silence was uncomfortable, so Gaskin left the room, walked outside and sat on the steps of the front porch. There was Addie sitting in front of his tent listening to the words of the neighboring Indians. He seemed calmer, as one does after eating a meal. After a minute or two, Addie noticed Gaskin, who greeted him with a wave of his hand. This time a smile shone on the Indian's face and, with a vague and fatigued demeanor, he looked back at the other Indians expressionless, taunting and rattling Gaskin's nerves so much that he walked over to Addie and sat.

The Indian did not turn his dark head. "So you came to apologize for lying?"

Gaskin picked at the dried dirt on his boots.

“Haven’t thought of any words? Figures. Can’t say I was expecting anything.” He crossed his legs and used his finger to draw a circle in the dirt. “I’m sure more broken promises are to come. I’m looking forward to the beatings.”

Gaskin held his peace. He kept scratching away the dried dirt on his boots. Addie was being a jackass to him and he did not appreciate it.

“I did not think Elijah would make that call.”

“Is that his name? The one on the horse? E-li-jah. Sounds pretty.”

“It is.”

Addie unearthed an acorn. He held it in his hand then flicked it at Gaskin. He must have sensed the dejection in Gaskin’s tone for he tried to silly him into a somewhat normal state of contempt and joy. He slid closer to Gaskin and pointed up at the sky, clear and filled with a sea of stars against the blackness of the heavens. Directly above them was the warrior with his mighty spear. To the east was the great snake seeking the water from the pail of the first woman. Addie told the stories of the stars. They were humorous and soothing. They calmed the stinging of the soldier’s words in Gaskin’s thoughts.

Before Addie told another story about another star, Gaskin stopped him.

“Enough, please.”

Addie nodded.

“You know you’re right. I do owe you an apology. I’m sorry people got hurt earlier. That shouldn’t have happened.”

“A family didn’t get to lay their son to rest. I cannot imagine their suffering.”

“If only I could have held on to the boy’s casket a bit longer.”

"If only you were strong."

"I am strong."

"Are not."

"Am."

They went back and forth twice more until Gaskin placed his elbow in the ground and held up his arm. "I'll show you how strong I am." Addie rolled his eyes, smiled, repeated Gaskin's words back to him in a playful, mocking tone. Then Gaskin counted aloud to three and their game of arm wrestling commenced. They squeezed their hands, pushed back in forth with all their might causing the veins in their arms to bulge, until their elbows were an inch deep in the dirt. As Gaskin made the choice to let up his grip and catch a breath so that he could make the finishing move, Addie read his face and slammed Gaskin's arm back in victory. Gaskin pretended to have lost his grip, that the moisture between his hand and Addie's caused his fingers to loosen in their grooves, then drifted into a daze while Addie called him a liar and said how much he enjoyed playing the game; it dawned on Gaskin that he had just locked hands with an Indian, a savage, the type of folk that his father warned him about, the folk he didn't care to interact with and that he believed should remain separated from the towns of whites. He imagined their skin to be rough, for their breath to be foul, for them to be unable to socialize and interact with others. But Addie was not any of those things. He spoke to Gaskin without judging him for the violent actions of other soldiers. He tried to speak about issues through peaceful conversation and play. He put Gaskin's feelings before his own and for what? Gaskin could not find the first reason that he deserved such kindness from an Indian. He expected it from Elijah, the man he had admired for so long and felt so close to despite the months of being separated. The man who gave him a sliver of security upon their reunion.

And then Addie stopped talking. He leaned back on the grass, told Gaskin to do the same, breathe in the fresh air, listen to the stories of the surrounding Cherokee and allow their words to sweep him up and take him to a place he had never dreamed. Gaskin loved stories. He was in no hurry, no one inside cared to be around him right now and there was no reason for him to rush back anyway, so he took Addie up on his offer. But they didn't really listen to the stories being told, they just talked for a long time, and mostly Addie talked now. He shared how he grew corn with his family, took up beading to spend extra time with his mother, learned how to skin a rabbit from his father. Gaskin looked up at the stars. He tried finding one of the sequences that he learned from growing up with the Brailford brothers. Then he adjusted his weight on his arms and fell onto the dirt beneath. His hand slid over Addie's. Neither retracted. Less than twenty minutes ago, Gaskin felt violated, every bit of his spirit shattered, every emotion bruised, destroyed, all of them beaten and ground down to the point where he could not decipher anger from hatred from despair. But now there was something hopeful, something good, something to look forward to. Their hands together were an admission. Secrecy fled with clouds of reason, shame was gone, but with Gaskin so was that fear of being spotted that would result in punishment, a good scalding or beating from the corporal. This would not be treated the same as the incident that occurred during training. No, it would cost him so much more, and despite this possibility, Gaskin did not move, could not muster the energy to lift the bones and muscles in his hand so that it was no longer on top of the Indian's. He wanted to keep touching him. He wanted to get away with touching him. He wanted to lean into Addie and kiss him.

But Elijah stepped out onto the front porch. A roll of tobacco stuck out of his mouth. Using a match, he lit the end of it, gave it three puffs, then blew gray smoke into the air. Gaskin retreated

from Addie and said, “I’ll see you tomorrow.” The Indian flashed his white smile before faking being asleep. Gaskin stood and made his way to the porch.

“What’s got ye out here?”

“Keeping watch is all. Don’t trust one not to run.”

Elijah took another draw, a sign of believing in his story. Gaskin knew this as one of his ways of letting him know that he trusted him, saw everything as well, Elijah’s way of pretending he wasn’t aware of the redness in Gaskin’s cheeks that one acquires not from the cold but from being smitten with another person. Elijah, he had come to learn, was an observant fellow, so he did not doubt that he already suspected something or saw him sitting with the Indians like a man does with his fellow soldiers around a campfire. “I understand,” he said. “Well, get on back inside. Corporal’s makin’ me have first watch on account of earlier at the river.” This was an evaluation, Gaskin was sure of it. Should he speak and stammer over his words or twist his face in a way that Elijah disapproved, that would be the end of Addie and himself. So long as he held his breath and resisted the urge to put words in his mouth, he would not be harmed, he would not be exposed, he would not lose his hope for a life after the removal in Charleston, he would not lose his freedom, again.

The despise Elijah directed at the Indians must have brought them worry, causing their features to border on modesty and unspoken mourning. They started to pray and hum a melody. Elijah took another hit, blew smoke out of the corner of his mouth. It seemed that their words were calls for mercy or pity, but as the lines in Elijah’s face deepened, Gaskin knew he was mistaking their prayers as curses aimed at him.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The morning, cold, brought a draft in through the front door, waking Gaskin and causing him to shiver and his skin to break out in chill bumps. There was a kink in his neck. Several others were already awake and rolling up their beds. They seemed not to notice that Elijah was missing. So Gaskin stood and walked around the first floor of the home, until finding his friend outside on the porch with O'Connor and a empty bottle of whisky. Their breath reeked of sleep and alcohol. Their bodies shook. Beneath their eyes were dark rings, dried snot clung to their upper lips, the top of their cheeks, ears, and their foreheads red with fever. Gaskin went back inside and returned with his blankets. He placed them over both men.

Elijah closed his mouth and blinked up at Gaskin.

"What ye doing standin' over me like that?"

"I saw that you were cold. You don't look so good."

Elijah stretched out his arms and legs. He was still drunk. He repeated Gaskin's words back to him and said, "That your new way of saying mornin'?"

"Just trying to help is all."

"Then give me a hand and take this shit back where ye got it."

All the movement on the porch caused O'Connor to wake. He did not speak, he only spat. He stepped inside his house with the blanket pulled around his shoulders and let out a sharp whistle that caused scattering upstairs. Not moments later, his children left their bedrooms and made a fire in the fireplace. His wife was already in the kitchen on the stove cooking eggs in a copper-bottomed pan. Rolls of venison tied together in links filled a pot beside her. When her husband

sat at the supper table, she told him breakfast would be ready for him as soon as their kids had a fire going and were able to cook the meat. He did not say a word to her in acknowledgement.

The little boy and girl apologized for getting in the way of the packing soldiers. Corporal was one of the few already dressed and prepared for the day's travel. He thanked the O'Connors' for their hospitality but insisted he and the soldiers get on with their day.

"Nonsense," said the drunken O'Connor. "Stay. Eat with us one last time."

"Ain't no need," said Corporal. "Got food out in the wagon."

"I said stay." O'Connor raised his voice, causing the corporal to take a step back and place a hand over his back pocket where he kept his bayonet. The bearded man laughed at Corporal's reaction and pulled out a chair.

"It ain't every day men like you come 'round. Would be an honor to host one last meal. Just hope when you get where your goin', you put in a good word for me and my family. Return the favor if you could. Weather ain't doing a thing for us side making our lives a living hell."

The corporal looked over at the wife, then over at the parlor at his men, then O'Connor.

"I won't turn a man down who offers food, but I don't make promises I can't keep."

He sat at the wooden table, and the two spoke of the road ahead; it stretched fifty miles west, through a forest and empty cotton fields, to a town surrounded by sugarcane that stood four meters high. Some of the wealthiest men in 'Bama lived there. A trading post was in the center of the town. Merchants that came to the site brought with them four to five linked wagons carrying slaves, jewelry, hogs, cattle, seeds, and guns. They did services for the people by taking orders and returning in about a week's time with the goods. They knew the roads that went west better than anyone else, so O'Connor told the corporal to make good and goddamned well he didn't miss the opportunity to speak with one of them over a drink.

As the two men exchanged words, Gaskin passed around a sack of potatoes to the soldier beside him. This was breakfast. Elijah massaged his temples and he leaned against the wall beside the front window and told everyone to hurry up and eat so that they could make progress before the next storm. When given his own potato, he did not pray. He did not cut the peelings off, and he did not clean the vegetable before biting into it. His gums bled, stained the top row of teeth red. Gaskin took out his bayonet and approached Elijah for he did not have heart for his meal while seeing his friend suffer.

"Hand it to me. I'll fix it up for you."

"I got it."

"Want something else with it? Could speak to Corporal and see if we can get you a fried egg. Or a stick of dried meat. You look sick as a dog and worn slap out." He held out a hand to retrieve the potato, gave Elijah a look that read: trust me. But Elijah bit another chunk out of the potato causing his gums to bleed more, then he threw it across the room and caused the children to scream as they rotated the sausage in the black, cast iron pan. Silverware fell onto the kitchen floor. O'Connor rose from his seat, let the blanket slip from around his shoulders to the back of his chair, and he stepped into the parlor with fists at his side, his face looking down at his children cowered against each other and Elijah poking one of his fingers into Gaskin's chest.

Gaskin stood still, repeated to himself over and over in his head that this was not normal Elijah. "I'm not trying to cause any trouble."

Elijah's forehead and ears darkened. "Goddamn liar!"

Corporal, stepping into the parlor, said, "What the hell is gotten into you two?"

O'Connor ran his fingers over the new dent in his wall. "Piece of shit can't keep down his liquor and threw a 'tater."

Rage was on Elijah. “I brought us these potatoes. If I wanted eggs or meat, I would have gotten myself some. Not these goddamned hard ass potatoes!”

The children started to cry. They burned the sausage in the pan. O’Connor yelled at them for wasting food and snatched the pan away from the boy and raised it over his head with his eyes set on Elijah; his teeth gritted, his steps heavy and fast. Corporal stepped in front of him, offered the old man compensation for the damages, then took him away into the kitchen and through the back door to the backyard where O’Connor hurled the pan and demanded the soldiers leave his property at once.

Gaskin wanted to go to them, tell them that Elijah didn’t mean what he was saying, but Elijah slammed open the front door, breaking it off its hinges. He stood in the doorway, his hands underneath it appearing as if he were about to fix his mistake, then became angrier and seemed to change his mind, so he slid the door across the front porch and slammed it against a porch column. The doorknob broke off. He stormed through the weeds to one of the wagons.

“Meat? You want a stick of it? Come on, Gaskin. Come get some!” He stuck his hand into a burlap sack and pulled out a piece of aged meat no longer than a finger and chunked it onto the ground. He stomped on it. Spat on it. Called it stupid. Then called himself stupid. Gaskin went after him and could not believe what was happening. It seemed that the fever was worse than he expected, so Gaskin cautiously approached Elijah, assured him that he was not a stupid person but a respected soldier amongst the troops and his friend; he spoke of a time they went swimming in the river and caught a snapping turtle, asked if he remembered when they climbed a tree to spy on his brother lying down with one of the ladies from Tanner’s.

“Keep makin’ me seem crazy,” slurred Elijah. “Ye *love* doin’ it. Don’t ye?”

He ran his tongue over his hand and smeared his spit over Gaskin's face. Gaskin grabbed his jacket lapels and pinned him against the wagon.

"Go ahead. Hit me!"

"What's got into you, friend?"

"Don't call me friend!" His knee dug into Gaskin, knocking the air out of his lungs. Gaskin fell on his side and found that breathing from his mouth was impossible for his jaw was locked open, and so he forced himself to breathe through his nose and the smell of dirt and grass overwhelmed his senses and kept him from noticing Elijah, who grabbed another stick of dried meat and threw it at him and asked, "Is that the meat ye wanted?" and when Elijah was given no response, again, he grabbed his crotch and repeated his question. By then the soldiers from the parlor had gathered around the two. They said not word nor tried to interject themselves to stop the fighting. For the first time Gaskin was afraid of Elijah, and he remembered the look of fear in the baby goat's eyes back at Blue Ridge, how it called out to its mother for help, how exhilarating he felt to have conquered the goat by sheer anger and fear. Now *he* wished to call out for help but there was no one who would come. So he rose coughing, holding up his fists in front of him to protect himself.

For a moment Elijah appeared bewildered. Gaskin wondered if it was because he had decided to stand up to him or if the alcohol suddenly vanished from his body. From behind the house came a cry of a woman and children and the sound of blows being exchanged. Elijah let go of his crotch and backed away from his company to his horse that he mounted. His face turned pale. No words were exchanged with Gaskin. Not even looks.

He wrenched back on the reins, "Everyone get goin'. What's not packed gets left. That's an order."

Another cry came from behind the house. Elijah tapped the sides of his horse and went over to see what was causing the ruckus. Exhausted, Gaskin fell to his knees. He gave himself a minute to compose himself, digest what had happened. All he wanted was to keep his friend from hurting himself, to be there for him as he had that day his sister had been put away in the stables. The attack seemed planned, like Elijah wanted to find a way to fight him for being with the Indians the night before, and though he couldn't help placing his hands on Elijah he wished he had not. Sun streaks rose on the front wall of the house, and the wind was gradually picking up. It carried Elijah's scent, not only the foul stench of remnant alcohol on his breath, but his body, too, his sweat, which was repugnant and intense; Gaskin was humiliated with himself for not becoming more upset by the stench. He chewed on his lips and leaned his head back on his shoulders. The breeze was cool as it ran over his face but the foul traces of his friend did not leave him, and though it was not the time or the place to do so considering orders were now in need to be followed, Gaskin prayed aloud, softly, and all the while he thought about the words of his father and how he was grateful the man had taught him so much before leaving him for heaven. As he thanked God for blessing his body with strength, Elijah emerged from behind the house with the corporal, who bore blood on his knuckles from what he knew came as a result of an altercation with the other drunk. Then Gaskin stopped praying. He held his face in his hands, wiped the tear that ran from his eye, and thought about the last conversation he had with his father: gripping his hand, Gaskin was prepared to commit the ultimate indignity, and with this indignity display to his father how all the shame, violence, and fear in their house belonged to him, not Gaskin, and he was going to leave tears on his father's sheets to remind him up to his last breath how he'd made his son feel trapped in a cupboard most of his life, but his father said to him, The Lord works in mysterious ways. He may not make everything seem clear all at once,

but don't get mad. Or sad. No, give him time. Be patient. Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. Wait for his answer and be rewarded.

A shadow fell over Gaskin. He looked up into the eyes of Addie, who offered him a hand. As Gaskin stood beside the Indian and watched Elijah take the corporal to the front of the troops, he recognized the pressure of Elijah striking his heart and mind and his resistance to let go of the hope that one day they would leave Georgia together to start a new life in Charleston. The fear and pain inside him eased now though the wind became fiercer, the air rattled the loose boards of the O'Connor house. A sense of pity began to make its way over Gaskin; he knew that when Elijah came to realize the savage, senseless nature of his actions that it would not be gentle, but a terrible event he did not wish to witness. So he stood there with the Indian until they were at the back of the line. Gaskin thanked him for his kindness then walked ahead to rejoin the soldiers, dragging his feet a little to prolong the inevitable violence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The day was dark. The Indians begged for food. Two of them had already died of bowel issues, another of malnourishment, and the sun wasn't even directly over their heads. For Gaskin the hunger was numbing. He wished to steal a pear or turnip. A sack of each were in the wagon in front of him. Across from him was a young girl who appeared to be no older than thirteen wearing a gray skirt and knitted top. She held the hand of her little brother. On her shoes was red blood that was also smeared between the inside of her legs; she had become a woman and soldiers had noticed, for several stared at her back and thighs and followed close behind her the way a bobcat stalks its prey. Gaskin cut in front of the girl to stand on the opposite side of her so that the gawking soldiers would no longer be able to see her body.

Gaskin knew the itch that made men hungry and stupid while they were away from their ladies back home. When he was eight years old his mother had been dead a year. It was the summer. He sat on the floor watching the light that came from beneath his door vanish and appear. Vanish and appear. His father paced across his study; he had been complaining all day about needing money and missing his wife. A knock came at the front door. Gaskin listened to the voice that spoke to his father: a woman in trouble. She apologized for coming at such a late hour. Said she was alone and that she couldn't return home because her husband had mistreated her. His father responded by offering prayer and to walk her back to her house. She thanked him for his kindness. They sat at the supper table, prayed, and when they were finished, his father requested she join him for service Sunday morning. You're too kind, she said. But church was the last place she wanted go, for she spoke of wanting to find a new roof to rest under at night and a man that would not beat her, but treat her with kindness. His father told of his relationship

with his late-wife and subtly hinted at his longing for companionship, to lie next to a woman at night as he had done with his wife for so many years and wake up to the warmth of her legs between his own. The woman slid back her chair. I should head back home she said. Something about her tone was unsettled. But Gaskin's father insisted that she be in no hurry. Stay until morning, he said. She said she did not want this, thanked him, again, for his kindness and requested they walk back to her house. When she took a few steps away from the table, Gaskin cracked open the door of his room and watched his father grab the woman by the arm and tell her, It's not safe out there. Stay. His words were less sincere. They were hungry and demanding. Before the woman could grab the doorknob and leave, his father pulled her back toward the table and forced himself on her. He kissed her face and grabbed her sides. The ordeal lasted for just a few moments then the woman slapped him and ran away.

He never spoke to his father about that night, but he regularly dreamed of the horror in the woman's eyes. The signs given by the soldiers toward the young woman augured warning, and after being attacked himself and helped by Addie, Gaskin swore that he would not let himself be hurt by another person.

The insults from the soldiers did not faze him. They shoved past him toward Elijah, now alone mounted on his horse. Elijah's back was hunched over. He swayed left to right with the trotting of the horse, a kind of dance. His feet dangled like a tongue, fat and slow, outside the stirrups. Beads of sweat ran down his nape. He coughed profusely and spat blood on the ground. Drool lingered on his chin. Gaskin called out to the soldiers who were staring at the girl to check on Elijah.

"Won't you shut the hell up," said one of the soldiers. "Leave him alone."

"He's fine," said another.

"One of you help him," said Gaskin. "It looks like he may fall off his horse."

Neither of them paid Gaskin any mind, so he looked around behind him until he spotted Addie. He motioned for him to stand by the girl in his absence. Addie nodded in agreement, and so Gaskin made his way beside Elijah, whose eyes were still and bloodshot. When Gaskin patted his thigh to catch his attention, he didn't move. Not even when he called his name and told him he was a worse drunk than his father and brother.

He grabbed the edge of Elijah's jacket, yanked, and whispered, "You all right?" It had been a couple of hours since they left O'Connor's. Elijah had it out with the corporal, again, but this time matters ended with his job being threatened. He could be involved in no more altercations during the march, and if he disobeyed any orders he would be immediately discharged and sent back to Georgia without pay, without food, without water. Gaskin knew Elijah wasn't one to let words bother him; he'd take them and better himself, so to see him as he was meant something was wrong.

"Don't say my name. Don't ask me questions. Don't even look at me."

Gaskin caught the drool, pulled it away from his friend, wiped it on his trousers and looked at Elijah's dark ears, filled with blood, then at his teeth grinding on top of each other. Gaskin knew this look all too well. Part of him wondered why he even cared about his friend's horseshit, but it was horseshit like this that brought tears now, tears he wished he could have given Elijah for his acts of insubordination that costed so many lives, tears he wanted him to consume so that he would be cured of his illness, not just his addiction to alcohol, but his unhappiness. He hoped the corporal's threats had beaten some sense into him, helped him remember who he was back on his family's plantation. But nothing seemed to change. He was worse. He was sicker. It seemed that

whatever was at the core of Elijah's despair was gnawing at his mind, had been for a while, and was now taking its toll on his health.

Elijah pulled on the reins of his horse. Gaskin walked faster and held a hand up as if hailing a coachman. He was going to tell Elijah it was time he stopped acting like a savage. For once, he would be the one in charge of the situation. No matter if it meant he had to be as stubborn as a dead mule. "You think this is going to make things better? Make everything go away?"

"Stop," he said, his voice cracking, "Gaskin, stop."

Elijah was shaking, but it wasn't his trembles that made Gaskin reconsider his sternness; it was the fear that was in his round eyes, the lines in his face that he'd seen many times growing up with him when he was concerned for his sister. "Elijah, whatever happened to you while I was away? You ain't ever really told me. Something happen that I need to know?"

"He made me do it. He forced my hand." He slid his hand into his pocket and pulled out his bayonet. "Remember the day I left? How I was sent northwest of home to deal with Indians?"

With caution, Gaskin answered, "Yes." He wondered why on earth he was bringing up that dreadful day; he left without saying goodbye, but gave Gaskin one last look of disgust infused with disappointment and then walked down the path through the woods, crossed the river, and wrote a letter not two days after stating that he was fine and that the Indians he was supposed to work with had fled to the northern Blue Ridge. His thoughts drifted to when they caught their first alligator. Gaskin wasn't sure why. But the memory calmed him. They bled together pulling in the line, fired one shot a piece at the gator's head to make it stop thrashing, felt good knowing that they had worked hard together and conquered a beast of the marsh that their parents warned them could gobble them up.

He kept his mouth shut for a spell. "I ain't proud of myself. Want to start over."

"To before we crossed the river?"

He quivered, gripped the front of his saddle with both hands. "No. Further."

Snow flurries fell from the sky. The clouds sunk. Ahead the road turned muddy with scattered ice crystals on sedges and brown smartweeds gleaming in the dim sunlight. Elijah's grip loosened. He started to slide off his saddle. Gaskin stopped the horse.

"Ye know ye start the most God awful conversations."

Thinking of what could be wrong with his friend, Gaskin said, "I know."

"Men were born to be mean. Don't know why the hell we call those sonofabitches savages and not ourselves. They're just stupid. Plain stupid. And ye can't fix that not even with the thickest book ye buy. Same goes for meanness. I reckon it's good to have some of it in ye. A man ain't worth shit for shit if he can't hold a blade and spill a little blood from time to time." Elijah coughed, spat a clot of blood on the ground. He fell on top of Gaskin, who caught him with both hands and helped him over to a spot outside of the line where they sat and he checked his head: hot.

"Ye're burning up."

"I'll be fine. Goddamn liquor and no sleep. Can't even remember what I talked to that bearded, wife-beating fucker about." Gaskin took the sack of water from off his belt and offered it to Elijah.

"Drink."

"I got my own."

"*That's* why you're sick. Drink."

Elijah obeyed. He drank half of the water, swashed the rest in his mouth then spat it out beside him. "Ye ever thought more about my question about the removal?"

Gaskin couldn't forget it. "Don't see what that has to do with anything."

"So ye have?"

Gaskin offered him more water.

"I'm fine. Tell me your answer. I won't say nothin' to nobody."

The line marched passed them. It had crossed Gaskin's mind every day since Blue Ridge that he was a murderer, that amongst the group of Indians Addie and others suffered because of him, his killings, allowing an Indian kid's foot to be claimed by infection and the cold, obeying orders to lead the company through a river too deep for any person to walk through. So many words filled Gaskin's head, words he did not know but heard from the Indians, words that reminded him of the Indians leaving their homes. They were never the intruders. Or trespassers. Or savages. He was. So were those like him—whites who came in, chopped up their land into states, elected big wigged pricks who told men what they could and could not have. All they had done was scare the living hell out of the Indians. Treated them worse than niggers.

"It wasn't my doing by choice," said Gaskin.

"So ye're learnin' just like I did."

"Whatcha mean?"

Elijah turned a little and made a sound, *pssh*, a sound of puzzlement and anguish, not an annoyed sound, and when he turned back he crossed his arms in front of him and his voice clotted with tears. "This war with the Indians has been goin' on long before we were just a glimmer in our parents' eyes. I don't think it's too hard imagining this war goin' on for the rest of our lives and beyond. But not long after I left home, I killed a man no older than the two of us. Corporal made me. Man was an Indian refusing to leave his home. Had been told three different times to go. Fourth time me and some other dumbasses had to go to his house. There were others

like him. They left after they heard the gunshot. My hands were shaking. Nearly dropped my gun, but I knew if I did I'd never hear the end of it from Corporal. Soldier next to me then went over and scalped the fella. Blood all over the hardwood floor. I couldn't stop staring at his skull. Then I heard someone fall in the next room. We all went inside it with our guns ready, and what we saw made me sick. It was the boy's mother or grandmother. I ain't entirely sure. But she was sick with all kinds of red spots on her, and I guess after she heard what we did, she went ahead and put herself out of her misery with her knife."

They both got still, Gaskin on his knees and Elijah digging his nails into his arms, breaking skin, drawing blood, as if both of them were waiting to see what would happen next. A new fear surfaced within Gaskin, fear of the immediate and distant future, as he wondered how badly he would be shaken and bruised and how he would live with the burden of knowing that because of his role in the removal, countless lives would be tattered and torn, separated, left to live in misery while on this earth.

"That was the meanest thing I've ever done, and I know I'm going to have to do that again. That day was a test. I know it. From the good Lord. I shouldn't have done what I did, but had I to. Part of me even *wanted* to. That's how I know I was born with meanness, and I can't help but wonder if that's what caused me to act like I ain't got a lick of goddamn sense at the river. And earlier with ye."

Gaskin put away his water and tried thinking about their first gator kill again. He did not want to cry. He pitied his friend, but he knew if he let himself break down that he would not be able to muster the same strength and determination that he currently had. He needed to stand by his friend, keep everything in. To help Elijah move on in his life as Addie had helped him.

"Gaskin, I need ye to promise me something. That no matter what happens, no matter what anybody tries to tell ye while we are out here, including me and my hateful ass self, ye're a good soldier and even better man and friend."

Elijah cleaned his face with the sleeve of his jacket. Gaskin helped him up onto his feet, thanked him for his words, and offered to lead his horse for him while he rested. He agreed, and so Gaskin helped him remount then went over to one of the wagons and took a quilt belonging to one of the Indians and gave it to Elijah. The soldier wrapped his body up and kept warm. As he held the reins of the horse, Gaskin mulled on the workings of Elijah's mind, to understand his outlook on men. Like the other soldiers marching, his life would end in suffering, but it would not be unmerited. It would come because of his infection, his meanness. He would never stop thinking about the violence he had seen and done is his lifetime, violence that needed repeating and that he would have to do in order to survive. Never stop thinking about the words of false hope and promises that he gave to the Indians, who were naïve enough to trust him—not like they knew any better, considering the pale faces surrounding them and cultivating their land. How could he forgive himself if the path ahead of him consisted of his hands and tongue bestowing hardships on innocent people, dragging Indians into a world of endless torment that he could only compare to hell?

CHAPTER NINE

They came up through the road in single file and set up their tents on a small island of grass amongst the mud. For as far as Gaskin's eyes could see, the horizon was flat and white and the road was less worn. The town ahead was hidden in the distant woods, away up to the northwest. It would take half a day to get there. Or longer. The wind swept over the land in gales. Blades of ice pierced tents and brought a cold that caused skin to burn. Snow mounted and suffocated undergrowth, turned the burrows of rabbits and moles to underground ice boxes. The dark clouds hailed from the mountains to the north. The soldiers passed out quilts, bed sheets, and blankets amongst themselves. When every one of them had an extra layer to fight against the cold, they passed out what was left to the Indians. Addie was one of the lucky few; he was given a blanket just big enough to cover his shoulders and the top of his chest. But he did not keep it. Instead, he gave the blanket to the young woman and boy he had been watching over and used an empty burlap sack for protection. He cut holes in it for his head and arms. When he was done, he nestled himself between the siblings and they kept quiet inside their tent.

So started the longest and worst night of the march west. For hours, the company was forced to bear out the storm not knowing when the brunt of it had arrived. Despite the past few days, the apology, and their history, Gaskin did not speak to Elijah. They sat there listening to the walls of their tent flap against the wind and exchanged puffs of breath. Their arms touched, but there was nothing warming or beautiful about it. Loneliness sank in. It grew around Gaskin like mold. As the light faded from the sky, so did the will inside him to leave the tent. He tried to shake himself out of his sadness by thinking of a tobacco field. He enjoyed being alone in them without Elijah or the rest of Elijah's family. He imagined it was summer and that he was walking down one of

the worn, smooth paths between the rows of green stalks, singing with the slaves as they suckered. At the end of the last row of tobacco was a bed of potatoes. He stuck his hands deep into the black dirt and searched. When he looked beside him there was Addie smiling. This illusion lasted for several moments, but then was shattered by a familiar sense of lack. Addie turned to dust and was carried off with the wind. The tobacco stalks turned brown and black and shriveled up into the ground, while the potatoes in his hands turned soft, then to mush, then became one with the dirt. Gaskin sat there hurting. When he came to, he was gripping his chest and throat. It felt as if something were the matter with his windpipe; he wanted to tell himself how he felt about Addie. He wanted to know how the words felt sliding off his tongue and rolling off his lips. But he could not muster up the first thing. It was agonizing. These feelings he felt once toward Elijah, but they were hushed and he was threatened; no one wanted to listen. He stuck out so much from everyone else that they scolded him with their menacing eyes, and now it appeared that there was someone else, like him, who cared for his well-being as much he cared for the other person's, but he had no way to communicate with him or anyone else about what it, their desires, feelings, and thoughts, meant.

When the last light faded from the early afternoon sky, Elijah opened the tent and welcomed in the whistling wind that nearly uprooted the tent. He had to go pass out food. "Ain't a hope in hell for us all to make it through the night without something to gnaw on," said Elijah. Outside the snow was over a foot deep. Gaskin watched his friend trudge through the snow to one of the wagons, then looked away at a group of Indian women gathering shirts and trousers, needles and threads from a straw basket. They ran to their tents where their children waited for them with open arms and tears running down their chapped cheeks. They asked their mothers when the snow would stop. When would they go back home? Their mothers picked them up and kissed

their foreheads. What they said Gaskin did not catch, for they entered their crowded tents and went to work sewing what clothing they could together to provide extra warmth to their family.

Dinner was another apple. As a treat for just them, Elijah snagged four pieces of dried meat: two for each of them. Gaskin cut the fruit in half with his bayonet. Brown blotches spotted the peeling. Seeds filled the core. The meat of the apple tasted bland. He ate quickly to get it over with, then took two bites of one of the sticks to get the taste of the apple out of his mouth, and then saved the rest for later; it worried him that the storm would do damage to the wagons and ruin what was left of their food supply, so he kept the meat in one of the pockets of his trousers as a precaution.

There came a thud from the outside. It was enough to startle both men and pull them from the safety of their tent. What they found to be the source of the strange sound was a dead mule. Its hide filled with ice, its mouth open, its tongue hanging out, hard, purple as a plum. Another mule could not be lost, neither could any of the horses, so Elijah alerted the corporal, who commanded he tie the animals to a wagon and build them a fire.

"Make it big enough for all of 'em to keep warm. One of those sonsofabitches dies, and I swear it'll be your ass, Elijah."

It went without saying that the fire would need to be kept burning throughout the night, so Elijah got little sleep. Between every two hours he got up to throw wood onto the flames. The horses neighed. The mules swished their tails. The animals' bodies shivered and jerked.

Late evening Gaskin stopped Elijah from leaving their tent, told him to eat, warm up, wipe the snow off his body before he gave out and froze to death during his next trip out. Elijah tied up the flaps of the tent, squatted and sat on the ground. He then pulled out his sack of water that did not reek of whisky, drank, wiped his nose with one of his gloves and spoke to Gaskin about

missing his mother's meals, how he wanted more than a silly apple and sticks of dried meat that tasted like shit. Gaskin was surprised to hear him talk about something that did not have to do with the removal or about how his request to take a break would be somehow going against the corporal's orders. When he was halfway done with his water, Elijah asked Gaskin to help him get the snow off his back, said it was melting and sliding into his trousers and causing the hairs on his ass to freeze together. "Tired of this goddamn weather," said Elijah, his voice loud. "Don't care to ever see another flake of this shit so long as I live." He cocked his head to one side and pulled out a stick of rolled up tobacco. He lit it, took a draw, then continued on about how the wind was picking up and causing the snow to pile up and around the tents. Before long, he switched topics: how the people back in Georgia had no idea of all the hard work that was being put into their safety. "They think all the good shit just happens. *Just* happens. It makes me mad as hell. How stupid do ye have to think to believe that? Bet those goddamn horses out there know how dumb that sounds. They've seen more than any of us. What happens in the late hours of the night and the early hours of the morning. They hear the crying when we sleep. The prayers that are said when no one is looking. If I had to guess, I'd say people back home, at the very least, have an idea of what we go through but choose to lie. Guess it helps with resting. Plus who wants to hear all that? I wouldn't. Would have enough to worry about. But I tell ye what, there's something to say about investing in a lie like that. Makes a man wonder if the world he lives in is real or not."

Gaskin felt an anxiety build up inside him made of his not knowing why on earth Elijah had decided to speak so much in their close, less than relaxing quarters, combined with a feeling of being a young man again, before the removal, back on the plantation when he and Elijah had not feared each other and were boys just being boys. He responded in agreement to Elijah and said

that people thought similarly about cured tobacco: it just appears. For a few moments, all the built up fears and worries were covered up with words and the sensation of old normalcy. The smile on Elijah's face widened, revealing a tiny piece of chewed tobacco between his front teeth. To this, Gaskin pointed at his mouth, told him to use his tongue to get it out. Elijah listened then asked if Gaskin could take his place outside, just for a little while, so that he could rest his eyes. His request revealed his irritation toward a job that, for all its worth, was one of the most respected yet cruelest and excruciating roles in the world, and revealed, too, his exhaustion toward trying to keep up with the corporal: his expectations, his performance, his outcomes. It was becoming too much, so it seemed.

Elijah was met with hesitancy. Gaskin did not wish to let down his friend, again, plus he wasn't comfortable being alone, in the dark, unsure of what to do should any disruption occur.

"If you need something," said Elijah, "come get me. I'll handle it."

The last minute remark gave Gaskin enough courage to agree to the task, and so he left the tent with his mouth covered by a torn piece of cloth, his boots laced tight, and one hand over his eyes to shield them from the slanted snow.

Outside, the fire wheezed. It was short flame fueled by pieces of coal and wood that ice and water threatened to smolder. There were gales that would silence, then breathe life into the flame. Over and over. The fire shrank in size with each passing second. The tents surrounding it provided little protection. The same could be said about the horses and mules. Gaskin hobbled over to the animals, patted their heads, broke apart the dried up meat into pieces for each to have one bite.

He went to the wagons twice, each time bringing back a block of wood and a bucket full of water that he gave to the mules and horses and held so that they would not spill any on their

hooves or on the ground, and then he sat by the fire and did his best to use his body to shield it from the direction of the wind. As he held his hands up to the fire, he overheard perpetual little squabbles going on between Addie and another man, yet he could not say that he recognized the voice. It was hoarse and dry. Whoever it was struck and held up a match. The shadows of the siblings and Addie were to the back of the tent, while the stranger sat and leaned forward in their direction at the tent's opening. At such a later hour, it did not make sense as to why anyone would be up, nor did it seem possible that any of the Indians would be talking to Addie since none of them were kin or close to him, at least not that Gaskin knew of. Even if the person was an Indian, it was odd that he sat away from Addie and would risk awaking a nearby soldier with such bickering. So Gaskin stared at the shadows. He placed a small board on the fire, then stood still and kept quiet as the stranger reached out for the young woman, who slapped his wrist and backed into Addie. It was at that moment Gaskin knew the stranger. He knew the soldier was probably bitter from before and just as lonely as all the other soldiers. It astounded him the desire for closeness, for joining together, for obtaining what was once easily accessible but now a fantasy, an itch, an uncomfortable feeling in one's groin. How it could push a man to this: infiltrating an Indian tent and requesting the hand of a woman barely older than a child.

Gaskin walked up to the tent with his bayonet in hand. As he approached, the match went out. A struggle broke out. The soldier cussed and exchanged blows with the girl, causing the young boy to cry. Addie called out for help, but he was told to hush, and when he didn't listen, he was struck and thrown out of the tent. Then the boy became quiet. Gaskin started running. He saw in the frame of Addie's body that he was hurt and that something rigid and horrifying was happening to the young woman. When he got to the tent, Gaskin opened the front flap. The young girl was on her back. The soldier had lifted her legs so that they rested on his shoulders.

Her mouth was open. It looked as if she wanted to scream. The soldier shook the girl's limp body, pulled her to his chest, held her there against him and ran his hands over her neck and breasts, grunted and moaned as he pinched her nipples. Gaskin was always afraid to fight. He had done his best to avoid it by proposing empty threats and bowing up his chest. But none of that mattered now. He didn't care if Corporal woke up or if his teeth were knocked down his throat by the soldier. He yelled and yanked the soldier off of the young woman causing the tent to be picked up by the wind and taken away. Addie wiped the blood from his busted nose and gathered the siblings, while Gaskin beat into the soldier's face. Despite each fist he took, the soldier kept a wild look in his eyes. There was sorrow in them, a deep pain, but it was hate that made them most maddening. Suddenly his fist dug into Gaskin's stomach.

"You got some goddamn nerves, queer," said the soldier. He pushed Gaskin off him then pressed one of his boots against his face. "Thought that savage would stop me? Didn't think I could take 'em?" He raked his heel across Gaskin's mouth and nose. "Bitch is mine. Weren't no way I was gone let a thing like that go before gettin' a piece of it. But you know what? I ort to break her neck now. Then yours. Didn't know a goddamn savage could bewitch a cock sucker. Guess that proves how good darker meat is." He stood over Gaskin then dropped down. He dug his knees into Gaskin's arms and knocked the bayonet from out of his hand.

"Damn you!"

"No, damn *you*!" said the soldier, gripping Gaskin by the throat with both hands and squeezing. Blood entered Gaskin's mouth. He tried to spit it into the wild eyes of the soldier, but instead it drooled out of the corners of his mouth and settled in the crook of his ears. There was nothing he could do to stop him. Air could not travel down his windpipe, so his lungs felt like they were about to explode. Sweat gathered in his pits and on the back of his neck and he tried to

wiggle free. Black dots clouded his vision. He tapped his hands violently on the ground, a last plea to the soldier to spare his life. But he was ignored. Then Gaskin blinked and looked up at Addie, who stood behind the soldier with his bayonet. The Indian rammed the blade into the soldier's back. The soldier let go and howled in pain, but Addie covered his mouth with his hand and ran the blade against his throat.

There was no struggle. The soldier was still. Addie looked down at him, removed his hand from over his mouth. The soldier lay still in the snow. There was a long pause in which not a sound was made by the tents or their occupants. There was only the sound of the wind whirling overhead. Gaskin could not move from his spot on the ground. He looked at Addie, then the young woman, a beautiful child, slim, her skin nearly walnut from her days in the fields. She had matured so quickly, Gaskin thought lamentably, despite being relieved that she had been saved. The young woman held her brother close to her chest and rocked him. She told him in a soothing voice that everything was all right and that the bad man would no longer hurt them, at least that is what Gaskin thought she was saying. It was the only thing that made sense for her to say; however, it was all a lie. It was now, as the woman wept, as Gaskin and Addie retracted themselves into the seclusions of their minds so as to allow the young woman and her brother their privacy, Gaskin felt a peculiar connection, one that comes after a moment of violence has ended and its effect has settled and remained for much more than a few simple moments. Memories of his father, the thought of their last time together even after all these years, came back so furiously that his chest compressed and forced the air back out of him. Then, gradually, the tents awakened again and soldiers stepped out with their guns and bayonets. The mules and horses stood and dug their hooves into the ground and snorted. From the tent center to the rest of the company Corporal's voice rang out. "Report," he demanded. "Someone report what the hell

has gone on here." The young woman cradled her brother in her arms and ran to Addie. She begged to him, but he stood in what seemed a spectral state and could not move his lips for the first word. She pulled back his hair from in front of his face, rested her cupped hand on his cheek, repeated herself again but this time in a calmer panic. Gaskin could remember when he touched his father the same way. He wondered why the ease and openness had left them, and why they had been replaced with aversion, a feeling of near disgrace that kept him from mourning as he imagined he always would the day his father would leave him for the next life. He felt so ashamed. He saw him and his father as cruel; when they stopped doing evening prayer together, when his father left him for days to clear his mind, when he gave up trying to forgive his father for having nearly raped the stranger. Gaskin lost himself then, bombarded by his past. It was several moments before he became cognizant of where he was again and that both Addie and the young woman were waiting on him. So he took the bayonet from Addie and told them that everything was all right and for them not to worry, that he would take the blame for what had happened. But this was untrue. He knew this. He knew that everything would not be all right. A soldier is killed by one of his own because of a woman? An Indian. A savage. One of the barbaric creatures that the soldiers had traveled all this way to remove from civil society. Gaskin was not sure why this affected him as it did, the way the Indians held each other as they ran to stand behind him, the anger on the corporal's face as he emerged from his tent, but it was devastating, even more so when he overheard Addie tell the Indian woman that one day there would be no more suffering. It dawned on him that the connection he felt came from seeing himself in the girl. The world had lied to her as it had lied to him. They were removed from their homes, forced to march to a place people close to them referred to as a second-chance. But in life what was done was done. They had grown up in spaces where their guardians promised

happiness, loyalty, and love, but failed to acknowledge the truth that life is lonely, driven by violence that further isolates states, cities, towns, and communities, and that to be different—to look different, to feel different—is the worst crime and forces a person to become a refugee, mocked and snickered at, left to wander as a nomad until their bones turn brittle and their hearts stop.

Corporal squatted and placed his hand next to the stab wound in the soldier's back.

"I suppose you know what happened here, Gaskin?"

"Yes sir."

"Then open your goddamn mouth."

"He tried to rape and kill one of the Indian girls."

Corporal pointed at the young woman. "That little cunt?"

"Yes sir."

He stepped over the body, and then grabbed the collar of Gaskin's jacket and yanked him forward.

"You should have just let him do it. Goddamn Indian bitch ain't worth a man's life."

Gaskin took a few moments to answer. He wanted to tell the corporal that he was wrong, that the young woman did not deserve to be treated like she had been treated, and it was for the better of the company that such a nuisance was no longer around to cause such issues, but instead he said, "But he didn't want to stop with her, sir. He wanted the boy as well." Corporal glared at Addie. "I told him to stop then he pulled his blade on me. I had no choice but to defend myself."

"You lying to me?"

"Swear on my honor."

The corporal pushed Gaskin's body away from him. The cold air hit them all like a fist and the snow picked up more. Elijah emerged from the gathered crowd of soldiers. He looked at the body then Gaskin. His eyes read: What happened? What did you do?

"A man is as good as his word," said the corporal. "I ain't convinced. Shit stinks. But there ain't time for what needs to be done. Not now. Not 'til we get to where we goin'. So in the meantime, you bury that body and you tell those sonsofbitches to get in a tent and keep their mouths shut."

The gathering dispersed. There was chatter amongst the soldiers, but by the time Gaskin had gotten a shovel from one of the wagons, it was over, or at least down to a whisper and he didn't know it. Addie escorted the young woman and her brother to a tent. He walked around to other tents, asked if there was room for one more, but he found that there was no space for him amongst the Indians, so he sat outside the tent where the young woman and her brother were staying and pulled his legs in against his chest and rested his head in his arms.

Elijah remained by the dead soldier. He stared at Addie with a look of apprehension in his eyes.

"Why did ye do it?"

Gaskin looked coldly at him. "I already said why."

He plunged the end of the shovel into the ground and scooped up the first pile of dirt. Elijah was silent. "I did what I had to do. Any person would have done the same."

"I should of knew," Elijah said hopelessly. "Think maybe I already did."

"What are you talking about?"

"Ye care for one of 'em?"

"What do you mean?"

“Don’t play me for a fool, Gaskin.”

There was a long time before either of them spoke again. Gaskin dug a hole about three feet deep. He stopped and wiped his forehead. Addie had not moved from his spot. His body shivered and was being covered by the snow.

“So what do we oughtta do about that one?” asked Gaskin, nudging his head at Addie.

Elijah sucked on his bottom lip. “Don’t know. What were ye thinkin’?”

“Looks like he has no place to go. He’ll freeze to death out here. We have enough room in our tent.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I ain’t getting killed for him. Corporal will skin our asses. He’ll just have to be on his own.”

Gaskin shook his head. He shoveled out more dirt, deepening the hole close to a foot.

“So tomorrow you want to dig another hole?” said Gaskin.

Elijah pointed at the savage.

“Don’t put his blood on me. There ain’t nothin we can do. I’m tryin to build my life up here. I love my job. Corporal? It won’t be his fault if he finds out and has to kill us like ye killed that sonofabitch. Ye got so much ahead of ye, Gaskin. Why risk it? Don’t ye have any decency?”

Gaskin dug faster. He widened the hole.

“I’m plenty decent. I just don’t want to see any more people die tonight. I’m tired of it. Aren’t you? Have you not got any sense yet?”

Elijah kicked at the snow. Corrosion worked between the two men.

“Ye’re messin with some bad stuff,” said Elijah. “It ain’t right. Ye know it ain’t right. I wish this shit weren’t around me. Ye best believe if I find a way to get rid of all this mess, I will. This

just makes me sick thinking about it." Gaskin finished the hole. He feared that what would come next from Elijah's mouth would be his decision to expose his feelings about the natives to the corporal. However, it seemed Elijah noticed the worry in his eyes, in the way his body seemed to droop inward over his frame. He wiped his nose and took a deep breath and said, "But I'll let ye do this. Don't say I ain't doing my part. I'm trying to be better. For both of us. At first light though, he's gone. I don't care where he goes but he can't be near us. Swear to me he won't be near us, Gaskin. Please, don't have him ruin everything."

He had never seen Elijah try so hard to restrain himself. The act of kindness meant so much to Gaskin, yet the pity he felt toward his friend returned as it was clear that what Elijah was doing was not for the greater good but to comfort him, Gaskin, on this special occasion. Tomorrow he might not be so gracious. He might deny ever helping Addie. He might do his best to serve the corporal well and reenter his good graces. He might help lead the company to the next town, then to the Indian Territory, and then work his way up through the ranks so that his pockets would always be filled. But Gaskin felt sure that Elijah's hard work would one day end in vain. Meanness seemed to have itself hooked in him.

Gaskin held out his hand, a motion of promise to Elijah, who seemed surprised by his response but gave every sign of trusting in his friend. This, Gaskin knew, was his way of letting him get away, pretending, for the last time, he wasn't in the least bit aware of the contradictory signals in his voice, words, and posture, testing to see if his word would be true and his body strong enough to resist temptation. Gaskin did not have to think twice about what gripping his friend's hand meant—a new cross would be placed on his shoulders, one that would break his back should he fail, leaving him and all those he loved left for dead.

The stress of the agreement caused Gaskin to tighten up, gave his features nervousness. That Elijah might mistake them as code for lying never crossed his mind. But gripping Elijah's hand, he spoke in the firmest voice he could come up with and said, "I swear."

CHAPTER TEN

The morning stank of snow and smoke and bathlessness and whisky. The corporal in his tent came out and called to the survivors of the storm to check for the dead. Seventeen were found: nine from the cold, five from malnourishment, three from sickness. All Indians. There was no time to bury them. Instead of pulling the bodies out of their tents, the tents were set on fire and the bodies were cremated and left to the weeds. The soldiers marched thirty-one Indians, two mules, nine horses, and two wagons to the town of Waterloo. Hundreds of acres of sugarcane surrounded the town. Ash covered the ground between the stalks. Blacks in rags with machetes in hand cut the stalks at their bases then ran hands that were yellow with calluses over the crop and stripped it of its leaves. On their knees, the slaves placed the clean stalks on the ground and chopped the cane into five consistent lengths then put the pieces into a little flatbed cart that stood on the yellow sands of the bank of Pickwick Lake. Waterloo was a few miles south of the Bama-Tennessee border. Bulrushes lined the edges of the water along with willows that gave shade to the homes of the white men and women walking through the streets. The women wore dresses of dull blues, pinks, yellows, and browns. Their husbands wore mostly black. The road into town went through a field of brown reed grass and pickerelweed. The road was soft, flooded by the run-over of the lake, but visible by the tracks of horses and the lines of wheels from the wagons of merchants. On both sides of the town's entrance were low walls of rocks, their tops worn smooth.

Gaskin followed Elijah and the corporal. They passed through the marsh onto the dry land of Waterloo. The town consisted almost entirely of colonial-houses, in various styles of marshside architecture: Georgian, old Tidewater, and Federal with white porticoes, balustrades, and

fencing. The trading post in the center of town was a collection of markets and vendors run by peddlers from foreign lands with weird accents that were nearly incomprehensible. They offered laces, silver, gold, and stands of cabbage, lettuce, and meats. On a platform, slaves of all sizes and ages stood still while white men with white hair made bids on their bodies. Thick veins stood out at the sides of slaves' necks; they did all they could not to flinch while the auctioneer showcased their bodies.

The company traveled past the trading post to a stable where they tied their horses and mules and fed them and themselves. The keeper of the stable was a man with a face like a very ripe peach. His hair was black, cut short, and thick. He was average in height with a small gut that hung over his belt. When he welcomed the company with a grin and greeting, his wife appeared in the doorway behind him. She did not have the same bright disposition as her husband.

"Cold day ain't it?" the stable owner said, leaning against a wooden beam. "What can we do ye for?"

"Supplies," said Corporal. "My men and I need food and fresh water. We headed west. Supposed to be there by the first of the year."

"Cutting it close."

"Yes sir. That we are."

"Welp, ye are welcome to keep your things here while ye head on to the market. But your slaves can't stay in the streets."

"We don't own them," said Elijah. "We are just relocating them."

"That's a shame. Good Lord didn't intend savages to be free."

"How'd he tell ye that?" asked Elijah, taking a gulp of the now whisky-water in his sack. "Someone send him a letter by quail or horse?"

Gaskin bit down on the insides of his cheeks to keep from laughing. The man narrowed his eyes at Elijah, but appeared unfazed by the remark. He told his wife to quit hiding like a corn mouse by the door and help the men bring their things inside. He shook the corporal's and Elijah's hands and introduced himself as Cormac Jones, then offered to take the men to a peddler he did most of his trading with.

"Ye got to be careful talking to these fellas," said Cormac. "Even the one I go to is a swindler. Can't trust him. Then again I can't blame him. These days ye never know when the Lord might decide to take everything away."

"Hell, folks up north ain't making things easier," said Corporal.

"Mennonite with his wife and kids came to town last week. Had the funniest voices. Couldn't place their accents, but they said they were from Carolina. Appeared to be a fine bunch. So several folks helped them find some deals in town, even offered them a place to stay for the night. Still don't know why we tried so hard for them."

"Sounds like this place is full of good men," said the corporal.

Elijah wrinkled his nose and said, "I thought I smelt shit before we got here."

The corporal arched his brows and opened his mouth to warn Elijah to watch his tongue, so Gaskin thought, but Cormac told Corporal not to work himself up.

"Your friend has a point. Waterloo is sometimes too naïve. But ye fellas bear the uniforms of our countrymen. Gut tells me ye boys are good people."

Cormac went on to tell the corporal and Elijah about the fighting that took place right outside of Waterloo as he led them away from the stable to the market. Gaskin helped bring the last of the soldiers' bags then rested a while in a rocker on the front porch. He listened to Addie and the young woman they had rescued talk about the good times back in Blue Ridge. The woman said

she used to enjoy traveling into the woods with a basket and picking blueberries for her mother. Said she would help mash them up with a rolling pin and collect the juice and make the best cobblers and tea. Her brother helped them toward the end of their labors. She said he would always get the first bite or sip and let them know if their hard work paid off or not. Regardless if he liked what they had made, she always thought it was funny seeing his tongue stained a dark blue. Addie said her brother got the better end of that arrangement then told her how he used to help his father milk the cows and butcher the chickens. Without going into any specifics, Addie told her how he enjoyed starting his day by helping and talking with his father about the silliest things: a trick one of them had pulled on somebody in town or the way Addie's mother always danced and sang as she cleaned and prepared their meals. The Indians surrounding them also spoke of home amongst themselves. Their concern was how they would adjust once they arrived in the new territory and if there would be as many resources available to them as there had been in Georgia. Despite all the uncertainty, they seemed hopeful and determined to survive.

A glass of water clutched between her hands, Cormac's wife joined Gaskin.

"I wouldn't be surprised if something didn't happen to those red men," said the woman. "Peddlers catch one or two of them while no one is looking and send them off to a town over a hundred miles away. Nope, I wouldn't be surprised in the least bit. That's why Cormac told you boys to get them off the streets."

"May we put them in some of the stables for now?" asked Gaskin. "Just so they are out of everyone's way?"

"I don't know if I'm allowed to do that. Haven't asked. Don't want Cormac getting all mad at me."

Gaskin stood and placed his hand on her shoulder. She flinched.

“Your husband seems like a decent man who wants you to see to it that his guests are tended to and well. You do this for me, and I swear to let him know of how kind you were to us and the Indians in his absence. Will even talk to my commanding officer about seeing that you two are rewarded for your hospitality.”

The woman’s body relaxed, letting one hand fall from around the glass.

“Bless you,” the woman said. “Finding good people is hard. The world is becoming a terrible place. I remember when you could trust your neighbors to keep an eye on your house while you were out and away. Can’t do such a thing now.” She smiled. “Go on and send those poor people around back. I’ll make them some room and leave them some bales to sit on. Just see to it they don’t make a mess.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Gaskin sat on a chair, his watch over the Indians ongoing and his fellow soldiers now away in town searching for a quick drink and female intimacy. It had been several hours. In his hands, the pencil scribbled across the sheet of paper into a letter that expressed his desire to no longer be a part of the removal. It was something that he had recently come to since given the chance to be alone from the other soldiers and think aloud. The deaths of the Indians were too much for his conscience to bear—the little boy, those who swam after his body, all the men, women and children who died from the cold and hunger—and the more he thought of himself and how he wished to be remembered by those who knew him, the worse he felt inside; a soldier who ran people off their land and across the country with only what their arms could carry. Not what he had dreamed of as a boy. Wood shavings covered his legs as he used his bayonet to sharpen his pencil and reveal more lead. Except for the occasional glance at Addie, Gaskin kept his eyes on the paper.

A warm, slow wind teased him from out a back window. There was still no sight of the sun overhead, yet the snow had stopped, the clouds had become thinner, and there was a light scent of rain mixed in with the smell of bread baking. A robin perched on the siding of a stall. It was red as holly and sang to the horses chewing on hay. The melody brought a fluttering feeling into his gut. Life and beauty in a hard winter. He thought about what the papers probably read right now. Surely Southern papers were talking increasingly about the possibility of war with the Yankees. There was probably little on the devastation befalling the Indians, but many kind words on Jackson for his empathy and determination to civilize and settle them. He could barely recall his State of the Union a few years back, but the part of it that suddenly ran past all other thoughts

in his head was when he spoke about his decision to endorse the removal: can it be cruel in this government when, by events which it cannot control, the Indian is made discontented in his ancient home to purchase his lands, to give him a new and extensive territory, to pay the costs of his removal, and support him in his new abode? Gaskin thought of the future. Would the Indians survive on the new land? Where would they go should that land be suddenly desired? Would there be another removal, and if so, would Elijah be there, or would he see how corrupt things were and write a similar letter as the one he was writing now?

He leaned the chair back onto its hind legs so that it rested against the stall behind him. He enjoyed the afternoon warmth on his cheeks; it was mollifying as the rustle of fall leaves down a dirt road. It was good to be away from the other soldiers, writing, able to get out all the closeted anxiety built up by the march. After filling up the first side of the page, Gaskin gave himself a break, folded the paper up and placed it in a pocket inside his jacket. He knew time was limited, so if he wished to speak in private with Addie, now was the time, for soon a soldier would return and force him to remain silent in his chair. He felt giddy. He nestled the pencil between his ear and temple and joined Addie in a stall where a colt slept.

"I was wondering when we'd get to have time again," said Addie, as he combed his fingers through the black hair of the colt's mane.

"I wasn't trying to avoid you."

He crossed his legs and watched the black hairs fall through Addie's fingers into rows. The robin changed its tune and flew to the opposite side of the stable.

"You know," said Addie, "I've been thinking all this time trying to figure out why I feel the way I do."

"About the march?"

"No. The way I feel about people in general. The way I think about companionship. I don't think I can see my family again. They won't like who I am. They want me to have a wife and children. I cannot deny them those things."

Gaskin felt warmth run up to his face. He covered his mouth with one of his hands, like when he was being polite while speaking with a mouth full of food.

"I've had similar thoughts," said Gaskin. "Didn't really speak to anyone about them. My father would have baptized me more times that I could count, and Elijah probably wouldn't have let me stay with him."

"But you've cared for him before?"

Gaskin removed his hand from his mouth and crossed his arms.

"I did but things never worked out. Not like I wanted. But that's okay."

"You sure?"

"I think so."

Gaskin placed a hand on Addie's lap, and then the Indian rested his head back on the wall of the stall. Gaskin took the strand of hay from Addie' mouth, placed it in his own, inhaled, "I'm going to quit the army. Don't see myself getting much out of all this. Best thing that has happened was meeting you. Now I got a situation on my hands. Got to figure out what I got to do. You got a mom and pop, that place west. We can't be seen there like this or we'll have to start walking another hundred miles west. Or worse. They'll tie our hands together and hang us from a tree. That scares the hell out of me."

"But Gaskin, why would we even go there if that's true? Where we're going seems dreadful. I miss my family. But I don't think I'll be happy seeing them there. All broken. You know they think I'm dead. Maybe that's how I should stay. Dead to them. Then there won't be any more

sorrow. They won't have to see me like this or with you." Addie leaned forward and turned his body so that he was facing Gaskin. "Why don't we run away? There's nothing stopping us."

"There's the corporal stopping us."

"But what can he do when it's late and no one is looking? We would be miles away before he even noticed we were gone."

"I would be charged with desertion. They'd kill me if they caught me."

"*If*."

The robin stopped singing. It flew out of a window. Cormac's wife tenderized a steak in a room at the front of the stable. She beat the meat over and over and over again with a wooden mallet, stopped abruptly, and walked toward the front door.

"What if we got a farm together? Up north in the mountains," said Addie. "My great grandfather's people are from there. I've heard stories of good soil, a valley that during the spring is bright green and full of animals for hunting. Like I said, I don't think I can go to my family. As much as I want to. They've already said their goodbyes to me. They'd want me to be happy with myself and life beyond the life I had with them. I think this will work, Gaskin. I really do. There would be no one to bother us there, and you would be free from this nonsense violence. You know these other soldiers would be happy to see you gone. They have made that clear many—"

"Now just a minute. That ain't your place to talk about how they see me. Not all of them think me to be a piece of shit." Envy made a wedge into his heart. Gaskin couldn't help but think of how well the other soldiers treated each other. The names they had called him. Cock sucker. Queer. It was their discernment that made their words hurt all the worse, he realized, not only with its own vileness, but with a vileness it uncovered in him. "I'm stuck doing what I got to do

here. I can't get out of it. Not like what you're thinking. Addie, I don't want to be like all those men who fled during the Revolution. I don't want to be killed. Heard a story once of a man named Welt. Corporal said he was one of the best goddamn men he's ever had. He could carry a man twice his size and twice his weight. Then, after the British fired the first shots over his head, he ran. Corporal said it was all he could to keep everyone from going into a panic. He said they were sure it was over once their best man ran. But they made it through. Lost not the first. It was a week later Corporal found Welt dead face down in a pond. Someone scalped him, stripped him of his clothes, beat him with a horsewhip until the bones in his spine showed, a terrible sight to see. Cracks covered his skull. Looked like someone tried busting it in with a hammer."

"Do you believe that?"

"Elijah heard the story from someone else back in Georgia. I wasn't there the day he heard it, but after I found out about what had happened to Welt, he stepped forward and told me what he was told. Stories matched up. Can you imagine one night we get a knock at the door by men looking for me and they find us living together? A deserter and an Indian. Don't even want to think about what they'd do."

"So you rather keep doing this?" said Addie. "Will you be much happier seeing my people suffer? Watch them die out? Be raped and robbed? Who wouldn't want to desert such an unhappy damn life?"

Gaskin tried to sort through his feelings, find some logic that would justify an answer of yes, but he couldn't find the words; they were like distant islands black against the evening sun. Addie told him about the thousands of Indians that had already died because of white men, the victories that leaders like the corporal proclaimed after destroying villages and farms belonging to the Cherokee, how even he himself remained silent while his own town was attacked and

allowed the innocent to be slain; he, alone in his room that had already been ransacked, admitted to gaining consciousness and spotting children running in the streets searching for their mothers and fathers, and despite the strength he had that he could and should have used to open the window to his room to let the children in, he remained silent and still and watched bullets enter the back of their skulls and come out through their foreheads and cheeks. They fell. Blood spilled from the bullet holes for what seemed like hours. He had prayed for his own death. The image of them dying would not leave his dreams. Their bloodied faces haunted him. So when he was able to finally rest, he prayed, gave thanks, and swore to avoid such madness, such evil, at all costs and do what he could to act and speak instead of being silent and still in the presence of wickedness.

It was after this tale of sorrow that Gaskin retook Addie's hands in his own.

"None of that is right. It's a shame that happened to those kids. Children are supposed to grow old and outlive their parents. Not be treated as bottles in target practice. I really do hate the removal. I hate you've lost everything. I hate that all these people lost everything. I don't know what on earth I'd of done if some fellows came to my house and told me I had to grab my things and get out. But I know what it's like to lose everything. I know what's it like to be forced to start over. It's shit." He chuckled and leaned forward and gripped Addie's chin. He brought him closer to his face. "But I can't think of anything worse now than seeing you get hurt. I don't want to have to walk away one morning while you wake up lost with nothing to your name in a strange, dusty place."

Gaskin was stunned and overcome by disbelief that came from his instinct decision to pull Addie's mouth close to his own, mixed with the realization that he was finally acting on his feelings toward another man and there was no retaliation, no look of disgust. Then their lips

touched. There wasn't an Indian close to the stall, so they believed themselves invisible. It was the first time Gaskin had ever kissed another man, and it felt strange, at first, but then he did not mind the small black stubbles of hair on Addie's upper lip rubbing against his skin, or the way Addie ran his tongue over his own and the roof of his mouth. The envy and sadness inside him seemed to melt away as they slid as far back in the stall. They lay beside each other. Addie took Gaskin's hand and brought it to his erect cock. Gaskin took in a sharp breath then curled his fingers beneath Addie's shirt. His gut was flat and tight. He ran his finger up a line where four taut muscles met his chest. In that moment he wanted to touch him more, slide his hand down the line to the space below the bottom of his trousers, but he worried that someone would see them. So he pulled away from Addie, told him to keep quiet, then led them to a ladder that went up to loft filled with stacks of hay, and it was there, high up near the rafters, that the two men lay beside each other, hugged mightily, their mouths together, their clothing off, sweat damped on their backs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Gaskin woke with his shirt draped over his body, a pain in his neck, and Addie butted against him. For a moment he admired how beautiful the Indian looked; the way he slept with his mouth open, how his nipples were no bigger than acorns, hard and pink, the tightness of his arms and legs. He kissed his neck and felt himself flow toward him; and yet, as he held Addie in his arms, another man came to mind, Elijah, and Gaskin studied him with Addie's beauty and the feeling that came to him was not the same as the way he felt for Addie. He smiled, kissed the Indian again, and then let him rest as he got dressed and looked down at the stables. On one end were the soldiers drinking from brown bottles and gathered around Cormac telling tales of battles fought during the Revolution. On the other end, were the rest of the Cherokee holding forks that they stuck into large mounds of hay made from the bales given to them to rest on, and on both sides of the group of Indians, were cattle and horses with their heads down in their mangers. The smile on Fleur's face, the dim afternoon sunlight streaming into the room, the sound of the bottles clanking together, the sticking of the hay, turned into a scene from a nightmare. Gaskin kept looking at the soldiers as he slid his shirt on, the sun sinking over the western elms and willows and dull behind the gray skies. He felt panic and shame and great envy. At the same time, he became aware of his effort not to look back at Addie, kiss his body, and admire his cock resting between his legs. The desire and entity that the Indian had given permission to exist inside him would no longer be in hiding; now, trapped in the overhead loft, he worried that he would not be able to share his life with Addie, and if alone, would he find another man that could hold his thoughts hostage as Addie had, or would he find himself wandering down empty streets

in the taverns of towns and cities where he would be left to meet and join men from God knows what dark corners.

With this fear there formed in Gaskin a hatred for the soldiers.

From outside came the sound of children kicking a ball in the streets and the shouts of men, playing, demanding, threatening. Gaskin finished getting dressed and looked through a back window at the road that ran beside the stable. Only three boys stood, and they kicked a red ball to each other while the merchants began filling the streets around them with their wagons packed and their bodies wrapped in layers in preparation for the cold night. Below the window was a fifteen foot drop to the dirt. If they landed right, Gaskin figured he and Addie would be able to make a run for it and make it to one of the wagons before any of the soldiers could even mount their horses. That was assuming they even noticed them. By the looks of it, they were several rounds in, for in an empty barrel were bottles of the same shit brown color.

Gaskin shook Addie awake. He held a hand over his mouth and whispered to him, “Don’t speak. Get dressed now.” He sat in the hay and looked at the Indian as he crawled behind a stack of bales piled high and slid on his trousers and shirt. He asked for help with his boots; his feet were blistered and slightly crooked, so he asked Gaskin to slide them on for him and to hold his hand. He squeezed in pain. Bones popped and shifted until both boots were on. They crept low to the window, pushed it open, then jumped with their legs tucked in and landed on the ground in a roll. To Gaskin’s surprise they made little noise, and they were able to slip away from the stable with ease. But for the first time, Gaskin knew absolute disorientation and exposure, completely stripped of his rights and will, so that the intrinsic element of his fear was total isolation, a feeling that wasn’t entirely unsettling, a kind of liberation, but made part of him feel abandoned, removed from the people and environment that brought him up to be the young man that he was.

The noises of Waterloo heightened his fear. They had not changed since he heard them last, but now with Addie out in the open, they reminded him of his choice; he was now a deserter, a man destined for calamity should the soldiers become aware of his absence and come after him and find him holding hands with an Indian man.

They ran as fast as they could to the trading post in search of a peddler to take them in. Gaskin had a few dollars to his name. He took the bills out of his wallet and clutched them. What was left in the spot once filled with noises, goods, and services, were a few empty tents, feed sacks and twine being blow around across the lawn by the light wind, and a shepherd herding the last of his sheep up a ramp into a large wooden crate. The shepherd held a dead lamb and stroked it with one of his hands from one end to the other, as if it were pup. He said to it, "Them kids played with you too hard. Thought you were as strong as your brothers and sisters." When the last sheep was boarded he closed the wooden door to the box, placed a lock on it, and then stepped over to a hole he had dug and placed the lamb inside it. As he covered it with dirt, anger arose in his voice. "God damn those no good little shits. Have no respect for other people's property. I won't come here again. So help me God as long as there is air in my lungs. Don't ever want to see more of this little fella be treated like rag dolls."

Gaskin and Addie came around the shepherd. They came quietly, so that they allowed the man to finish tending to the dead lamb. They held up a hand in hello. The man was a Mennonite wearing a straw hat and a white jacket over his black uniform. His face was covered with lines and cracks from years of working in the sun. He looked sullenly up at them.

"What can I do you two gentlemen for?"

Gaskin held out his hand holding the bills. "We are looking for a ride out of town."

"I'm heading to the eastern shore of North Carolina. Tired of this here land."

"We are headed in that same direction."

The Mennonite looked at the bills then, at Addie.

"Why's a man like you leaving here? Seem to be doing well. Even got yourself a savage."

Gaskin did not know how to proceed. He realized how he must look with Addie at his side, but did not wish to bring unnecessary suspicion by correcting the Mennonite. His mouth turned dry with worry. He spoke quietly, "My family has ordered me back home. Got a letter saying my father was ill, and there is no one to tend to the help."

"Well that's mighty kind of you. Where do they stay?"

"Savannah."

"I've never been there. Roads I'm following will be taking me to Virginia. Sure won't feel right leaving you two to walk home from there."

"Do not worry about us. I should have enough money to offer another person for a ride further south."

The Mennonite changed the subject. "Why are you wearing that uniform there?"

The fear mounted in Gaskin. "Belonged to my father," he said sadly. "Wanted to come home in it and surprise him." He placed a hand on Addie's back. "Then show him the extra help I got for tending to the house. This guy here should take a load off of my mother."

"Your father is a lucky man."

"Just hope he's still around when I get home," said Gaskin. "Hate to be going through all this trouble only to make it home in time for his funeral."

The Mennonite took his hat off his head and placed it over his chest.

"Well aren't I ungrateful. And here I was crying over a sheep." He thought for a minute while chewing on his lips and scratching his nose. Gaskin could tell by the way the Mennonite's eyes

shifted that he was mulling over the words in his head, debating on whether or not to give into temptation and sympathy. Then the Mennonite took in a deep breath and said, “I tell you what, I’ll make a special trip just for you, mister. But I’ll be needing payment. My horses and sheep will need feed and water, and I will need bread to last me for at least two weeks. Can you do that?”

Gaskin counted the bills: seven dollars.

“I got just enough,” said Gaskin. “Whenever we’re out of Waterloo, I’ll be sure to get you what you’ve asked for as promised.”

The two men shook hands, concluding the exchange. Gaskin and Addie followed the Mennonite to the wagon hitched to the flatbed carrying the crate of sheep. Inside was a rocking chair next to a small furnace filled with coal and trunk filled with books bound together with strings, letters, and cornmeal. Dangling in the overhead was a lit lantern. The light from it was just bright enough for the three to see what was in front of them. The Mennonite slid the trunk in front of the rocker, said he could use it as a foot rest so that they had room in to sit. “Y’all can use my blanket to keep warm if you don’t mind,” said the Mennonite. “Sorry it ain’t much.”

But it was fine. They had shelter, warmth, a means of escape from the impending danger. As the Mennonite popped the reins on his horses, Gaskin and Addie sat close to one another and held each other beneath the blanket. Gaskin thought about the violence that had driven him to the spot in which he sat in the wagon. All his life he had been surrounded by violent men. From as early as he could remember his father was a coward, never able to face his fears or the demon nestled in his heart that made him long for the flesh of women. He was no better, too frightened by what the Brailford family would say and do to him if they ever discovered the true reason why his sheets were sometimes wet. It was clear that the truth was something he and his father

liked to run away from, and now it had landed him not far from Mississippi in a queer land where nothing was right. Existence did not follow his instructions, would not allow him to live in that moment in the loft with Addie for more than a few hours, did not permit him to be able to leave the stable with Addie as a man escorts his wife home from church on Sunday morning. No, it was clear as day that the land and the people in it that surrounded them were a violent bunch, men and women who allowed for only one right way to exist and would go to war to uphold that existence and execute all who spoke of it as an illusion; that was the way it had been and would be. But feeling the warmth of Addie's body, Gaskin felt a sliver of hope.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The ride outside of Waterloo was peaceful. The children playing in the street skipped behind the wagon, hand-in-hand, to a yard where clothes hung on a line to dry, and there they played, ran at each other, pretended to fight and giggled. At the door of their house was a woman, the mother of the children—Gaskin assumed—holding a broom and a rug. Gaskin peeked beneath the canvas to get a look at the woman's face; she was older, fifty or so, with gray hair tied back, breasts sagging from years of nursing. She appeared happy as she knocked the dirt and dust from the rug. When her children ran to her she patted their heads, kissed their cheeks, told them to wash up for supper, then escorted them inside. Gaskin lowered the edge of the canvas and told Addie that he was thinking of the young woman and her brother.

"We left without saying goodbye."

"She knows I was not happy," said Addie. "She told me to run the first chance I had. I advised the same."

"Think she'll listen?"

"I worry she will be killed if she doesn't."

Gaskin slipped away into his thoughts. He didn't want to talk much. His mind kept going back to the girl, her adolescent brother, the soldier with blood falling down his neck, the crimson blade of the bayonet. When he picked at his nails, Addie took his hand in his own and massaged his palm, then his knuckles, and finally his wrists. "You must hope for the best and not burden yourself with bad thoughts," said Addie. Gaskin wondered if he was as troubled by the other night as he was, but he did not ask. Instead, he took one of the books from the Mennonite's trunk and decided to read. It was a collection of sketches of Appalachia with notes written by the

Mennonite. He ran his finger over the images, like when he was child, tracing their outlines, enjoying the sensation of the lines of indentation on the pages rubbing against his skin; it was a relief from his mind, of everything that had gone on, to be able to read, to have the opportunity to sit up and talk as much as he wanted to Addie and not have to worry about walking around through the stable and continue to be reminded of the discomfort of the Indians. He tried not to think too much about anything aside from what was contained within the book. Each page was a gift, detailed, full of questions to ponder. He read in silence and finished it in peace.

The road became smoother as they came out the marsh to the north. The Mennonite called out to his horses by name, told them to slow down as they approached the other merchants and peddlers who had left the town. According to the Mennonite, the plan was to head north about twenty miles then turn west. The roads they'd find would be free of hills, bandits, coyotes, and swamps. He went on to say that regardless of how far they'd traveled that he would be stopping for the night not much more after sunset. Said the air would get too cold for his old bones, and so he would cook them supper and prepare their beds in the wagon. It was not long after these words left his mouth that the horses slowed and the wagon came to a stop. When Addie and Gaskin asked what was going on, the Mennonite pointed at the wagons in front of them and indicated that they too had come to abrupt stops. The land around them was dead. Nothing but grass and the occasional elm surrounded by weeds, ice, and snow. Gaskin stepped out of the wagon and gave a look around and to the southeast, mounted, approaching fast were ten soldiers led by the corporal and Elijah. The soldier carrying the rear of the party waved an American flag. Gaskin’s mouth turned dry. He figured they must have known that the easiest way for a deserter to escape would be by sneaking aboard one of the merchant wagons. It was now too late for him

and Addie to sneak away from Mennonite's wagon and make a run for the waters of the marsh. Gaskin pulled out his bayonet and reentered the wagon, ignored the Mennonite and his questioning, and squatted beside Addie. He told the Indian what was going on then handed him the blade. "Use it just in case," he said. There was no time for discussion, only time for actions. Gaskin turned to the insides of the wagon—the trunks, the furnace, the blanket—and then to the cracks between the floorboards. Beneath their feet was an enclosed space deep enough for a body to be kept. It was there that he decided to hide himself and Addie, and so he began searching for a way in; he ran his fingers between spaces and yanked, searched for the handle of a latch. There was nothing. The Mennonite left his seat and the reins. There were letters knocked out of the trunk and scattered across the floor which was tarnished with mud and snow brought in by Gaskin's boots. He swayed slightly. His hatbrim fell over his ears and forehead red from the cold. He snatched up the blanket that had been balled up and tossed in a corner, then pointed at both men and said, "You best have a good reason for all this mess."

Gaskin wasn't going to tell him the truth and he saw no use in discussing it. So he grabbed the Mennonite by the arm and took him back to the driver's seat. There he spoke to him in a whisper. "I'll pay you more if you keep your mouth shut. People are looking for us. You make sure we stay safe, and I promise there won't be any more troubles on the road and you'll have more than enough to take home to your family."

The Mennonite yanked his arm free from Gaskin and looked inside the wagon at Addie; the Indian gathered and stacked the loose letters, placed them in the rocker, and then got down on his knees and ran his hands across the floor in continuation of Gaskin's search. The Mennonite shook his head.

"What did you fellas do to cause all this?"

"Nothing."

He leaned over the seat and looked back at the soldiers now just a few yards away.

"You kill someone?"

"I said nothing."

"Nothing don't make ruckus."

Gaskin showed his bayonet.

"I told you nothing so stop prying."

"Fine. But you swear you won't hurt me?"

"Promise."

"And you'll pay as you say?"

Gaskin pulled out his wallet and handed over the seven dollars.

"Here's what I promised before. I'll give you the rest when I'm home."

The Mennonite took the bills and looked at them and laid them out on his lap. The corporal and Elijah stopped their horses. They began to walk toward the front of the wagon while the rest of the men dismounted and readied their rifles. The Mennonite collected the seven dollars and slid them into his front pocket.

"Don't make a sound, and I'll see you boys make it to your sick father."

Gaskin thanked him by flashing a smile then crouched and moved soft and fast beside Addie. The Mennonite nudged his head to the floor at the back of the wagon, and it was there, in one of the back corners that Gaskin found several boards unnailed to the floor. The hideaway was purgatory. In the space below there was little light, dust, and mouse droppings. No clean air, no refuge from the cold. Outside winds slipped in snow and sleet. There was no relief from the smell of dirt, rain, and horse droppings. Gaskin held his breath as long as he could, tried not to

move, thought of how to break a way to the outside should they be spotted. All absurd. He shut his eyes. They were here because of him. A lie. Elijah was not wrong; meanness had placed his life and the lives of two others in danger. The Mennonite and Addie were innocent people who appeared to believe in his words and trusted his actions to be in good spirit, and now it seemed that he was no better than his friend when he was in his drunken state at the O'Connor home, for he had brought fear into the lives of the people around him and left them at his mercy and the mercy of the corporal. Gaskin imagined what would befall his body should the worst happen. There was a lone elm tree not far away. He knew the corporal would leave him there, not only with a rope around his neck but lashings on his back and face so that it looked like burned apple peels were all over him. He'd be a bloody pulp with cauliflower ears from being kicked and beaten into the ground.

A horse let out a violent neigh. Wood creaked as Elijah placed a foot up on the bottom step of the driver's side. He scratched the railing with a finger, sniffed the cold air. Arrogance seemed to underline every movement he made, as if he had caught Gaskin's scent and wanted to see how long he could scare him before finally tiring and asking him to come out. He was alone. The corporal told him to inspect the wagon while he investigated the next one.

"Afternoon," said Elijah, letting his words settle on the Mennonite briefly before lifting the rest of his body up onto the wagon. "Mind if I have a peek at what ye're carrying?"

"Why, I don't mind, but what's all this for?"

"Government order. That's all I can say, sir."

Elijah pulled back the flaps of the canvas, gave a look around, his breathing heavy as he concentrated. His body radiated a strong, palpable stench and heat. His bayonet tapped against

the side of his belt next to his pistol that he only used in case of emergencies. He smelled the air, let go of the flaps, and said to the Mennonite, "What's that I smell fresh in there?"

"Ground corn. Bought a sack for a nickel."

"Mighty good deal ye got then."

The Mennonite paused for a moment as if rolling the words around in his head with the tone of Elijah. Then he spoke. "May I offer you some?"

"No."

"Well, what for?"

"Sir, I don't have time for chit chat. What's in the box ye got hooked to the back?"

"Sheep and lambs."

Through a crack, Gaskin peeked up at the shadow of Elijah leaning toward the Mennonite. He remembered climbing into Elijah's bed as a kid to tell ghost stories, to listen to the slaves sing, to make shadows on the wall. He remembered the cramped tent they lay in after army training had ended where they exchanged looks of sympathy to each other for the first time; and the dark woods with pine straw covering the grass damp from the morning dew that they walked between to the Skidaway and the plantation; the evening of the day they reunited and spoke for the first time in weeks and prayed before going to bed; the Cherokee in Blue Ridge and the scared billy goat and nanny and ants and Elijah calling out to him from his horse. He remembered searching the stars with Addie for people and creatures he'd heard from stories and how Elijah interrupted that moment by standing on the porch of the O'Connor home. That wretched place! Tall and falling apart with the anvil and the wall of heads bearing faces of absolute terror at the sudden and unexpected arrival of death, where the two children lived and gnawed on bones and ate the scraps from the beast they had called father, where the ghost of the Elijah from olden days

remained and kept with him Gaskin's admiration and respect . . . These all caused torment. Every moment he ever made with Elijah. Gaskin slid his hand into Addie's and squeezed.

"How'd ye get such a nice setup in there?" asked Elijah pulling back the canvas and placing one foot inside. He hummed a note as the Mennonite thought. His voice was scratchy and tired. Then he entered, grabbed the lantern and stretched his arm out over the trunk. He took one of the books from inside it and sat in the rocker holding the light over the pages.

"Traded chickens," said the Mennonite, finally.

"Chickens for books? That don't make no goddamn sense."

"The roads can be quiet sometimes. Need something to keep my mind busy."

Elijah snickered. "Then make noise."

"Hard to when you ain't got no reason to. Came all this way to sell a few sheep for my family. Been a hard winter. Used to make do selling to a few gentlemen up north, but with all the recent politics, business has stopped. Could barely afford to keep food in my family's bellies. They write me letters all the time. Send me more books. That's why I read so much. And write. I look for the little notes they leave me tucked between pages. Lately, they haven't been leaving as much, so I've just been sitting out here at nights talking to the horses."

Elijah closed the book and placed the lantern down on the floor.

"That's the saddest shit I've done heard in a while."

The Mennonite shuddered. "Pardon me. I did not mean to upset you, sir. Please, let me share with you much happier news."

"God no. I got a feeling ye ain't got much good news *to* share."

The light of the lantern shined down on Gaskin's legs. The heat warmed his body. He hoped it would be left there, forgotten until Elijah was gone and he and Addie could resurface.

“Seems ye ain’t got what I’m looking for,” said Elijah leaning back in the rocker. “Mind telling me if ye seen anything odd today? Maybe during the last little bit of sun we had?”

The Mennonite shifted in his seat. “Depends on what you mean. Many of the fellas around me selling things looked quite queer. Cussed and cheated men all day. Then I met someone who was dressed quite descent, very similar to you, who was kind and sincere.”

“What do ye mean like me?”

“He had on a uniform. Was with a red man.”

The words dragged their teeth through Gaskin’s mind. The Mennonite caught Elijah’s ear, for he rose from the rocker and placed his hands on the man’s shoulders. In a harsher voice, he said, “Mind telling me a little bit more about that fella?”

“What would you like to know, sir?”

Elijah tightened his grip on the Mennonite causing him to yelp and squirm. He asked to be let go.

“Quit the bullshit, friend. We both know what I want to know.”

For a few moments he didn’t say anything, tried not to yell by spitting air through his teeth, maybe thinking back to his time with Gaskin and questioning the validity of it all, or maybe not.

“He said he was heading east,” the Mennonite finally said. “His father is sick and his family needs help tending to things.”

“Ye believe him?”

“Had no reason not to.”

“Ye see where he went?”

Gaskin did not expect any sympathy, he was prepared to reveal himself by busting a hole in the floor and giving them a good fight. He figured he would be as good as dead anyways, so

what was one charge of assault to be placed against his name? The breaks in the Mennonite's responses were trifling, led Gaskin's thoughts to hope and the possibility of life outside of the boundaries of Waterloo. He waited for what seemed like a long time, until the silence was broken, and the Mennonite said, "I don't know." His response made Elijah exhale and kick the rocker. It fell onto the lantern and shattered it. Hot oil and embers fell onto Gaskin's trousers where they burned through the stitching to his skin causing him to hiss in pain and turn his body so that the oil slid off his legs and onto the bottom of this trousers. The smell of burning hair, along with the noise, made Elijah free the Mennonite and drop to a knee. His eyes moved up Gaskin's leg, to his chest, and when they met faces a breath left his body that had neither an angry nor annoyed ring, but sadness.

"Get out," he said. "Now."

His voice got harder, strained but no louder, but it was his silence that frightened Gaskin. It reminded him of the quiet between them after the shower incident and the anger and disgust that lingered in his eyes for days. Now that anger had returned to his eyes, but it was sorrow that made them glow. Before leaving the hideaway, he gave Addie a glance that read: keep still and quiet and all will be well. Then he emerged, brushed himself off, and waited for Elijah to make his move.

"Didn't make ye out as a deserter."

"Wasn't my first thought."

"Why'd ye do it then, Gaskin? Ye had such a promising career. I bent so much for ye."

Gaskin didn't respond. He fiddled his fingers. The oil on the side of his leg, once hot, was cool, hardening, no longer able to distract him from himself and delay speaking. Another horse

let out a loud neigh. Suddenly, Elijah's hand shot out like it was on a spring and grabbed his throat. His knuckles were white and blue.

"Ye answer me when I'm speaking," said Elijah. "I'll break your goddamn neck if ye don't." His voice choked. "I saw that savage from the other night was missing before someone else couldn't find ye. I know he has something to do with all this. I told ye what ye were doing with that sonofabitch was wrong and look what happened." He dug his second hand into Gaskin's gut in the form of a fist, knocking the air out of his body, and then slammed him down in the rocker, held him tight, breathing hard. A gasp came from the Mennonite. Elijah told him to sit, grab the reins, and not say a word and act normal. Then he grabbed Gaskin by the face. "Tell me where he is, Gaskin! It's for ye own good."

"You'll see him killed!"

Elijah pressed his thumb into Gaskin's cheek, pulled him closer, repeated his question. When denied again, he let Gaskin loose from his grip and plunged his knuckles into his mouth. Blood rose from his gums and lips. Gaskin jerked up and rammed his body as hard as he could into Elijah, pinning him on the wall of the wagon. He swung his fists, breaking the skin below Elijah's right eye.

"You stupid sonofabitch!" He pushed Gaskin, knocking him into the furnace. Gaskin slid onto the floor, holding his arms over his face as Elijah came toward him. Elijah did not kick or throw another punch. Instead he stood with his pistol drawn. Gaskin pulled his legs up to his chest, and struggled to breathe.

"I told ye I would do my best to fix the wrong ye've made," said Elijah between pants. "Don't ye want yer freedom? Charleston? A better life than what ye have now?" He aimed the pistol

down at the floor, readied the bullet in to the chamber and placed his finger over the trigger. “Is that red man worth it?”

There came a new silence to the wagon. Gaskin’s heart jumped. He sweated and felt the dampness on his pits and chest. He heard Addie shifting his body. If he didn’t bring him out it meant he would have to watch the Indian be shot and killed, a sight that he did not wish to bare or carry with him to the grave. Gaskin got on his hands and knees, searched for Addie’s face, and when their eyes met, the Indian asked in barely a whisper, “What do I do?” Gaskin did not answer but rested his head on the wood and kissed the crack in the floorboards over Addie’s mouth. He was sure he would never be given the chance to kiss the Indian goodbye. He hoped that by some chance, the fear keeping Addie still would break, and the heat from their mouths would be exchanged one last time, squelching Gaskin’s doubts that what he was doing was for the best, convincing himself that he enjoyed the time he had shared with Addie and that Addie did to and understood everything that was going on. But there was only the cold of the wood. The Indian’s mouth stayed shut. It appeared Addie did not desire any more words. No goodbyes.

Elijah pushed Gaskin aside, told the Indian to come up this instant, and as Addie surfaced from beneath the floor, Gaskin prayed he would be given some proof that his actions were not seen as vile but acts of compassion and mercy. Still nothing was given to him. The silence panicked Gaskin, caused him to wonder if wickedness resided in Addie, who was using the silence to stir his nerves, enjoy the disturbing pleasure of watching his spirit break. Then came the desire to want to shoot Addie himself, so that they both seemed upset and worried about what awaited them beyond the Mennonite’s wagon. Gaskin wanted to shoot him himself, even, so as to let Addie know how much his existence bothered him, how unbearable his ease with everything horrible, taking all things on the chin and being able to face the dark unknown with

hope. If he couldn't shoot him and watch him hurt, then Gaskin wanted to kill him, so that he could stop thinking about him and wondering what cruelty would befall him after this day. With the Indian dead, he would not have to fool himself that Addie may one day desire someone else, want another man physically, move on from this incident and forget the day he was ever spotted by Gaskin.

Elijah placed his pistol back in his holster. He observed Addie, who stood next to the furnace, then the agony on Gaskin's face. He, like Gaskin, seemed to ache all over, his soul in torment on what to do, what to say, how to rectify all the hell that he had brought upon the other. His hesitation to take Addie away was far from his usual response to the Cherokee, which was to be rude and violent. In a soft, low, and for the first time, disheartened voice, Elijah said, "I'll see to it he makes it West, Gaskin. But I can't say the same to ye. Ye're such a stupid sonofabitch." He grabbed Addie by the arm and pulled back the flaps of the wagon's canvas. The Mennonite scooted over in his seat for the two. Before walking away with Addie, Elijah looked at him for the last time and nodded.

At first, it all seemed absurd to Gaskin. The Mennonite was told to move out, so he obeyed, and as the wagon dipped and swayed as its wheels rolled along the dirt road, Gaskin began to tremble. The confusion and misery inside him made his organs shake, his bones feel frail. He had protected himself, guaranteed the future; and yet, he seemed to be the only one left in hell. Elijah had found a way to fix his problem, the thing that had caused him shock and fear not long ago during a shower at a church, the thing that brought out the violence in him and made him lie and dig a deeper grave for himself. Gaskin knew that his leaving set Elijah free of temptation and weakness, the two things that could set him back from achieving the life he always dreamt of. That final look on his face, that slight smile, dominated his thoughts like a lit candle on a dark,

dark night. Behind those eyes he saw what the burdened carry: terror and anguish. Forever would Elijah carry this look as he continued the march west, grew older, moved up through the ranks and told stories of the events of the removal. And he would not be alone; Addie would share the same, along with the rest of the Indians. No matter how safe he was being protected by Elijah, Gaskin knew Addie would suffer and cry out his name when no one was looking; perhaps, his voice was crying out now, as his hands were tied together by rope and he was mounted on the back of Elijah's horse. Their grip on him and others like him, long after they have arrived in the Indian Territory, would be eternal, his body and wishes would never be his own.

"Sir, you all right?" asked the Mennonite. "Are you going to be okay?"

Gaskin took deep breaths.

"Yes. I just need some fresh air is all? May I sit up front with you for a minute?"

The Mennonite slid over. Across the plains were elms that sparkled with ice and snow. Puddles of rainwater stood still and reflected the yellow light of the full moon. Above was a river of stars against the darkness descending on the land. The storm clouds had dissipated and all that remained of them was a thin gray strip drifting eastward down the road ahead. He looked back over his shoulder. The corporal rode past Elijah, who carried the rear of the company of ten with Addie holding on to the back of his shirt. He wiped away the blood falling down his chin with the side of his arm and turned back around. He needed to calm down, and so he slid the truth of the matter to the back of his mind, and looked up at the night sky at what he pretended was freedom.

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EDUCATION

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, Virginia
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing May 2018
Concentration: Fiction
GPA: 3.98

Coastal Carolina University, Conway, South Carolina
Bachelor of Arts in English May 2014
Major: English **Minor:** Dramatic Arts
GPA: 3.89

TEACHING AND TRAINING EXPERIENCE

Centura College, Norfolk, VA
English Instructor (January 2017-Present)

- Create curriculum for English EMT course
- Educate students on how to engage in a variety of professional, academic, and creative writing forms
- Assess students' performances through student-teacher conferences, peer evaluations, and student portfolios

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
Managing Editor for *Barely South Review* (August 2017-May 2018)

- Coach staff members on how to review manuscripts for publication
- Create bi-annual print and digital copies of journal
- Improve curriculum for Literary Editing and Publishing graduate course

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
Advocate and Allies Graduate Assistantship (August 2016-June 2017

- Established ODU's first LGBTQIA+ Mentoring program
- Co-taught Safe Space ally trainings in student resident halls
- Produced events advocating for LGTQIA+ awareness and campus safety

Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA
Fiction Editor for Barely South Review (August 2015-May 2017)

- Coached staff members on how to critique and select short stories for publication
- Compiled manuscripts for print and electronic copies of the journal
- Conducted surveys on how genre editors can improve leaderships, how the journal can be improved, and how communication amongst staff members can be improved

PUBLICATIONS: SHORT STORIES

What Christian Women Tell Their Children; *Barking Sycamores;* (December 2016)
He Has Gone to Be in His Own Bed; *Inklette;* (August 2016)
The Melody of the Indian Grass; *Deep South Magazine*; (March 2016)
A Rare Commodity; *The Dead Mule School of Southern Literature*; (January 2016)
A Thing Honeybuns and Coca Cola Can't Fix; *Lavender Bluegrass: LGBT Writers on the South*; (December 2015)

PUBLICATIONS: BOOK REVIEWS

Size Does Matter: Karan Mahajan on *Small Bombs* and American Politics and Literature; *Barely South Review;* (October 2016)

Making Love: A Talk on Queer Literature with Garth Greenwell; *Barely South Review;* (January 2018)

SELECTED READINGS

Old Dominion University, 2016, 2017, 2018
The Muse Writing Center, 2017, 2018
Tunnel Traffic: Traveling Writers Series, 2016, 2017, 2018