



# The Interloper

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The day was shuddering and clinging to the damp gray substance of itself during a brief pause in the rain. The air was wet, the leaves and rocks slick. The white bark of red alder trees, rising in a clump from a perennially damp depression in the soil, shimmered with the droplets of water that clung to them. Characteristic of a rainless interregnum in the Pacific Northwest winter, the sound of rain itself had not stopped. It continued to fall from the foliage it had briefly clung to on its descent to the ground, its rhythm only slightly syncopated. The road was muddy and pools of water had formed where the tires of trucks had bitten deep into it.

Jacob chose his steps methodically, examining the ground for the tracks of other creatures as he did. He rose steadily in elevation until the road leveled out and turned south to follow the ridge. He stopped at a break in the trees and looked for the sun in the southern margins of the sky, to which it so fastidiously clung during these long months where night was more prevalent than day. The sky was erratic, with impermeable streaks of slate-colored cloud convoluted by patches of thinner material where grainy yellow light streaked through—bled to an anemic pallor as it had filtered through the clouds, but visible nonetheless. In that tangled wilderness, he could not find the sun.

For a brief moment, he had the impression of a brilliant flash of white light negating the forms of the forest; he did not see it exactly, but imagined the light could be perceived by some sense other than sight, and he felt a thing akin to fate although he made no effort to discern the course which that fate would take.

He knelt down in the road and ran his fingers over the

scales of a large chunk of Douglas fir bark that lay in the mud, knocked loose from the trunk as loggers had stripped the branches. No tree on the mountain, with the exception of perhaps a few madrones, was older than sixty years. Roads cut its skin in an intricate, jagged network, open-pit mines gnawed at its very bones. He would not have said it aloud, but he imagined the wounds of this mountain resembled his own. It was bounded on all sides by paved roads and development, it had been ravaged with merciless savagery and methodical regularity, and still it towered above its surroundings, unyielding and undying, intrepid in its beauty. For all that it had missing, for all the ways in which it was broken, it teemed with life. A road ran along the mountain's western base and across it, other forests, under state or federal ownership and subject to some protection, stretched on for miles and miles. If one chose one's way, it was possible to travel almost to the sea without encountering pavement; he rarely ventured into these more pristine forests.

Jacob began to descend the southern slope of the mountain until he turned off the road and wended his way beneath the young forest's canopy, pushing slender branches away from his face with one outstretched hand. He came to a cedar tree, older and larger than anything else in the vicinity, its base blackened by a fire that left no other mark anywhere he could see. The cedar had a long, misshapen hollow in its trunk that slowly filled with dirt and dead foliage and other detritus; into its protective cover he had placed the tiny, eyeless carcass of a shrew a few weeks previous. He had found the shrew in the center of the road, its lifeless body perfectly intact, so exquisitely and minutely constructed and so far from its home, a foreigner on earth's surface. The thought of a tire crushing it hurt him, so he sheltered it within

the tree. Occasionally, he came to observe its state of decomposition.

Today, it was gone. In its place, a stone, about half the size of his fist, lay on the deep bed of brown needles and tiny shreds of bark the tree harbored in its interior. There was no plausible means by which such a heavy object could have come to rest here other than being placed by some human hand, and that human hand had not been his own. He stood looking at the rock for a long time, seeing in it someone's presence as much as if that person emerged from between the dense trunks of trees to stand there with him. He imagined the interloper was a man and tried to picture his face. The man had placed the stone there to make unequivocally clear that the shrew had not simply been snatched away by some animal. Jacob felt somewhat uneasy. He did not like to feel like he was not alone. He turned and walked back up to the road and continued on his way.

He reached the base of the mountain, where a two lane state highway made a broad half circle around it to circumvent the steep terrain. He crossed the highway and picked his way through a field on the other side, avoiding pools of water, until he came to a service road that ran alongside high-voltage power lines. He could see the smoke from Marta's chimney rising above the crowns of the trees that obscured her home from sight. He veered off of the service road in the direction of the smoke, picked his way through the trees, and came into her backyard. A pile of wood salvaged from the demolition of an ancient structure, stained dark brown by the passage of time and jagged with nails, leaned up against the synthetic off-white material of her trailer. Next to it there was a motorcycle wheel, a pile of firewood covered in a tarp, an ax, a 55-gallon barrel. The barking of the dog had alerted her to his presence and she eyed him through the window from the kitchen and smiled.

Marta made coffee and they sat in her kitchen in the twilight with just an oil lamp on the table to suffuse the darkness with a warm glow and speculated about whether spring would be rainy. They ate roast potatoes and venison for dinner. Afterward, Jacob took a flashlight and a cordless screwdriver outside and fixed the hinge on the gate to her driveway. She was grateful, but he was skeptical of his work and said he thought the wood would need to be replaced soon.

She invited him to spend the night and there was some uncertainty for both of them what that would mean. He accepted but ended up sleeping on her couch. There was tenderness between them, but he

was hesitant, from shyness, but perhaps also from a certain weariness he was becoming conscious of only gradually.

In his sleep, the universe emanated from the stone that had been placed by some unknown man in the hollow of the cedar tree. It lay there, heavier than any other object, omnipotent, portending cycles of creation and destruction beyond his comprehension.

All else in the dream world emerged, subsided, and reconfigured with horrifyingly easy mutability, but the stone remained the constant feature around which all of his dreams were centered. An enormous flock of barred owls, more than would ever be seen in nature, wandered over bare red ground on which the stone rested. A man whose house he occasionally worked on gave him a sledgehammer and told him to go break up the stone, which had grown to the size of the house and was resting in a crater in the yard, having fallen from the sky.

After a few hours of sleep, Jacob woke on Marta's couch and knew with absolute certainty both that he would not fall back asleep and that he would lay there for hours more trying. Coyotes were howling somewhere to the east. The sound pleased him. It was not one he heard on his side of the highway. He listened to the gradual ebb of traffic in the distance until it reached a nadir that lasted approximately two hours. When cars could be heard passing with slightly greater frequency, he estimated that it was five in the morning.

When he thought it was six he rose and slipped out of the trailer, Marta sleeping peacefully in the bedroom and the dog stirring only slightly on the floor by the front door. He was grateful for the darkness while it remained. It insulated him from the violent stimulus of the world his sleepless body was not prepared for. As he walked along the shoulder of the highway, the bright headlights and whirring sound of the cars rushing by him seemed remote, or even imaginary. When the sun came up, the light would hurt his eyes and the roaring of the traffic would be real, relentless, and incisive. At the gas station, he purchased a gas can and filled it. Then he made his way in the direction of home.

At moments like these, wearily treading through a high-traffic shopping area as it grew steadily busier with the progression of the morning, he became more aware of his general sense that he was becoming an anachronism. It was all the passing cars. They made it clear to him that the world at large, which he generally

relegated to a distant mental horizon, was still very much out there, abounding with activity. It was accelerating in every possible direction, changing ceaselessly, while he remained implacably oriented toward a few simple and increasingly obsolete things: the forest, his work, the vicissitudes of a given day.

He imagined himself to be ahead of the times. Eventually, oil would run out, industrial civilization would cease, some other order would take its place. He thought this was the inevitable course of the future, but he did not think it with any particular romanticism or emotional fervor. He liked books, but primarily he read simply for the experience of doing so rather than in search of any absolute or perennial truth. He did not organize the facts of existence he experienced into any all-encompassing schema; not for lack of intelligence, but for lack of interest. His world consisted mostly of sensation – of hunger, of warmth, the sight of the white blossoms of trillium, the feel of wet clothing clinging to his skin, the pleasures of the wood stove, the rhythm of a shovel in the ground or a hammer on a nail, the rhythm of the rain.

At home, he drank coffee, which hurt his stomach, then filled a pressure washer with the gasoline and began to wash away decades of accumulated dirt and lichen from the interior wooden walls of the barn. He had lived here all winter, working on the house while the owners were in California. They had told him to make use of a bedroom, but he slept in front of the wood stove in the living room, his blankets sprawled out next to a wine jug full of water, a wine jug full of wine, some candy, and a pile of books and magazines. Rain came down in a soft, soundless mist outside while the pressure washer churned away and his hands tensed and lurched with its vibrations.

After a few hours he went in, made lunch, and started a fire. As he sat in the kitchen eating, he was surprised to see the day emerge from behind the clouds with full, brilliant, beautiful sunlight. The sun revitalized him and he resolved to walk back up the mountain, which abutted the property he was on. The new air, cleansed by the rain and shining—potent and vivid and free—felt exquisite on the skin of his aching and exhausted body. Small birds flitted through the branches, avidly chattering, animated by the same quickening of living impulse he felt in his veins. He climbed the mountain and made a long loop south and gradually back north, with a view of the less wounded mountains to the west.

After an hour of walking, the sky darkened. Minutes later, Jacob heard the first tentative drops of rain

falling from the sky. Their pace quickly and steadily increased. As he was walking up a hill, he felt whatever unconscious worry or conflict that had kept sleep from him the night previously suddenly vanish and his body become heavily laden with a fatigue as true and irrevocable as the words with which god is said to have created the world.

He did not want to spend the time necessary to descend the mountain in the rain. He was much closer to a simple shelter he had built, so he chose to continue walking in that direction. It was on the east side of the ridge, a couple dozen yards down the hill from the road. At the spot he turned off, on a clear day you could see the waters of an inlet of the Puget Sound shining in the distance. He clambered underneath the canopy of branches he had woven together and deep into the interior of his shelter, where there was only a cavity large enough to accommodate his body, surrounded by walls as thick as the length of his arm. It was dry and warm and he had not been exposed to very much rain before taking cover. He drifted off immediately.

In his dreams, he was visited twice. The first time he was an external observer, witnessing events that he was involved in from a vantage point other than within his body. He watched himself lying in the hut sleeping and a creature that was like a slightly misshapen man with a bird's head silently walk down the slope and fix his gaze on Jacob. The creature remained at a distance and sat on the stump of a hemlock, legs folded and chin resting on hands, evaluating him. Jacob had a feeling of tremendous vulnerability that was deeply unnerving but did not feel threatened with actual danger.

The second time Jacob was within his body and knew that he was asleep. He heard footsteps but did not wake. Someone was right outside his sleeping chamber, underneath his canopy where there was room to stand. There were two of them and they were doing something with his face. One was male and one was female. They sat looking over him and communicated with silent gestures. The gestures were deeply meaningful. They were more than symbols. They were mandates, whatever they symbolized became true. There was a slight tension in their dialogue. They were deciding what to do with him. The female had more compassion for Jacob. She had tiny owl wings that she placed over his closed eyes.

When he woke it was night and, without any tangible basis, he felt certain that someone really had been close to him while he had his dreams of visitation, but

that they had been gone for hours. He thought briefly and with vague alarm about the mountain lion whose tracks and scat he so often saw up here and then his thoughts became a confused jumble of other things derived by the remote logic of the nearly-sleeping from mountain lions and unknown visitors and he surrendered again to oblivion.

In the morning he saw that there was some foreign object outside of his cocoon of branches, underneath his canopy. He emerged on all fours and hovered over it. It was a comparatively enormous replica of the shrew. The shrew had been less than the length of his thumb, but the body of this one was the size of his fist. It was made of innumerable tiny twigs woven together. The head of the shrew was a Douglas fir cone. With great precision, the maker had pierced the cone on either side with tiny pebbles to emulate the inconspicuous and nearly useless eyes of the animal. The tail was a thin twig stripped of foliage. The feet were lovingly arranged from small strips of bark. None of the parts were attached to any other, so he could not move the structure in its entirety, but he took the tightly woven body without deliberation and began his way up to the road.

The sun was out and he sat on the trunk of a fallen bigleaf maple with a view of the Puget Sound and began carefully unraveling the woven twigs. When he had formed a hole of an adequate size in the body he rummaged through his pockets for a golden ring which he had given to a woman who was now absent from his life, a ring he had carried with him everywhere since the day she had returned it to him. He dropped the ring in the round twig structure without a moment's hesitation and meticulously entwined the loose elements until they again formed a bounded whole. Then he set off to the south.

When he reached the tree where he had deposited the shrew, he hesitated, wondering if there would be something new inside of it. There was not. He removed the rock and replaced it with the twig vole body, enclosing his ring. He was silent and his face was impassive but tears streamed down it. Resolute, he turned and retraced his route until he was back at his hut. After he placed the stone between the head, tail, and feet of the effigy in his shelter, he knelt looking at it for a few moments and then stood and began to silently walk down the mountain. Halfway down, he heard something behind him and looked back to see a gray fox paused in the middle of the road, surprised by him. The fox turned and bounded a few paces of the road, turned again to look at him, as if inviting him to follow, then disappeared off into the trees.

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When Jacob came home it was already well into the afternoon. He had been walking all day and was hungry and thirsty but did not have food. It was a time he wished he drove. By the time he made the four mile round-trip to the grocery store and back, it was nearing dark. He ate copiously and rested for a few minutes before going back out to the barn and preparing to paint. He stood squinting, looking up into the dark corners where the wall met the beams of the ceiling and his 500-watt shoplights did not give adequate light.

He found himself experiencing a rare moment where work did not seem worth doing. Rather than thinking about it simply as a pattern of thought and movement to which he set his body, he found himself contemplating it in abstract terms, wondering what its ultimate purpose was and resenting the toll it took on his body. He wished that god existed to give some meaning to him and to the piles of stored objects, tucked away under sheets of heavy canvas, and the tools, covered in dust that clung to old engine oil and condensation, that stood before him in the barn. He knew that meaning was there for him to make out of this heap of rubbish as much as it was anywhere, but did not think himself capable of doing so.

He felt foolish, mocked by someone on the mountain or by the mountain itself. A sense that he somehow belonged to the forest was perhaps the only thing on which he truly prided himself, and the last couple of days had made him feel blundering and oblivious to its workings. He made himself paint for a few hours and then retired to bed. He was lonely as he lay there; he thought that if Marta were here with him now he would not be so faltering in his courtship of her.

The day following he resisted the overwhelming urge to go check on his hut or on the vole body in the hollow of the cedar. He made himself paint, working high up near the ceiling on a ladder; despite his distraction, he made solid, methodical progress throughout the day. When twilight was approaching, he began to make preparations for his next trip up the mountain. He set out up the road after dark and almost immediately had the distinct impression that the mountain lion was somewhere close by. He tried to reason that, while it was likely to show an interest in him and perhaps stalk him for a while, it was very unlikely to attack him, but he lost courage and turned back.

He woke early the next day and immediately began his way up the road. He found fresh cougar tracks in

the road less than a hundred paces from where he had turned back, confirming his suspicion that the animal had been hunting on this side of the mountain last night. He thought about the interloper, admitting that he did not know the mountain well enough to really give someone else on it that title. He had come here in November and it was now February. He had spent part of almost every day in the forest behind his house. In that time, he had seen two or three hikers, a mountain biker, and a drug-addled couple looking for a place to sleep. The only regulars were a group of three folks who rode their all-terrain vehicles here. It was all private property, owned by timber and mining companies, and for the most part, people stayed away. Logging did not occur here in the winter.

He had felt like he was the only person who intimately knew this place, but now he knew he was wrong. He tried to imagine where the other lived, if he lived on the mountain. The mountain was not monolithic. The southern slope was cratered with the deep wounds made by mining equipment and the surface was burdened and scraped raw by the ceaseless traffic of the rumbling hulks of metal. One could feel the rawness of the mountain's injuries on the southern slope. There was a chaotic anguish in the air, giving it a humming electrical charge—the land's senses were scrambled from the pain.

The center of the mountain was treeless and the high-voltage power lines dominated the landscape. One could look out over vast distances in any direction. Here, many roads converged, and at some of the crossroads there were the remains of long-extinguished fires littered with blackened beer cans. The passage of time had given these artifacts of drunken revels a sacral quality and the land the feel of ritual ground, a high point where people from the lowlands in all directions converged to conduct their rites. Their chanted words still suffused the air, clinging low to the ground.

The east and north slope were forested and far more secluded. These were the parts he knew the best. The west slope was farthest from him and least familiar. There was an old wooden pump house on one road and a decrepit trailer on another. He had seen bald eagles there. He thought it was perhaps the most magical part of the mountain. It was here he imagined the other to live. He pictured him in a shack he had yet to discover, having lost all contact with civilization. He imagined him old, with a coarse beard, flint-gray eyes, and a knife like Jacob's own hanging from his belt.

As Jacob ascended the road, he also realized he did

not know, precisely, the protocol for the communication he wished to establish with the other. He felt that the other's uncanny knowledge of where he had deposited the vole's body and where he had built his hut demonstrated a great comprehension of some mysterious essence of the mountain that Jacob lacked. The other knew its inner workings, its psychology. Jacob imagined that he could not simply find the man and ask to be taught these things, but that if he could communicate with him through the subtle manipulations of the landscape that he favored, their cryptic dialogue would eventually reveal to Jacob the mountain's secrets. But he was hesitant because he did not know what meaning to attribute to what had already happened or what he should try to say.

Halfway up the eastern slope, he left a gift for the other in clear view by the side of the road: an unopened bottle of whiskey, its glass shimmering dully in the weak sunlight. He continued up to his hut and found that nothing was different. He left his bag and his jug of water there and continued down the north slope with a smaller bag slung over his shoulder. Halfway down, he removed a crow's foot from it. He took a dead madrone branch and notched the end of it with his knife to fit the base of the crow's leg into it so that the claw emerged from the branch. He bound it with twine and hung it from the madrone the branch had fallen from.

He proceeded back up the way he had come and then down to the west. Here, he offered to the other his premium gift. It was a thin cross section of a tree, found among the stumps of a recent logging operation, onto which Jacob had carved a face over long hours at his hut. He left this in the crook of a tree at about the height of a man's face. He was weary as he made his way back up and then to the south, but he forced himself to continue. On the southern slope he left a railroad spike inside the mouth of a coyote skull. On the way back up, he checked the hollow of the cedar, but it was exactly as he had left it, with the main body of the other's vole effigy still deposited inside, presumably enclosing his ring. He made his way up to the center of the mountain.

He rested with his back up against a maple for a long time, listening to the rumble of the mining below and looking out over the land, before he began his work. A few hours before dark, he began collecting fallen branches. Tree cover was sparse and fallen branches were not heavily concentrated here, but he worked diligently. He constructed a simple lean-to on a grassy expanse of a few acres between the power lines and a road. He did not make the walls thick enough to withstand rain. It was merely a symbol. He then made

arrows pointing south, east, north, and west from branches and lay them on the ground, emanating from the lean-to. He wanted the other to choose a gift from one slope. The hut with its arrows was intended to communicate that Jacob would take the choice as an indication of where the other lived on the mountain.

He walked to his hut, where he built a fire from the dry wood he kept under the canopy and replenished what he burned with wet wood. It would dry quickly by the fire. He ate and stared at the fire and did nothing at all for a very long time. Then he slept. He woke the next morning to the sound of rain. He did not bother to build a fire; rather, he lay there, detached and vaguely disconsolate, staring at his ceiling and listening for any change at all in the rain's rhythm or intensity. It was to no avail. Hour after hour, it fell with perfect and persistent monotony, the moments of the day merging into a single, barely-noticed tedium as they passed. When the sound of rain ceased night was only a few hours away.

He got up and walked down the road to where he had left his first gift, of whisky. It remained by the side of the road. He grudgingly treaded back up the hill and then down to his second gift. Slick with rain, the crow's foot tied to the branch had aged tremendously and taken on the appearance of having been discarded or forgotten. He was glad to see that his carved face had, in contrast, simply integrated more into the tree it was resting on and the surrounding landscape. In the cloudy post-rain afternoon, the carved wood and the bark of the tree reflected the same deep red-tinged hues. He went back to his hut, not bothering to check on any of the remaining points of interest, and ate for the first time that day. He was bored and restless. The rain resumed. He still felt no motivation to build a fire, and lay there in the failing light simultaneously frustrated and indifferent.

Jacob maintained his vigil for three more days with no discernible change in the landscape. Gradually, he ceased focusing on the symbolic language he was attempting to establish with the other and began to orient to other signs written into the skin of the mountain itself, looking in the diffuse collection of elements—records of rivulets of water coursing down slopes, of grass burdened, bent, and broken by the footsteps of animals, of fires that had scorched the bark of trees—for some decisive chronicle of the mountain's secret inner life. He followed the networks of branching animal trails through dense brush and forest alike. He slept in the abandoned pump house. He attempted to map the territories of the great-horned owls he heard at night, walking until the calling of one could no longer be heard and the calling of

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another began. He returned home only once to gather food and water.

On the fifth day he was in the mountain's northwest, clinging precipitously to a steep, brushy slope as he followed a game trail. He was selecting his course based on the freshness of its deer scat. The trail had been recently traveled by deer, and for as much as he knew he was surrounded by them, he had never once seen one here. The sun was pale and marginal, hovering in the southern sky.

Above him, the voices of numerous crows suddenly erupted in an avid, cacophonous dispute. He looked up and watched them tumbling through the sky, trying to make sense of their conflict. The sky was broken into many different pieces by the crowns of trees all around him, and he could only see two, one appearing to chase the other, although he could hear the voices of many more. As his vision tracked them across the sky, he saw movement in the periphery of his vision, somewhere on the slope above him. There was a road some fifty yards in front of him, visible through the vegetation only by the absence of treetops in a distinct thin band. On it, through the tiny fragments unobscured by the jumble of branches and leaves, he could see movement. He could hear footsteps. When a brief pause in the voices of the crows came, he could tell they were human footsteps. His heart beat wildly and his stomach turned and clenched. His senses amplified and he felt a fluttering sensation that he could not locate in any part of his body or in the world around him, but that simply pervaded every aspect of him and his surroundings without belonging to any of it.

He tried to control his breathing so as not to be audible and began making his way up the steep slope as quickly and stealthily as possible. He grasped the base of a young madrone and pulled himself up to where he was able to cling to the waxy stalks of Scotch broom bushes, hoping that the faint rumble of dislodged dirt, leaves, and soil he made as he traveled was not audible. He came to a bare section of ground, where he had no choice but to lunge forward with as much force as possible and try to grab onto the root of one of the conifers towering above him by the road. He managed to reach the branch but his feet scrambled and tore against the bare ground loudly as he did so, sending a small avalanche of debris down along the deer trail.

He stood perfectly still and listened intently. The footsteps had ceased. There was nothing on the road. No sound whatsoever. Desperately, he ceased trying

to be quiet and tore his way up to it, stripping the bushes of their leaves as he clung to them for support and clawing into the ground when there were no bushes, lashed in the face by branches as he sprinted along the ground where it leveled out by the road. The road was empty. Even the crows were absent from the sky. He exhaled sharply, inadvertently snarling—a single, wordless curse. Then he set off down the road in the direction the other had been walking, traveling as fast as he could while still looking for signs that he had turned off the road.

When he came to the first fork in the road—one continuing in the direction he was walking, one doubling back along a higher ridge—he suspected he was defeated, but instantly made the decision to keep on in the direction he was already walking. It would take him to the center of the mountain. He would be high up. At subsequent forks in the road, he began to lose hope, but not ardor. He continued to hurriedly walk his spontaneously and haphazardly chosen course as if he was methodically tracking, intently scanning the land surrounding the road for signs that someone had recently walked on it. Hours later, his breathing heavy, his pace relentless, his lips slightly cracked from growing thirst and his face clenched into an unyielding grimace, he continued to haunt the mountain roads, navigating their multitudinous forks and branches with eyes wild with vigilance.

As the afternoon faded, crows once again plunged after one another in a tumult of black feathers and indignant croaks and Jacob read in this an indication of cyclicity, the appearance of angry crows presaging the appearance of the other. When darkness had almost rendered the world void of such things as columns of smoke rising in the distance, he saw the vague indications of one to the south and east of where he was. His every sense alive with desperation—but for some reason he could not precisely identify, unwilling to run—he made his way toward it.

As he came closer, he realized it was coming from the lean-to he had made in the center of the mountain with arrows laid out on the ground around it. When he came to a break in the trees with a clear line of sight to his structure, he realized that it was the lean-to itself that was in flames. He thought that the land was too wet with recent rain to be in danger of catching fire, but he ran toward it nonetheless. When he reached it, he saw that three of his arrows had been reversed in direction, so that they now pointed in toward the blaze. The fourth, which pointed east, was gone. He pondered what this meant as he scattered the fire out over the ground and smothered it in damp soil. He

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thought perhaps the other was telling Jacob that he was leaving. Or simply telling Jacob to go home.

He did not spend a moment longer than was necessary to subdue the fire contemplating the other's meaning; he continued on his way toward the east of the mountain, his eyes alive with new fever, reflecting the livid flames. He looked for signs of footprints as he traveled, but saw none. The convoluted network of roads that made their jagged scrawls on the eastern slope of the mountain gradually condensed into a single widening artery as he progressed further down. He was only a half-mile or so from his house when he saw the arrow laid out on the road, pointing off to the north, up a steep and densely wooded hill. He made his way up, listening to his feet press deeply into the soft mat of bigleaf maple leaves that covered the ground, hearing the portents of the vast and trembling unknown in each step.

Then he saw it. The deer instantly registered as having been killed by a mountain lion. It was mutilated, its ribs sticking out from its body where the meat had been eaten away, a frenzy of its hair scattered everywhere as it had been torn from its skin. It was half-buried beneath dirt and the yellow ghosts of maple leaves, whose rich hue had been muted by the same moonlight that rendered everything else a bone-white monochrome, concealed and preserved by the cat for another meal.

He stood for only a moment looking at it, knowing what it was but waiting for it to seem real. He felt his skin prickle and flush. It would be close, and this is the time when it would be waking. He turned silently and walked back down the slope, knowing it was a bad idea to run, making an effort not to breathe too loudly. The roots and trunks and twisting branches of the trees and bushes around him were a tangled wilderness of looming cats, a jumble of supple muscles, hovering forepaws, and peering eyes.

He was grateful for the moonlight when he came back out into the road. He made his way back up the mountain to a very high place and built a fire with great effort, using moss and lichen from underneath tree canopies to supplement the meager newspaper he had and the driest wood he could find: the dead limbs of cedars that were still attached to their trunks, sheltered from the rain by the dense canopy of living limbs above.

He sat there unmoving all night, looking out over the land, knowing his fire could be seen from many different vantages. He watched the sun rise and felt its

more gradual and diffuse warmth mix with the concentrated warmth of his fire as he let the fire die out. His eyes blurred, his stomach hurt, and he thirsted for coffee.

When he judged the sun had risen far enough to safely assume the cougar was sleeping, he went back down and made his way to the kill. He tossed the arrow off to the side of the road and went up the slope. He worked quickly and methodically, his knife unbuckled in the sheath that hung from his belt, but no longer fearful. The carcass had been further savaged, so much so that he had some doubt the cat would return to it or remained anywhere in the area. This made his work quick. He broke ribs off the vertebrae with a rock. He took a few other bones that had been broken by the cougar, the marrow sucked dry.

On his way up, Jacob saw that the bottle of whiskey he had left by the side of the road was gone. He went back to the burned down lean-to and arranged the bones in a circle around the periphery of the blackened ground, radiating out in every direction. In the center, he placed the deer's head, lacking eyes and much of its skin. He was wearying as he walked down the road to the south. The sun seemed to be draining his energy from him in order to fuel its rise into the sky. The sky seemed devastatingly large and criss-crossed by the confusing trajectories of multiple suns, on their way to rise and set at various horizons. Looking up into it made him feel dizzy and weak. Some distant memory occurred to him and he found himself wondering, bizarrely, if his face had the same shape from the time of that memory that it did now.

He found indications of the other everywhere, but he could not assemble them into any particular chronology, nor know to what other signs elsewhere on the mountain they referred. Everything was derivative of everything else, but he could not establish the relations a given artifact of the other's presence had to any other. There was too much ground to cover and no way to organize his search of that ground with any meaning.

On his way down the road, he found a circle carved into the trunk of an alder tree. When he saw that the vole was resting at the trunk's base, he knew the circle symbolized his ring. When he made his way to the old cedar that he had originally deposited the vole into, there was nothing. He found the gift he had left on the northern slope of the mountain, the crow's foot, in his hut. He found the railroad spike he had left in the coyote's skull in the mouth of the deer that he had left on the ashes of the lean-to. His ring was still missing.

As it grew dark, he took his knife and made a shallow incision all the way around his finger, a bloody band where he had once worn his wedding ring. He wandered all over the mountain all night, flitting between the trees, trudging along the grassy ridges, crouching at the precipitous cliffs that terminated in rain-filled pools where bullfrogs sang with alarming volume and intensity, further disorienting him. When morning was near, he burrowed beneath a large pile of branches stripped from trees by a logging operation and slept for an hour or two.

When he woke, it was with the image of his ring on the other's finger. This image was not an artifact from the dream from which he was emerging, but simply his first waking impression, already vividly and perfectly formed the moment he opened his eyes. He resumed his search.

The other's modifications of the landscape grew more proximate in time—he constantly evaded Jacob although it was everywhere indicated he had just been where Jacob was. He passed the lean-to and found the coyote skull had replaced the deer skull and that the vole had been placed inside its mouth, where once the railroad spike had occupied the coyote skull before being moved here to replace the missing deer skull.

He went down to the western slope to check on the carving of a face that he had left, to find it missing, and when he returned to the lean-to less than two hours since he had last seen it, the coyote skull was now gone and the wood carving had replaced it, the vole now in its mouth.

Jacob was right behind the other. He walked north. He walked past his hut, stopping to drink water, and when he came back up the road an hour later the deer bones were now splayed out in a circle around his dwelling. He bounded up and down roads, as fast as he could, everywhere encountering signs and the modification of signs that told him he was closer and closer to reaching the other.

The day had been clear, but toward afternoon, snow began to fall. He stopped. He was in the southwest corner of the mountain. He knew that the snow had the potential to assist or impede him. If he kept walking, he would leave tracks. As the light failed, obsessed to a point of confusion and his senses numbed from lack of sleep, he would begin following his own tracks. If he simply waited for snow to fall to a substantial depth, he could possibly find a single set of tracks made by the other. He took shelter in an old

wooden shack that housed a decrepit water pump and waited.

As he sat there with his back up against the wall, he wondered if the other had been awake for as long as he had. Then, despite the cold, he sank to the depths of a long, numb, oblivious slumber, from which he did not hear the door of the shack opening.

He woke in the complete darkness of the pump house with a mask on his face. It was formed of leaves and bark and he was terrified by the feel of it. He rose in a panic and opened the door out into the night, which was blanketed in white snow that brilliantly reflected the light from the moon, beaming down from a cloudless and endless sky.

He saw everything more clearly and sharply than he ever had before. He looked out over the open snowy field, its surface jumbled by clumps of grass that bent down to the ground, humbled by the snow. He saw the ramshackle fence and the jagged line of black trees in the distance with new eyes. He took a breath and felt the cold night air pierce his lungs for the first time. Everything had taken on its elemental form. He stood on the prototypical mountain from which all other mountains were derived. A set of tracks approached his hut and then retreated back up the mountain. He followed.

A great-horned owl was calling somewhere close by. He was halfway up the mountain and his eyes peered through the mask down at the ground intently. He diligently placed his feet inside the other's tracks, in order to avoid any later confusion. The cat pounced on him from above, from a steep embankment to his left, perhaps because he was still scented with the blood of its last kill, perhaps because the mask somehow linked Jacob to the cougar or gave him its vision.

He managed to stay on his feet by turning, swinging the animal around with the force of its own momentum, and felt the sting of its claws adjusting their position to retain a grasp on him. The teeth bit at his face unsuccessfully as he brought his fist down on the cougar's arm and then he felt the teeth on his shoulder as he reached for his knife. His hands were numb from the cold and he realized that it was tremendously difficult for him to unbuckle the knife from its sheath. He stopped fighting for a moment as he focused his effort on finding his fingers in the frigid and ambiguous wash of sensation at the extremity of his right hand and directing them to simple movements.

When the cougar's mouth slid from his shoulder, gnashing at his skin as it went along, to his neck, he grasped at its ear with his left hand to pull it away. He fell to the ground and the mask slid so that he saw everything at a new angle, distorted and anguished. By brute force and chance he had undone the single button that bound his knife and he raised the blade up into the animal's body and felt himself being crushed into the ground as the cat leaped off of him and bounded up the road and then off into the forest.

His clothing was shredded in a few places and his body bound by ribbons of blood, but none of the wounds were deep. The thickness of his jacket and sweaters and shirt had protected him. There was a place where the cougar's foot made a track dead in the center of one of the other's tracks.

Jacob followed him up the road until he stood at the top of the mountain. He felt everything transfixed by his gaze, trembling, obsequious before him. He was scared to take off his mask because he feared that the brown stalks of dead grass would be singed and the leaves of trees would be ignited into a roaring conflagration by the brilliant, sun-like radiance emanating from his face. He looked down at the distant lights of towns and houses and listened to the highway. He knew that whatever happened to prophets in the wilderness had happened to him, and that, if he were to follow their convention, he would now descend from the mountain and speak empty words he would claim god had given him. He knew that whatever he lacked in truth he would compensate for in conviction, because he had been transfigured in such a way that his words would be, for many, beyond reproach or doubt. But he knew there was no god and he was not a liar, so he turned his back on humanity and continued trudging along the road until humanity was out of sight.

The other's tracks turned onto the main road that led off of the mountain to the west and began to descend down it. Jacob followed them until they came to the bottom, where they crossed the road and penetrated that far vaster forest that extended from here to the ocean. He stood there, his face a chaos of leaves and his skin a muddle of claw and teeth marks, still grasping his bloody knife in the burning cold fingers of his right hand, feeling all of the wounds of this mountain he had frequented for so long mirrored somewhere in his body. Then he crossed the road, into the forest's interior, and abandoned civilization forever.