

Peripheral Visions

You Would Not Want To Be Staring Like That At Me: The American Other and the Carnival Spectacle in HBO's True Blood, Deadwood and Carnivàle.

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A Novel, *Tarnished.*

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Table of Contents

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements.....	4
<i>You Would Not Want To Be Staring Like That At Me: The American Other and the Carnival Gaze in HBO's True Blood, Deadwood and Carnivàle.</i>	
Introduction	5
<i>My Mad Face and My Happy Face Are the Same: The De/Construction of Vampire Identities and Locations in Alan Ball's True Blood</i>	9
<i>You Cannot Fuck the Future, Sir. The Future Fucks You: Uncivilised Modernity and the Frontier 'Other' in David Milch's Deadwood</i>	32
<i>Wonderful, Terrible Things: Ecological Freaks and Transient Bodies in Daniel Knauf's Carnivàle</i>	58
Competing Centralities: A Conclusion	88
The Creative-Critical Approach: Framing and Writing Spectacle in a Gothic Western Hybrid.....	93
A Novel, <i>Tarnished</i>	101
Bibliography	236
Appendix: <i>Tarnished</i> , continued.	241

Abstract

‘You would not want to be staring like that at me.’ The minacious words of *Deadwood*’s Al Swearengen ring out beyond the show’s Wild West confines and speak to the wider cultural anatomy of the United States. Swearengen is threatening his nemesis, Sheriff Bullock, who has decided to communicate his contempt for Swearengen with one, long look. Al returns this glare, his verbal riposte a mere addendum to their power struggle that is, in that moment, reaching its climactic end through a distinctly visual discourse.

The visual, what we look like, what we look at and how we look at each other, the superficial dermal sign and what it signifies, not only about itself but about the viewer also, permeates and produces American subcultural interactions. Philip McGowan calls this ‘an economy of seeing’, and conceives it as a distinctly American version of the Carnavalesque that renders the act of looking a method of both highlighting and monetising difference and negating the different, of constructing and deconstructing the identities of those who do not fit into the template of the norm (white, able-bodied), and of creating a binary between this norm and an American ‘Other’, the racial, physiological, cultural outsider. McGowan traces the development of restrictive visual exchange through the chronology of the American exposition, the midway and the freak show, arguing that these public events provided a model for the paying public on how to frame and interact with this ‘Other’ in both showground and more quotidian spaces. McGowan follows this historical precedent through to its literary permutations, exploring texts that best illustrate his conceptual reframing of the Carnavalesque in distinctly American terms.

I seek to take this updated framework and apply it to its other natural counterpart, serial television (HBO specifically), the filmic, opt-in, long-form narratives that have overtaken cinema as both our premier visual product and primary means of replicating, investigating and evaluating culture. The shows I have selected (*True Blood*, *Deadwood* and *Carnivàle*) each stand as and offer up instances of these visual behaviours through their narratives and aesthetics, depicting this normal/’Other’ binary in illuminative, intersectional and often disruptive ways.

With these concerns in mind, I also present my own creative work, a novel that attempts to converge American Gothic and Western tropes (succeeding other less explicitly coalesced examples) in order to more fully materialise the inherent potential of this specific hybrid, and that was, in part, written in consideration of and as response to this critical discourse and its associated visual, cultural and historical cues.

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You Would Not Want To Be Staring Like That At Me: The American Other and the Carnival Gaze in HBO's True Blood, Deadwood and Carnivàle.

Introduction.

‘We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.’¹ The principal hypothesis of John Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* (1972) still bears weight in multiple contexts. To observe, examine or to even glance at another is only rarely a neutral or objective act; ‘looking’ is both the culmination and catalyst of a set of social and cultural subcurrents that, created through individual, small-scale interactions, echo repeatedly into wider consciousness. This effect is only intensified in image rich, visual cultures like that of the United States. In *American Carnival*, Phillip McGowan proposes a version of carnivalesque that developed in symbiosis with American culture specifically: instead of Bakhtin’s European carnival of laughter, a temporary inversion of normal hierarchical structures, McGowan suggests that States-based carnival, manifested tangibly in American World Fairs, midway shows and freak shows, was a means of consolidating identity, race and social position through the act of ‘seeing.’ Commercial, public events like these reassured the dominant, white population of its normality and status through the act of looking at the freakish, abnormal, and exotic or racially ‘Othered’ attractions such events had to offer.

McGowan scaffolds his reading with the framework of European carnival, using this paradigm to delineate what he suggests is America’s innately contrastive practice; he states that these American shows were not yearly festivals, events or rituals of carnival or isolated incidents of ‘Othering’, but that this method of seeing and controlling those that deviated from the norm permeated American life and became ever-present and pernicious. Through these visual relations a binary racial code was created. The ‘Other’ was set apart both for and from the white viewer, an object of visual consumption, and from that examination, that viewer’s whiteness and value were both confirmed and affirmed:

The spaces and moments of American Carnival serve a dual function: to displace and simultaneously display Otherness, to place non-American, un-American identities beyond regular social interactions and social viewing and exhibit them within extra

¹ John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC; Penguin, 1972) p. 8

social arenas that operate in the establishment of a politics or an economy of seeing, a visual economy of observing Otherness, blackness, ‘subversiveness’.²

Within the structures of this American carnivalesque, boundaries are formed and fused instead of liberated. ‘Normal’ and ‘Other’ identities are constructed in symbiotic opposition, normal co-dependent on ‘Other’. American carnival is one of repression, rather than expression, and its mode a political and economic exploitation of minority groups, a monetary exchange that ensured that the white viewer purchased reassurance of their normalcy at the expense of the economically exploited individuals on show. As Berger states, ‘[a]s a result of this act, what we see is brought within our reach – though not necessarily within arm’s reach.’³ Through the act of purchase and the gaze itself, power, and subsequently value were instilled in being able to ‘look’ at this ‘Other’ from a safe distance, laying the foundations for a scaffold of confidence and entitlement that went beyond the show environment. Though certain critics like Carl Lindahl argue that Bakhtin’s depiction of carnival is inherently conservative, a controlled and self-limited ‘venting’ that allows only for a return to normality once the carnival experience is complete, in America, McGowan would have it, there is no inversion, however temporary, only enforced submission from those that appear to be different within such a ‘visual economy’.⁴

The theoretical concept McGowan proposes in *American Carnival* in particular seems little utilised in the broad and divergent sphere of reading American socio-cultural history, given that visual and commercial culture appear to be so inextricably engrained in the United States’ past and present – the ‘carnival impulse’ that is responsible for the inherent prejudice against and marginalization of what is not white, normal, expected. I intend to rectify this previous critical neglect, testing McGowan’s ideas alongside other intersecting critics and concepts that reflect upon American culture and the organisation of social hierarchies. As a suitable conduit for this examination, I will focus on one aspect of U.S visual culture, television, and how this carnival impulse permeates certain shows.

On its webpage, HBO posits itself as ‘America’s most successful premium television company.’⁵ A subscription cable channel with one hundred and twenty-seven million viewers internationally, it does not need to rely on advertising for financing and is subsequently not as restricted by censors regarding its choices about its programme content. It can target adult

² Philip McGowan, ‘Preface’ in *American Carnival* (London: Greenwood Press, 2001) pp. ix – xii (p. ix)

³ Berger, p. 8

⁴ McGowan, p. ix

⁵ Data taken from HBO’s webpage, ‘About HBO’, <http://www.hbo.com/#/about/index.html> [accessed 18 August 2017]

audiences - this was originally typically middle-class Americans though its audience now has a more expansive demographic - who have the means to purchase a subscription to original, quality programming. It has a reputation for creating shows that contain graphic sexual and violent content, balanced with respected writing, original narratives, and superior production values. Though, as Brigid Cherry points out, HBO 'only reaches a quarter of American households with television sets,' (though it extends its reach with DVD sales, international syndicates and unintentionally with illegal downloads) its demographic and the popularity of its programming makes it significant in the context of *American Carnival* and social organisation.⁶

Bryan Rommel Ruiz states that 'films provide an essential media for [Americans] to engage with their national past,' and are 'the primary way Americans connect with their history.'⁷ I would argue that HBO cable shows, with their ambitious narratives and big budgets, are now operating in a comparable fashion. Indeed, Home Box Office started out life as a channel that offered first-show movies and sporting coverage before it moved toward made-to-order television, the evolution of its content and business model anticipating the growing shift towards television as the more popular, consistently sophisticated and even academic medium.⁸ This shift, the swing towards televisual 'box-set' culture and the concurrent truncation of Hollywood, is a burgeoning area of critical focus unfortunately beyond the scope of this study, but we can surmise that by subscribing, the viewer 'buys a ticket', and opts in to what HBO has to show them. There is clearly an appetite for the network and its output, branding and ethos, and viewers have bought into its choices and focus. McGowan's analysis is a literary one, but as he stresses the importance of the visual element in American culture, it seems appropriate to apply his conception of carnival to cable. Rommel Ruiz states that a purely 'academic' or literary approach to any given narrative instigates a detachment in most readers to the original source material or subject.⁹ Films, he argues, do the exact opposite: what we 'see' when 'reading' the visual becomes clearer and more accessible than when reading text. The visual core of televisual production

⁶ Brigid Cherry, 'Introduction' in *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic* ed. by Brigid Cherry (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) pp. 3-21 (p. 7)

⁷ Bryan Rommel-Ruiz, 'Introduction' in *American History Goes to the Movies: Hollywood and the American Experience* (New York: Routledge, 2011) pp. 1-9 (p. 5)

⁸ Gary R. Edgerton, 'Introduction' in *The Essential HBO Reader*, eds. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2008) pp. 1-20 (p. 1)

⁹ Rommel-Ruiz, p. 5

mirrors the economic and ocular elements within *American Carnival* and provides a substantial platform for examining some of the shows HBO has produced within that context.

The three shows that lend themselves most readily to this reading and overlap in their treatment of the 'Other', are Alan Ball's *True Blood* (2008 – 2014), David Milch's *Deadwood* (2004 – 2006) and Daniel Knauf's *Carnivàle* (2003 – 2005). *True Blood* is an adaptation of Charlaine Harris's *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* book series. In the fictional town of Bon Temps, Louisiana, Sookie Stackhouse is coming to terms, along with the rest of her community, with the 'Great Revelation'; vampires, after centuries of hiding, have revealed their existence to humanity. They as a species have 'come out of the coffin', an event made possible through the development of synthetic blood, and expressed a desire to 'mainstream', to live peacefully alongside humans. Sookie is thrown into contact with the vampire world when she encounters the vampire Bill Compton and engages in a romantic relationship with him, while dealing with a world that begins to reveal multiple other supernatural beings.

Deadwood is an 1870s Western set in the South Dakota Territory, with Milch utilising real historical figures within his narrative. It primarily focuses on Seth Bullock, an upright but unstable sheriff, and Al Swearengen, a British-born saloon owner who controls most of the town's business. The show tracks their tense, often violent interactions parallel to the progression of the town as it heads towards annexation and modernity and becomes subject to the steady creep of 'civilisation.' *Carnivàle* contrastingly provides an interior view of the carnival experience. Set in the dustbowl in the Great Depression, it follows healer Ben Hawkins as he reluctantly joins a travelling freak show and is forced to come to terms with the supernatural ability he possesses and the fate that awaits him and his fellow 'freaks' in a wider battle between good and evil.

These shows have begun to become a subject for tentative critical attention, with one or two recent collections released recently that focus on each series. In context, however, relatively little critical work exists in relation to any of these three programmes and none examining them within a specific cultural context. In connecting them to wider understandings of American heritage, using *American Carnival* to provide a framework for reading how difference of all kinds is marked in these three series, I hope to develop an original and meaningful study of what they reveal about American history, its visual culture and its socio-geographical relationships, past and present.

***My Mad Face and My Happy Face Are the Same: The De/Construction of Vampire
Identities and Locations in Alan Ball's True Blood.***

It would be easy enough to discount *True Blood* as just one more offering in a spate of media that features vampires and vampire lore. From Joss Whedon's *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997-2003), through to Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* 2005 – 2008), L.J. Smith's *The Vampire Diaries* (2009 – 2017), adapted for the screen by Kevin Williamson and Julie Plec, and its spin off *The Originals* (2013 – 2018), and Cole Haddon's *Dracula* (2013 – 2014), co-written by Daniel Knauf, viewers are spoilt for choice with regards to modern re-interpretations of vampirism. *True Blood*, staying true to Harris's stories, does not stray far from traditional tropes associated with all that is 'vampire'. Its monsters function within the parameters of a gothic romance narrative, can live for millennia, are vulnerable to sunlight, silver and stakes; they have fangs (retractable), only drink (synthetic) blood, are physiologically 'dead' but otherwise look as they did when previously human. So far, nothing new.

What make *True Blood* more complex, and pushes it beyond yet another straightforward recycling of a popular Gothic subgenre, is, as Bruce A. McClelland states, is that it 'refocuses on the vampire community and the politics of its interaction with the human community.'¹⁰ Integral to this 'refocusing' is the series' location: set in Louisiana, it marks itself from the very beginning as Southern. This setting re-animates a plethora of socio-historical issues the region has associated with it: its links to Europe, stemming from Louisiana's sequence of authorities, from French to Spanish to French; its purchase in 1803 by America; ties with the slave trade and involvement in the aftermath of the Saint Domingue revolution and the State's unusual 'tripartite' social structure in the eighteenth-century comprised of white Louisianans, free people of colour and slaves; and the preoccupation with voodoo, spiritualism and the supernatural stemming from a fusion of Catholic and African religious practices.¹¹

Race, of course, is the primary burden of that history and *True Blood* provides, in the vampire figure, an allegorical reading of the issues faced by minority groups in the region. Stacey Abbott suggests that 'Vampires become sympathetic in *True Blood*, not because they are struggling against their condition and resisting the thirst [...] but because they are the

¹⁰ Bruce A. McClelland, 'Un-True Blood: The Politics of Artificiality' in *True Blood and Philosophy: We Wanna Think Bad Things with You*, ed. by George A. Dunn and Rebecca Housel (New Jersey: Wiley and Sons, 2010) pp. 79-90 (p. 81)

¹¹ Thomas Ruys Smith, *Southern Queen: New Orleans in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Continuum, 2011) p. 8

victims of prejudice.’¹² Vampires emerge after the Great Revelation as creatures unapologetic of their ‘condition’, a group fighting for their rights. The first series, primarily concerned with Sookie and Bill’s burgeoning romance and a spate of murders in Bon Temps, features a sub-plot centred on vampires pressing for the VRA, *The Vampire Rights Amendment*, to pass so that they can obtain the same civil rights as humans. The AVL, *The American Vampire League*, debates this issue on various television news programmes, reassuring Americans that vampires want to integrate as fully as possible with human society, having been mythologized as a race for (presumably) almost as long as humans have been its dominant species.

The *True Blood* world acts as a contemporary microcosmic projection of the Reconstruction/Redemption South. Postbellum, the region was in a state of conflict on all sociological levels, its states and communities anxious to re-establish a sense of unity and stability against growing economic pressures, the influence of a Republican government and the influx of ‘carpet-baggers’ into the region. However nebulous, fractious or brittle the reality of a unified South was, both during and after the war it appeared at least to operate and to ‘think’ as a united whole under external pressures. It closed ranks, many of its citizens refusing to acquiesce to outside interference and external legislation, or to entertain the political progression of its black residents. In response to Northern, Republican interference and the emancipation of the black population, factions like the Ku Klux Klan formed to both intimidate minority communities and to offer strength and support to the white population. Southern Democrats continued this cause in political and ideological arenas, and a decade after the war had finished these varying groups, on a local and state level, had effectively gained control of the region and ‘redeemed’ the South; Reconstruction, irrecoverably hobbled, stalled completely with the compromise of 1877, which saw the last federal troops pulled from Southern states. Charles Reagan Wilson states that, ‘fearing that crushing defeat might eradicate the identity forged in the war, Southerners reasserted that identity with a vengeance.’¹³ As blacks struggled to gain the political and civil liberties that seemed opportune upon the end of the war, a campaign of violence against them grew and spilled over into the twentieth century.

¹² Stacey Abbott, ‘TV Loves Fangs: the Televisuality of HBO Horror’ in *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic*, ed. by Brigid Cherry (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012) pp. 25-38 (p. 34)

¹³ Charles Reagan Wilson, ‘The Lost Cause as Civil religion’ in *Major Problems in the History of the American South: Vol. ii, The New South*, ed. by Paul D. Escott, David R. Goldfield, Sarah G. McMillen, Elizabeth Hayes Turner, 2nd edn (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) pp. 203-208 (p. 204)

In *True Blood*, The Great Revelation becomes the re-activating trigger for these defiant, separatist attitudes. However, this time around, this stance is taken up in defence of the human race, the physical state of life. Political groups like the AVL clash with those that oppose the VRA, such as the Fellowship of the Sun, an anti-vampire rights religious organisation. On the surface, this conflict doesn't appear to be particular to the South - the show reveals that vampires live all over the world, some cultures more inclined to tolerate them than others. They run the gamut of race, gender, age and sexuality and on one level operate as symbols of tolerance, a species that transcends prejudice. *True Blood*, however, focuses specifically on the South. Primarily set in Louisiana and Texas, it very rarely moves from its geographical base and takes great pains to emphasise and exoticise the region (the show's title sequence, created by Digital Kitchen, is a montage of Southern culture snapshots, from catfish and swamps to cicadas, gospel choirs, riverside baptisms and a reference to the infamous Westboro Baptist Church with a church sign declaring 'God Hates Fangs'). Shannon Lee Dawdy states that New Orleans 'is depicted, and depicts itself, in novels, plays, and tourist material as an exotic, licentious, dark and decayed place,' and Harris and Ball create explicit connections between the vampire race and the show's location; indeed, vampires from all over the world seem drawn to this area, and the show's regional limitations, excluding the occasional reference to the wider world in the aforementioned TV debates, begin to suggest that vampires are all, in a sense, naturalised southerners, or a problem specific to the South depending on your viewpoint.¹⁴ Eric Northman, a vampire with Viking roots, lives in Shreveport with his progeny Pam, who has connections to London and San Francisco; the millennia old and very powerful Russell Edgington lives in an antebellum mansion in Mississippi; Godric, Eric's maker, again over two-thousand years old, is head of a nest in Dallas until he commits suicide; Bill, a Bon Temps native who travelled Europe with his maker, returns to Bon Temps to reinvigorate and reoccupy his old family estate. In *True Blood*, it seems, no matter your history, all roads lead south.

If, as John B. Boles states, the 'perception that the South might be disappearing in a cultural sense has led to a discovery of its importance in personal and national terms,' then by aligning these narratives with those of the region within a contemporary timeframe, *True Blood's* creators deliberately recall and merge the trajectories of the South and of vampire kind, aligning vampire culture with both racially 'Othered' groups and the negative or

¹⁴ Shannon Lee Dawdy, *Building the Devil's Empire: French Colonial New Orleans* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2008) p. 8

anachronistic elements of white Southern culture also.¹⁵ The postbellum period saw vampiric imagery used to frame both white and black identities: multiple descriptions of the South use the word ‘defanged’ to depict the perceived impotence of the region after the war, the image of a debilitated freak robbed of both its power and the very thing that made it freakish concurrent with a South shorn of the institution that provided the linchpin of its identity, and consequently unsure about how to view itself. Cartoonist Norman Jennett’s almost identical images, ‘The Vampire That Hovers Over North Carolina’ (1898) and ‘Negro Rule’ (1900) transpose a monstrous identity onto the black population and its political progress: the two cartoons depict a huge black man with bat wings, claws and a tail, reaching for vulnerable white citizens while keeping one foot on the ballot box. Published in the *Rayleigh News and Observer* (the paper clearly felt the image was worth repeating) thirty years after the Civil War had ended, these cartoons crudely evoke the supposed dangers of black emancipation and political influence and helped finalise electoral victory for the Democrats in North Carolina’s turn of the century elections; the state did not have a Republican governor again until 1972 with highly conservative Jesse Helms taking the senate seat.¹⁶

In the world of *True Blood*, the civil war lives on. *The Descendants of the Glorious Dead* (DGD), a group whose members meet to discuss the war, explore their family connections to the Confederacy and Bon Temps’ involvement; the war is still very much part of community consciousness. There is also an implication that vampires come or return to the South because of the roots of the region, the pull of its colonial and civil histories. If trauma, as Cathy Caruth defines it, is ‘the unwitting re-enactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind,’ Harris and Ball, by placing these monstrous representatives of history in this region, position *True Blood* as an attempt to work through this past.¹⁷ Ruys Smith states that ‘New Orleans has a history punctuated by disaster, and, in uncanny ways, modern traumas indelibly call up the ghosts of ancient catastrophes.’¹⁸ Vampires themselves embody and perform history, some of them far older than America as a nation. Having previously existed as fiction, an unspoken presence, the confirmed physical reality of the vampire calls to an end

¹⁵ John B. Boles, ‘The Difficulty of Consensus in the South’ in *Major Problems in the History of the American South, Vol I, The Old South*, ed. by Paul D. Escott, David R. Goldfield, Sarah G. McMillen, Elizabeth Hayes Turner, 2nd edition (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999) pp. 19-28 (p. 27)

¹⁶ Norman Ethre Jennett, ‘The Vampire That Hovers Over North Carolina’, September 27, 1898, and ‘Negro Rule’, July 4, 1900, *Raleigh News and Observer* <https://cwnc.omeka.chass.ncsu.edu/items/show/325> [accessed 26 August 2017]

¹⁷ Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Maryland: John Hopkins University Press, 1996) p. 2

¹⁸ Smith, p. 2

this period of latency the South has experienced regarding the war and racial integration. Vampires are walking, talking embodiments of such history, of a barbarous and primitive past, wherever they originate from.

As stated, vampires are a heterogeneous group; once human, they naturally include every identifiable race, gender, sexuality and physicality possible in as many combinations. Humans in *True Blood*, however, read vampires as one homogenous threat. When Bill is asked to give a talk at a DGD meeting regarding his role in the war, a boy remarks on his paleness: ‘Mamma, he’s so white.’ His mother, Arlene, replies, ‘No darlin’, we’re white, He’s dead.’ (1:5) Bill’s ‘whiteness’, what would have made him not only acceptable but socially superior in his previous life, now marks him as untrustworthy. Through Arlene delineating white people from vampire, Bill is categorized as ‘Other’, regardless of race; indeed, his whiteness now simply serves to highlight further his deathly pallor. Arlene herself is not prejudicial in regard to her fellow humans and interacts normally with the black residents of Bon Temps; what she is really doing is using ‘white’ to codify normal – in this case human. Bill is no longer part of this community; though some of his audience do display a tentative interest in what he has to say, he is at best a novelty, to be looked at rather than listened to. That is his attraction, and not that he embodies a shared ideological history, nor even that he functions as an antebellum revenant.

If, as McGowan states, ‘American culture assigns particular positions and locations to the identities of its citizens,’ Maxine Fortenberry’s mistaken attempt to remove the church cross at the meeting, though an effort to accommodate Bill, only highlights his now corrupted heritage and further renders him different to his audience. Utilising her limited knowledge of pre-existing vampire lore, Fortenberry believes Bill can no longer be comfortable in a church and makes a scene of this assumption.¹⁹ This scene is just one of many moments that explicitly and implicitly cast Bill as problematic, and a disruptive, unsettling presence in Bon Temps, partly because of his human connection to it; his character acts as a conduit for the amplification of difference regarding vampire kind within the show as a whole. We first encounter him in Sam Merlotte’s bar in the show’s pilot episode. Though he is recognised as vampire by bar staff, he sits and orders red wine to keep up the charade of ‘passing’ as human. We see a close up of his face, deathly pale and smiling, juxtaposed by the red leather booth he is sat in. The light is then dimmed around him, throwing his pallor into relief while casting a shadow on the ‘human’ environment around him. The colour, saturation,

¹⁹ McGowan, p. x

cinematography and framing of the shot all play on sanguine symbols, his vampiric qualities created through visual cues.

Blood is the most significant and recurring motif in the show and binds the narrative to its location: after the Civil War, repeated legislative attempts were made to define the proportion of blood that produced different racial variations or ‘dilutions’ and characteristics.²⁰ In 1924, this process culminated in the Racial Integrity Act, colloquially known as the ‘one-drop rule.’ Thenceforth, anyone with ‘black blood’ in their lineage, however slight, was classified as ‘coloured’, overriding skin colour, physical features, and social position as deciding factors. Fear of people ‘passing’, primarily black passing as white, produced this blanket legislation that designated a person’s race by literally taking only one small thing into account.

Blood tied black and white together through generations of social and sexual contact, a co-dependency engineered through the structure of a slave-holding society, and yet later on, blood was also what set them apart and solidified the two separate identities of ‘whiteness’ and ‘Otherness.’ The relationship between humans and vampires in *True Blood* echoes this socially engineered binary. Until the creation of a synthetic substitute, vampires have used human blood for sustenance. Conversely, vampire blood has also become an addictive, psychotropic drug for humans that increases libido and heightens the senses. One drop is, ironically, all that is needed to produce such an effect. Blood is what forces the two species together, in a co-dependency given the addictive and healing properties of ‘V’, but also what divides them. Images of blood abound in the series. There are numerous shots of Sookie and Bill both drinking from each other, blood running freely from neck or groin or into and around the mouth. When a vampire is staked, he or she explodes in a grenade-like splatter of blood and tissue, liquid and coagulate.

Sookie is the anchor to which this motif is most frequently tied. Setting aside her ability to hear people’s thoughts, she operates, at least to begin with, as a typical romantic heroine - attractive, blond and virginal with traditional values and good manners. A modern belle, she is the good girl to whom a range of characters in *True Blood*, vampire or otherwise, are attracted. One of the central fears in the Redemption South that continued into the twentieth century was of miscegenation – sexual and pro-creative relationships between racial groups. In contrast to unspoken liberties in the antebellum South that enabled white masters to have

²⁰ Dorothy E. Roberts, ‘The Genetic Tie’ in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. by Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) pp. 186-189 (p. 187)

sexual contact with their slaves, the taboo of a black man having sex with a white woman became the cause of an insidious paranoia in the Southern consciousness. Numerous anti-miscegenation laws were enacted at state level, reacting to fears surrounding women's vulnerability and honour, which formed the bedrock of family honour. Such fears mutated into the accusation of rape, which became semi-judicial tool to save white woman's reputations, preserve the dignity of the region, and repress black communities through fear of retributive violence.

Synchronically, the practice of lynching became more prevalent in the region toward the end of the nineteenth century. In his study on the phenomena, Philip Dray states 'the main U.S. lynching epoch was from about 1890 to [...] 1919', though the ritual carried on well into the 1960s.²¹ Its use was rooted in Southern social customs and, again, in antebellum notions of honour. Bertram Wyatt Brown states that '[h]onor in the pre-Civil War Slave states was an encoded system, a matter of interchanges between the individual and the community to which he or she belonged.'²² A community thought as one; social approval was crucial, the cornerstone of public and private life. Meaning and justice were imparted on a local level without significant interference from civic or governmental organisations through social occasions, rituals and, occasionally, violence. Community bestowed honour and its antithesis, shame, as well as punishment for various social transgressions. The latter was frequently administered, again communally, through physical, visual spectacles – charivaris – where transgressors might be tarred and feathered, whipped or 'ridden out of town on a rail.'²³ Such punishments were carnivalesque in nature, the aim being to punish the offender by making a public spectacle of him or her and thereby expel the crime and alleviate its effects.

Lynching in the South, primarily used to persecute and kill black men, evolved as a deadly manifestation of this community spirit and agency in the South. This often false accusation of rape in symbiosis with what Thomas Ross describes as, 'the recurring mythology of the black man as the over-sexed, large, would-be defiler of the innocent white women', was responsible for thousands of extra-legal black deaths in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.²⁴ It swiftly became a highly ritualised activity, with its own patterns, rites

²¹ Phillip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, (New York: Modern Library, 2003) p. 457

²² Bertram Wyatt Brown, 'Preface' in *Honor and Violence in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) pp. vii-x (p. vii)

²³ Wyatt Brown, 'Tar and Feathers: Community Disorder' pp. 187-213 (p. 193)

²⁴ Thomas Ross, 'White Innocence, Black Abstraction' in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. by Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997) pp. 263-266 (p. 264)

and expectations as Dray outlines: ‘the use of fire, the sacredness of objects associated with the killing, the symbolic taking of trophies of the victim’s remains, the sense of celebratory anticipation and then the lingering importance participants placed on such events – all suggest an anthropological basis for viewing lynching as a form of tribal sacrifice.’²⁵

The sacrificial or cathartic function of lynching and its ceremonial practice echo the rites associated with vampire myth, the use of fire and the sense of ‘expelling’ a mortal and moral danger. This is exemplified in *True Blood*: by threatening Sookie, serial killer René Lenier/Drew Marshall draws Bill out into sunlight, and he becomes a black, charred, debilitated version of himself, unable to move. Steve Newlin, in his plot to sacrifice Godric by making him ‘meet the sun’, describes the event as a barbeque, a term used by lynching parties and news reports also, indicative of the ‘festive’ atmosphere these murders engendered. Lynching was often seen as a family day out: children were allowed out of school to attend, special train services were laid on, and newspapers printed updates about the whereabouts of the victim and the group who held them. Photos were taken of the victim when they were still alive, and later of the body surrounded by crowds, people smiling and pointing to the often eviscerated, mutilated form amongst or above them. It was common for ‘souvenirs’ to be taken from the corpse - teeth, bones and genitalia – often being sold or displayed in store windows. However, the victims’ faces, and identities were frequently covered or obstructed by bags, by the angle at which they were photographed or hung, or by fire or mutilation, these images becoming individual static distillations of the display/displace mode of American carnival operations.

The other method of killing a vampire, a stake, is a form of penetration analogical to the wounds inflicted on lynching victims, to the crime of rape and the penetration enacted in a vampire bite; in *True Blood* vampire fangs erupt when upon hunger or arousal, though the two are often syncretic. On the vampire body, the use of a stake results in the bloody ejaculation of gore described earlier. Newlin’s ‘barbeque’, though halted, is a would-be lynching and a carnival moment, its aim being ‘the eradication of the multi-racial and polyglot nature of U.S. experience, a blacking out of nonwhiteness, subversiveness and un-Americanness.’²⁶ Lynch lore and vampire lore, and the rituals that provide a scaffold for the destruction of the body of the ‘Other’, are a visual apparatus, designed, through repetition and

²⁵ Dray, p. 79

²⁶ McGowan, p. 9

documentation, to purge a region or community of a particular threat and a means of re-affirming the authority and status of the dominant population.

Reading Sookie as representative of white southern womanhood and potential locus for this threat, the reaction she encounters at Merlotte's after Bill has bitten her for the first time and taken her virginity redirects established Southern fears of miscegenation. Concern is vocalised most directly by Sam: 'When there's blood involved, a line's been crossed.' (1:7) he later states that Bill 'belongs with his own kind', that vampires and humans should be 'separate but equal', as if re-instating Jim Crow laws would best address this latest incarnation of Southern societal conflict.

The line Sam refers to is one of species. Sookie's bite marks taint her and diminish her honour because they signify her physical relationship with a member of the 'living impaired.' Consequentially, they negate the social standing and honour of the men around her (Sam most directly as he has a romantic interest in Sookie that goes unfulfilled). Bill's 'Otherness', his alluring yet threatening sexuality, is written in those marks. In the moment they are revealed, she both disgusts and intrigues those around her.

McGowan states that as well as being subject to the display/displace dichotomy of American carnival operations, the 'Other' was also both 'neutralised' and 'glamorized' by this cultural process.²⁷ Humans having sex with vampires – 'fangbanging' as it is known in *True Blood* - is depicted as both frightening and pleasurable. Maudette Pickens and Dawn the waitress, two women that indulge in such activities, are both depicted as trashy and overtly sexually active characters with loose morals. Lenier/Marshall kills them both for their indiscretions, along with Amy Burley, a user of 'V', and vampire sympathiser Adele Stackhouse, Sookie's grandmother. He also kills his own sister because she too was a fangbanger and series one ends with his attempt to kill Sookie for the same reason. He believes these women are 'dishonourable' and have brought shame upon the community by associating with vampires.

Vampires only have sex for pleasure – they reproduce individually by draining the intended victim then sharing their own blood – so are thus barren in human terms. In a region where lineage remains significant, another source of pride and honour, a sexual relationship between vampire and human that produces no offspring revels in this sterility, a sublimation of life into death, a hereditary stasis that again corrupts southern womanhood and threatens to halt human and therefore cultural reproduction. Jason Stackhouse, talking to Dawn, vocalises

²⁷ McGowan, p. 1

this distaste, ‘You let a dead man fuck you? You make me sick.’ (1:1), implying, as this is a woman he has sexual history with, that he is both disgusted and undermined by her preferences.

Lineage, however, is also significant in vampire culture, perhaps even more important than it is to humans; vampires, in a sense, out-last and out-do contemporary Southern society through their heritage, their veneration of their ancestors and their mannered public personas – whatever their origin, they act or appear more Southern than Southerners. Being born into a long-standing, socially established family meant ‘loyalty not to an immediate father alone, but to a whole weighty series of fathers.’²⁸ The burden of familial history weighed heavy and intermingled with notions of honour and pride in regard to bloodlines and conduct. The show places heavy emphasis on the relationship between a vampire and his or her maker, the bloodlines that these relationships form, and the sheer age of a vampire (age again confers position and both physical and social power). In North America, vampire judgement and justice is administered by the magister, a travelling adjudicator who passes sentence from the back of a pick-up truck, an image which is so emphatic it becomes caricature in its reproduction of Southern imagery, stereotype and the operations of localised power structures.

Despite the similarities between vampire and Southern society, vampire social and political structures differ greatly from that of the region’s humans. William M. Curtis highlights the way in which the political systems *True Blood’s* vampires adhere to are ‘feudal in nature.’²⁹ They retain old power structures and have a monarchy, a king or queen in each state, with smaller districts run by sheriffs. The vampire community round the world is controlled by ‘the Authority’, a council made up of some of the most powerful vampires in existence. This ‘Old World’ system is a European throwback, a reminder of Louisiana’s Spanish and French inheritance and the decay and degeneracy associated with the continent and historical continental power bases, and it appears to be an implicit threat to the democratic political systems of the U.S. Vampires then manage to exemplify, caricature and corrupt white Southern social structures and codes, embodying a proto-American, or certainly proto-Louisianan multicultural heritage, the manners and modes of Southern social customs and policing, and a decadent, dangerous and distinctly European inflection concurrently. They are the South at its best and worst.

²⁸ Wyatt Brown, ‘Family’ pp. 63-84 (p. 69)

²⁹ William M. Curtis, ‘Honey, if We Can’t Kill People, What’s the Point of Being a Vampire?’: Can Vampires be Good Citizens?’ in *True Blood and Philosophy*, pp. 65-78 (p. 69)

Through mainstreaming, a policy of equal co-existence with humans prescribed by the Authority, vampires appear to abide by human laws and policies their leaders have constructed in alliance with the United States government. However, many vampires do not follow this program, and even the Authority operates, through the magister, an extra-legal (in terms of human law) justice system for crimes committed within vampire culture. These trials are akin to the carnivalesque punishments metered out in old-fashioned forms of Southern community justice. The punishment is often physical, and publicly conducted. We see a vampire having his fangs pulled out for having bitten a human that ‘belonged’ to another vampire, and Bill is required to create a new vampire to display his loyalty to his kind (1:9). Bill’s trial functions in the same way as the routines McGowan describes: ‘spectacles of Otherness, or of purported criminality, were situated in what can be termed as carnivals of punishment – a social code readily understood by the gathered audience.’³⁰ Again, these common historical guide ropes are another reason why, in the world of *True Blood*, the South seems to be a draw for vampires; it still prescribes old social codes, providing an independence from government and officialdom in which vampires as historical beings can operate with minimal interference. Vampires can keep their own pre-mainstreaming culture alive, despite it being the target of human prejudice and mistrust, though it is indeed dangerous to humans.

This crossover between a region and its cultural predilections, and vampires as a species, would appear to be the root of a larger issue *True Blood* explores but leaves unanswered. If both humans and vampires engage in ‘neutralizing and ‘glamorizing’ the other, then the process of prescribing what is normal and what is ‘Other’ becomes complicated. Ariadne Blayde and George A. Dunn suggest that vampires are now the dominant species: ‘In short, the assumption that human beings occupy the highest run on the great ladder of being is challenged in the world of *True Blood* by the existence of a species that seemed to be superior to us in every way.’³¹ In some sense, the superior strength of the vampire, their longevity, their invulnerability, and their ability to procreate without a partner, only a willing/unwilling victim, marks them as the physiologically superior life form. Their existence enfeebles and commodifies the human body, repositioning the living as something akin to free-range livestock, a product, anonymised things relative to the hyper-individuated vampires who are, in most interactions with humans in the show, holding back the violent

³⁰ McGowan, p. 10

³¹ Ariadne Blayde and George A. Dunn, ‘Pets, Cattle and Higher Life Forms in *True Blood*’ in *True Blood and Philosophy*, pp. 33-48 (p. 41)

power their own bodies and impulses are capable of. This is the unspoken undercurrent to the televisual back-and-forth between head of the AVL, Nan Flanagan and various political opponents, that culminates in Russell Edgington ripping the spine out of a newscaster live on TV and declaring that he is the true face of the vampire, not the politically correct and media-palatable AVL: 'We will eat you... after we eat your children.' (3:9). To humans, Edgington is the monster let loose, without political or social restraint, a dark secret finally revealed, the Hyde to Flanagan's Jekyll; to Edgington himself (and those that think like him) he is simply the pragmatic, if eccentric, confirmation of the organic superiority of the predatory vampire body.

Steve Newlin and the Fellowship frame this body in biblical terms, believing that vampires are soulless abominations without a trace of the humanity they left behind. However, the series resists suggesting that vampires are demonic in any way: The Fellowship are depicted as ridiculous, though no less dangerous for it, and Newlin is eventually turned into a vampire. However, many vampires, like Edgington, Eric and Pam, lack the morality and empathy that human kind values and prides itself on, however unrealistically. There is constant divergence between the species in the series; vampires vocalise a desire for equal rights and depict themselves in the media as much abused, but many of them privately believe themselves to be superior to human kind, including Flanagan. The humans in *True Blood* vary more in the strength of their opinions, but even those who are pro-vampire rights are anxious about how such legislation would affect them and their safety. Vampires are apex predators playing prey; humans are prey posturing as, if not quite predators, then arbiters of culture and morality.

Bill Compton becomes the figure through which these convergent identities manifest. He is a vampire, but he is also both a former Confederate and a modern patriot. The way he courts Sookie is old fashioned and, as Victoria Amador points out, he possesses 'two of the most important elements of the Southern social hierarchical structure – old blood and fine manners.'³² Granted, the blood now in him is no longer human, but his name still bears strong familial ties to Bon Temps, and he remembers his human past clearly. He straddles two stereotypes, the Southern (romance) hero and the morally and physically compromised 'Other'. His attempts to integrate with his old-new neighbourhood are reasonably successful on a one to one level. However, when other residents name him, it is frequently prefixed with

³² Victoria Amador, 'Blacks and Whites: Trash and Good Country People in *True Blood*' in *True Blood: Investigating Vampires and Southern Gothic*, pp. 122-138 (p. 133)

the signifier of his difference and he becomes known not just as 'Bill' but as 'Vampire Bill.' Vampire Bill is consistently marked as different, however good his intentions or actions appear to be, because the humans around him cannot let him forget that he is, however fine his manners, a monster. His Otherness becomes hitched to his identity.

Through political, local and personal interactions, and whether consciously or subconsciously, both humans and vampires attempt to display and displace each other by constructing particular images of themselves in opposition to particular images of the 'Other.' Reginald Horsman states that 'Americans had long believed they were a chosen people, but by the mid-nineteenth century they also believed they were a chosen people with impeccable ancestry.'³³ Both vampire and human provide the yardstick against which to measure themselves and that 'Other', and both threaten the status quo of the other group, yet both lay claim to an established heritage. *True Blood's* southern context amplifies this claim; sometimes those different legacies, as we see in Bill's narrative, can amalgamate and a vampire can function in human society by adhering as best as they are able to human social codes and expectations. However, Bill's behaviour, his willingness or even preference to live amongst humans, is rare and, like his extreme whiteness, renders him even more suspicious than being stereotypically standoffish or aggressive might; his interest in and proximity to Sookie also has grave consequences for her and the rest of Bon Temps, as Jennifer Culver states, '[a]s long as human beings stay in their human setting, this new positive image of the vampire can become predominant. But once human beings enter the boundaries of the vampire world, the rules of the human playground disappear, and things get dangerous.'³⁴

Central to the themes in McGowan's *American Carnival* are concerns regarding who particular spaces or places belong to, and who belongs in certain spaces or places. David Sibley declares the human landscape a 'landscape of exclusion', where anxieties over social and physical boundaries are frequently rooted in issues of racial and economic stratification.³⁵ Sibley also acknowledges that, concurrent with this anxiety, crossing boundaries can be exhilarating and frightening, and that fear also accompanies not being able to categorize others adequately, particularly those that enter or operate in close proximity to our own sphere. Responses to this proximity relate to sensations of abjection concerning both people and objects that we begin to impose and experience from birth. However, visual

³³ Reginald Horsman, 'Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Anglo-Saxonism' in *Critical White Studies*, pp. 139-144, (p. 140)

³⁴ Jennifer Culver, 'Dressing Up and Playing Human: Vampire Assimilation in the Human Playground' in *True Blood and Philosophy*, pp. 19-31 (p. 31)

³⁵ David Sibley, 'Introduction' in *Geographies of Exclusion* London: Routledge, 1995) pp. ix-xviii (p. ix)

categorization is not always adequate, or accurate, when deciphering who or what we interact with or are willing to accept near us.

In *True Blood's* narrative the South is depicted as Sibley's 'landscape of exclusion', a region that manifests the racial 'Othering' and carnivalesque depictions of both those cast as abnormal and those that perceive themselves as regular. But if, as Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf state, '[s]ocial relationships are entwined with the physical environment', an examination of the more personal spaces depicted in *True Blood* and what happens when humans and vampires enter each other's space, is necessary.³⁶ Ueland and Warf also recognise that '[r]acial segregation in the South has a very long and ignoble history of reflecting residues of earlier rounds of segregation stretching back to slavery and the ongoing reproduction of a racial social order.'³⁷ The word residue is particularly significant when connected to Sibley's exploration of the psychology behind boundaries and transgression - that a sense of separation between the self and everything else begins in infancy through interactions with others and the world around us:

Thus, the boundary between the inner (pure) self and the outer (defiled) self, which is initially manifest in a distaste for bodily residues but then assumes a much wider cultural significance, derives from parents and other adults who are, by definition, socialized and acculturated.³⁸

A desire for physical separation, of the body from outside influence and effluvia, conceptualised as a question of purity versus contamination, is therefore learnt behaviour. However, Sibley goes on to explain that the avoidance or cleansing of these residues, what we want to keep separate from ourselves, can never be fully achieved. This causes anxiety; purity is sought but remains, to one degree or another, unobtainable. This combination of anxiety and abjection can be associated with places also, and geographical or physical boundaries and racial or minority groups within or without these boundaries. Through visual associations, these groups are related to these abject 'residues.' For instance, black has been read as a harbinger of dirt, disease or death, with its 'opposite', white, a signifier of the pure, clean and healthy, though white can also conjure up ghostly or sickly imaginings. What we

³⁶ Jeff Ueland and Barney Warf, 'Racialized Topographies: Altitude and Race in Southern Culture' *American Geographical Society*, 96, (2006) 50-78 (p. 51)

³⁷ Ueland and Warf, p. 56

³⁸ Sibley, 'Feelings About Difference' pp. 3-13 (p. 7)

see outside our personal space, bodily or geographically is viewed with ourselves as the referent and with a range of visual associations at work. A negative connection creates a need for the viewer to create distance for self-preservation.

Vampires shift from peripheral or fictional figures to present, material reality that has breached human society; as Maria Lindgren Leavenworth states, '[n]o longer threatening the outside borders of the nation the vampire is figured as already part of it, which entails, on the part of humans, different, albeit still fearful, forms of encounters.'³⁹ However, they are still burdened with specific negative associations: they appear only at night – a suspicious quality within the context of usual human behaviours; they are pale, a signifier of their 'deathliness'; they have fangs that hint at an animalistic nature and physiology; they drink blood, a fluid that gives life but that can also be tainted with 'invisible' diseases like HIV and hepatitis. Miscegenation is not just a Southern fear of shame, but a transgressive crossing of established borders. Again, sharing blood is akin to these discomfiting residues, that operate in both literal and socio-historic terms, sticky reminders of past cultural traumas. Through his or her fangs, a vampire 'gets under your skin' and you are robbed of your own bodily space, fluids and agency; you are made 'Other' through some loss of yourself. Sibley summarizes this by saying, '[t]he sources of bodily defilement are projected onto others, whose world is epidermalized.'⁴⁰ Skin is the final boundary between humans and vampires, just as it functions in human sexual and racial terms, except that here the threat of that boundary being crossed is heightened as vampire methods of penetration can be sexual, consumptive and possibly deadly. Instead of just a visual marker of difference, an external organ to a body that might be corrupted, skin becomes a more permeable, vulnerable boundary. Therefore, vampires are abject in *True Blood*, and the risk of their blood, or residue, mingling with that of a human is an innately troubling possibility. Because of this risk, a substantial number of humans wish to maintain social separation. The vampire fight for civil rights contests this desire.

Jennifer Culver suggests that in 'Sookie's world the actual threshold of a human being's home serves as one of the most powerful boundary markers between the human and vampire worlds.'⁴¹ Sookie's house is a central location in the show. It is the one place over which she feels she has some control, her private property and a source of comfort, familiarity and

³⁹ Maria Lindgren Leavenworth, 'What Are You? Fear, Desire, and Disgust in the Southern Vampire Mysteries and *True Blood*' *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 11 (2012) 36-54 (p. 37)

⁴⁰ Sibley 'Images of Difference' pp. 14-31 (p. 18)

⁴¹ Culver, p. 23

perceived safety. Place, defined by Tim Cresswell, 'is space invested with meaning in the context of power.'⁴² Typical of popular vampire lore, a vampire can only enter a human dwelling if he or she is invited in in *True Blood*. Because of this mythic limitation, Sookie can have vampires enter her home, or pushed out of it as and when she chooses. Cresswell goes on to suggest that home is a specific place 'where you can be yourself.'⁴³ At home, Sookie can relax, away from the interior thoughts and voices she constantly hears in the company of others. In her house she is not property but proprietor: if a vampire forms a connection with a human, for sex and sustenance, that human is designated 'theirs' and cannot be bitten by another vampire without the 'owner's' permission. Bill frequently has to state that 'Sookie is mine' to protect her from predation by other vampires, but he also says it to her in private, implying that he ascribes to a form of romantic, patriarchal ownership and reminding her and the viewer of his connections to the slave trade. In her own home, however, Sookie is her own person. The house's age and style, typical of the area, also invest it with comforting memories, both familial and of a recent past in which vampires weren't real.

This environment and her control over it are repeatedly threatened and disrespected throughout the first two series of *True Blood*, first by René, when he kills both Adele and Sookie's cat Tina, and by the intrusion of Adele's unwelcome mourners. In season two, the transgressor is Maryann Forrester, a maenad – a follower of the ancient Greek God Dionysus. By the end of the season, Maryann has taken control of most of the human residents of Bon Temps and induced them into a pagan revelry, ready for a sacrificial that involves killing Sam in order to summon her god. While Sookie is with Bill in Texas, Maryann and her horde take over her house and turn it into an epicentre for the coming of Dionysus (2:11).

When Sookie returns, we are presented with a shot of her ascending her staircase. She is centrally placed and is framed by walls covered in stains and detritus from the orgiastic, drunken exploits of the hypnotised revellers, and in dirt and foliage brought in by Maryann's influence. Previously the house had been light, clean and sun-filled; now, the outside has invaded the inside and the swampy, wooded landscape of Bon Temps has swiftly taken root in Sookie's home along with the abandon of Maryann's disciples. Sookie tells Maryann to get the 'creepy foreign stuff' out of her house, reiterating the idea that she will only tolerate transgression on her terms, when she, Sookie, authorises it. The uninvited, the amoral or

⁴² Tim Cresswell, *Place: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004) p. 12

⁴³ Cresswell, p. 24

immoral are not welcome. She likens the experience of this invasion to assault: ‘Gran lived and died in this house. People the exact opposite of who she was are defiling her. I was almost raped in Dallas, but this is so much worse.’

Later she finds a nest on her bed that contains an ostrich egg. The egg is a mockery of her house, a corruption of her nest. She has been displaced, her home disfigured. This season finale is reminiscent of Bakhtinian carnival, a removal of hierarchical structures and the subsequent abandon that accompanies that inversion, the crowd acting out their basest desires and impulses. Eventually, Maryann is tricked and killed by Sam, with the help of Bill, releasing everyone from her control. Sookie reclaims her home and her friends, then, having done so, she instructs Sam to get everyone off her lawn, commenting on how long it will take to return the house to its previous state, to get the ‘outside’, the taint of Maryann’s influence back where it should be, away from her. The people who Maryann can’t control, Sam, Bill and Sookie, a shapeshifter, a vampire and a telepath, are ironically agents of normalcy here, and reinstate the status quo. In doing this, they also refocus the narrative on its prescient issue – the tensions between vampires and humans – by the end of the series.

Bill’s residence, the ‘Old Compton House’, in contrast to Sookie’s home, becomes statelier and refined as *True Blood* goes on. It starts life in a state of disrepair, the paint chipped, and heat perished, the wood cracked. Bill returns to it once the last of his descendants has past, leaving him as next of kin. He re-inherits the house and sets about repairing it and returning it to its former glory. The building is a former plantation house and such a refit raises further questions about the delegation of space. In Steven Hoelscher’s study of home owners in Natchez, Mississippi, that have resurrected such houses as part of the Natchez Garden Club, he notes the owner’s competitiveness, their focus on having the best antiques and the most authentic or ornate interior displays and what these objects say about American progression:

Such stories of the white-pillared past – narratives that focus exclusively on a patrician lineage, specific gender roles, furniture, and architecture – invariably come at the expense of the people who made such extravagant landscapes possible.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Steven Hoelscher, ‘The White-Pillared Past: Memory and Race in the American South’ in *Landscape and Race in the United States*, ed. by Richard H. Schein (New York: Routledge, 2006) pp. 39-71 (p. 54)

This focus on aesthetics and gentility privileges certain histories and narratives and excludes or ignores others, namely the slave economy that provided the labour for that history and cultural landscape, and the wealth needed to construct and preserve it. Bill's former home is part of that 'big house' narrative, a building that dominated the landscape and people around it. In bringing it back to life, Bill constructs a similar narrative in regard to his own second existence, and both he and his home act as antebellum antiques, as Hoelscher suggests: '[i]n Natchez and throughout the American South, the past and present tangle in a complex web of political, economic, and cultural relationships that speak to the region's ongoing struggle of identity.'⁴⁵

The inherent associations of power, oppression and the 'blacking out' of those very associations by home owners (of which Bill is a fictional counterpart) are significant when compared with the disruption of the more modest Stackhouse residence and the visual emphasis McGowan places on race relations. The two homes are separated by a graveyard that houses some of the Compton family and notably Bill's own memorial stone. To reach Bill and the big house, Sookie must physically walk amongst the dead. The reminder that Bill and his home are not new to the neighbourhood, and that they are tainted by time and the building's former function, is always present and must be confronted each time the couple visit each other. The graveyard is also a boundary that, in her crossing, incites anxiety and excitement in Sookie. Passing through it, she steps into the dangers of the vampire world and also moves toward her first sexual encounters as the relationship between her and Bill develops, which is pathologized before its even begun by her having to literally walk over Bill's grave to meet him.

Bill knows how to use the home to his advantage. Sibley posits that '[t]he social positioning of the self means that the boundary between self and Other is formed through a series of cultural representations of people and things which frequently elide so that the non-human world also provides a context for self-hood.'⁴⁶ By taking up residence next to the Stackhouse home, Bill pre-emptly his proprietary relationship with her, and displays his power, wealth, lineage and intentions through his house. His refurbishments reinforce these intentions; he has the economic means to get such work done and emphasises his heritage by making it plain he intends to settle in Bon Temps, his original residence when human, as if it is his birth right. If Sookie's house reads as symbol of 'simple country living,' Bill's reads

⁴⁵ Hoelscher, p. 41

⁴⁶ Sibley, p. 10

first a symbol of a slave economy; then, in its dereliction, it stands for the postbellum reconstruction era when the Southern economy was poor, and the region struggled with its injured identity, a landscape gone to seed. Finally, with Bill's intervention, we see a form of Redemption (through Restoration), as a local man ploughs money into a relic and it becomes a modernised seat of power once more.

However, their relationship is more complicated than this chronology suggests. Again, there is subversion here – Bill is now vampire. The 'Other' has taken up residence in a former symbol of the dominant population's success. If Bill is no longer part of that population, we must consider how his assuming this geographical and economic position of authority might affect the humans of Bon Temps. Bill is operating effectively and acceptably in two worlds. When a nest of vampire associates of his, who are more indulgent of their appetites, move in to the neighbourhood, an element of 'not in my back yard' erupts and the house is burnt down, killing the nest and a fangbanger. Bill's willingness to, on the surface at least, play human, to mainstream and preserve custom, means he is tolerated, albeit uncomfortably, by the locals. By moving into the big house, he also creates a physical distance from other Bon Temps residents, excluding Sookie; he 'carnivalizes' himself by highlighting his difference and his novelty through his home. In essence, he gothicises himself, and utilises the vampire stereotype – that they live in lonely, old ruins, crumbling with the weight of feudal histories - to remove himself to an acceptable extent from human society; moving into a suburb or flat block would have been a more subversive act.

Public places or historical buildings often act as 'the locus of collective memory', according to Cresswell.⁴⁷ Bill's refurbishment triggers this memory; he both displays himself and his influence using his home and its anchor to the past and displaces himself through its physical difference to the homes around it and its visual and fictional associations with vampire lore. We cannot say if this is a deliberate act – perhaps Bill desires and responds to roots like anyone else might and is simply looking for what drives human home-making – '[m]any people all over the world do invest (in non-reactionary ways) in a search for comparative fixity.'⁴⁸ But this search brings to life past social issues and drags them forward into the present – a vampire is brazenly stepping into the human community and taking control of a symbol of dissipated power, whether it used to be his family home or not. This collective memory and knowledge, and the elision between racial histories and common

⁴⁷ Cresswell, p. 61

⁴⁸ Cresswell, p. 74

conceptions and misconceptions about vampires, gathered through the longstanding social production of mythology, converge under one roof in Bill's house. Both confrontational and familiar. Bill is able to use this mythology, and his status as mythical or supernatural being, to repress and hide the effects of its more disquieting truths.

Another location integral to *True Blood* is *Fangtasia*, Eric and Pam's 'vampire bar' in Shreveport. When Sookie first enters she says, '[t]his feels a little bit like what a vampire bar would look like if it were a ride at Disney World.' (1:4). In *Fangtasia*, it is vampire culture that is merchandised for human consumerism: the club plays death metal and electro-euphoric music, has a distinctive red and black colour scheme, employs vampire table-dancers and club-goers dress in the PVC, lace, corsets and straps associated with the Goth and BDSM scenes. Eric, only half-pantomiming the feudal lord status his kind have bestowed on him, sits on a throne inviting 'tribute', summoning those he likes the look or smell of and kicking away those he doesn't.

George Fredrickson suggests that 'stereotypes themselves are important historical phenomena. If they tell us little that is reliable about the object of such conceptions, they may reveal a great deal about those who hold them.'⁴⁹ *Fangtasia* then is another exaggeration of what humans perceive vampires to be, or be into – an exaggerated play on the trappings of death, pain, sexual predilection and perversion. The club, instead of using the 'gothic castle' trope, tunes into a different one, the glamour of the vampire, the lurid, hedonistic, licentious element of their mythology. Eric, Pam and their vampire clientele perform hyperbolised vampire stereotypes, fully aware of what attracts humans to vampires – sex, exoticism, danger. These elements though are sanctioned within the club and controlled by the public nature of the space and the apparent legislation placed upon running it: police keep a close watch on its activities.

However, to the humans that flock to the bar, the *Fangtasia* experience appears to be an exciting, liberating one, a rekindling of Bakhtinian carnival activities that 'celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order.'⁵⁰ Visitors and tourists can partake in the exoticism of the vampire, be used by one, become the 'lower', base creature within that designated club space and time. When they leave they in all likelihood return to their normal human lives, safe in the assumed knowledge that vampires are not fully

⁴⁹ George Fredrickson, 'White Images of Black Slaves (Is What We See in Others Sometimes a Reflection of What We Find in Ourselves?)' in *Critical White Studies* pp. 38-45 (p. 39)

⁵⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) p. 10

integrated or politically enfranchised and cannot move freely at all times of the day. If, as Sibley states, ‘carnavalesque events confirm their subordination,’ *Fangtasia* appears to reaffirm human dominance through licensing and catering to human indulgence in vampire culture.⁵¹ It is primarily for the pleasure of humans, on the surface at least.

Embracing this persona, one that is both exaggerate and reduced, in public life is advantageous as it allows vampires to operate a legitimate commercial enterprise. In Eric’s case, it gives him the opportunity to display and enjoy his status as Sheriff, and to ultimately come into contact with humans who might allow him to engage in sexual and gastronomic contact behind the scenes. However, behind the scenes at *Fangtasia* is another matter, more dangerous than such cartooning suggests. Below the ground floor of the club is a dungeon complete with moving metal wheel to which humans who displease Eric are chained. The carnivalized portrayal of the vampire world within the club masks Eric’s true nature and agenda. More controlled and practical than Edgington, he still holds a derogatory view of humans, and functions as a realistic barometer of vampire attitudes in general. He and Pam view the humans that frequent or staff *Fangtasia* as pathetic, desperate or in possession of a death wish. They are there to be used. The ‘self-Othering’ he and Pam participate in disguises the very real danger they pose to the human club goers; human consumerism is exploited for vampire consumerism, and humans enamoured with vampire culture are effectively displayed for vampire club-goers to pick and choose from like meat in a butcher’s window.

This duality again recalls prevalent antebellum stereotypes. Fredrickson states that ‘[w]hat was truly universal about the black slave stereotype was its inherently dichotomous or contradictory nature.’⁵² If ‘Sambo’ was the ‘official’ stereotype of the black slave, dependent, childish, genially simple, then ‘savage’ was that of the runaway or even free black. Pro-abolitionists, who argued this second image was a falsity, were countered by the idea that if blacks inclined more toward the ‘sambo’ personality then, if freed they would fail to thrive away from the guidance and provision of their masters. If, as in *True Blood*, humans have thrust equally reductive and generalised images onto vampires, because of a mythological past disassociated from reality, it makes sense that vampires, who have far more personal and social agency than a pre- or post-war black American would have had, utilise that stereotype for their own benefit.

⁵¹ Sibley, p. 46

⁵² Fredrickson, p. 39

Fangtasia represents the dichotomy of vampire culture and vampire public relations, the difference between real vampire life and mainstreaming. On the surface the club is an attempt to accommodate and create an image of what humans want vampires to be, a real fiction, and a distillation of the pleasurable, romantic or seductive aspects of their Gothic novel counterparts. Underneath, the only aim is to facilitate Eric and Pam's true ambition, to perpetuate their power base and to extra-legally torture or kill humans who wrong vampire kind. They play on human desires and on the human perception, perpetuated by the AVL, that vampires seek approval, adoration and acceptance to continue to get by in a world post-Great Revelation, whereas in reality vampires continue to operate under their own rules in a world that is distinctly violent, subversive and dangerous to humans. Fredrickson continues, '[a] stereotype 'legitimizes the status of one group relative to another, but becomes the vehicle for overt and active hostility only when the subordinate group is seen as getting out of 'its place.'⁵³

By appearing to stay in 'their place', in an industry designated appropriate for them - the night time club scene - Eric and Pam offer a visual display of 'Otherness' to reassure humans that while exotic and real, they lack real social bite; that they operate more as arbiters of a trashy subculture than as superior separate species. Like Bill with his home, they turn McGowan's theory of American carnival, the visual method of demarcation, in on itself, and display themselves to displace attention away from the reality of the vampire, their amoral, dangerous hungry selves.

The patterns of American carnival are inherently present in *True Blood*, used by both human and vampire to construct racial identities in locations like *Fangtasia* and Bon Temps, and in the South and America as a whole. Stereotypes and images coloured and created by prejudice are utilised to differentiate one identity from another, and to separate vampire and human physically and culturally while, on media and political platforms, attempts are made to mesh their cultures. As Sibley states, '[i]t is convenient to have an alien other hovering on the margins.'⁵⁴ The Great Revelation unifies human kind and opens up poorly buried narratives of the Southern past once more. It also gives vampires a political cause. However, while humans apply stereotypes to display and displace vampires, and exclude them from a complete social integration, vampires create carnivalized images of themselves, based on human visual expectations, to displace attention away from their true cultural and societal

⁵³ Fredrickson, p. 41

⁵⁴ Sibley, p. 110

operations. Vampires appear to be much more conscious of the value of visual categorizations and the fear that comes with not being able to classify someone or something, because they survive and thrive by 'passing'. By marking themselves as 'vampire', and signposting elements of vampire culture that humans erroneously believe to be authentic while at same time verbalising a desire to integrate, by utilising both a stereotype and its negative, by cloaking their true selves in human-looking lives and livelihoods, vampires can dampen this fear and create a false sense of security. This 'oscillation of power', as Leavenworth calls it, both negates the original possibility of peaceful vampire-human co-existence and the notion of vampires as a prejudice-busting multicultural, multivalent group who just want to mainstream.⁵⁵ It suggests the monstrous 'Other' in *True Blood* isn't so much hovering at the edges as hiding in plain sight, with the physiological strength and malicious, or certainly amoral, intent, to get what it wants - access to human blood.

⁵⁵ Leavenworth, p. 52

You Cannot Fuck the Future, Sir. The Future Fucks You: Uncivilised Modernity and the Frontier ‘Other’ in David Milch’s *Deadwood*.

You would be forgiven for thinking David Milch’s *Deadwood* – set in a Black Hills mining camp between 1876 and 1877 – is a typical Western. It certainly looks like a genre piece, employing so many stock characters and imagery – marshals, railroads, revenge, whiskey, horses, Indians, outlaws – familiar to the Western catalogue that it risks looking like a tick-box exercise. As John Fargher states, ‘[w]e’re on the American Frontier of the late nineteenth-century with familiar characters acting out an equally familiar story about the coming of law and order to the West.’⁵⁶ Cabins and guns and saloons abound, but while Janet McCabe argues that ‘[r]esurrecting a classic American genre taps in part into a seemingly unappeasable desire for Wild West romanticism,’ *Deadwood* is, fundamentally, anything but romantic.⁵⁷ The series occupies a different branch of the genre to the classic Westerns produced from the late thirties up until the fifties (for instance John Ford’s *Stagecoach*, 1939 and *The Searchers*, 1956), the revisionist Westerns of the seventies (Arthur Penn’s *Little Big Man*, 1970 and Clint Eastwood’s *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, 1976), comedic and stylised spaghetti Westerns and the neo-Westerns of the nineties and noughties (Eastwood again with *Unforgiven*, 1992, Kevin Costner’s *Dances with Wolves*, 1990, and *Open Range*, 2003). Milch deprives the viewer of sweeping scenery, and of images of people honestly and diligently making their way in a wild but beautiful landscape. Jettisoned also are the gun fights at noon, stylised or recognisably choreographed violence and ‘Cowboys and Indians.’

The locus of *Deadwood* is instead the camp, a filthy, violent and disorderly town sprung up in Indian Territory (later South Dakota) or, as Karen R. Jones and John Willis state, ‘an asinine, grubby and grasping world far removed from the heroic landscapes of traditional fiction and Hollywood cinema.’⁵⁸ We follow its development throughout the show’s three seasons, from bare bones up-start town, through gold bonanzas, the installation of political officials in the camp, annexation, incorporation into America and its being overtaken by gold millionaire George Hearst. Its characters are equally filthy, violent and cutthroat, many of them based on the historical occupants of the real *Deadwood* camp of the 1870s, continuing

⁵⁶ John Mack Fargher ‘HBO’s ‘Deadwood’: Not Your Typical Western’ *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 57 (2007), 60-65 (p. 60)

⁵⁷ Janet McCabe, ‘Myth Maketh the Woman’ in *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, ed. by David Leary (London: I.B Tauris, 2006) pp. 59-77 (p. 77)

⁵⁸ Karen R. Jones and John Willis, *The American West: Competing Visions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009) p. 167

what McCabe identifies as a ‘hybrid tradition’, one that intertwines fiction with historical fact that has been central to the formation of the West, the myth of the frontier and, I would suggest, the Western genre that stems from them both.⁵⁹

Rommel-Ruiz posits that examples of the Western genre ‘use the tableaux of the American West to explore ideas about race relations, modernity, and the United States’ role in international politics.’⁶⁰ Milch himself has stated that he wrote the series to explore present issues, the historical setting of *Deadwood* providing, for him, the distance necessary to enable viewers to confront and comprehend current events. Certain critics, such as David Drysdale, have highlighted this allegorical function, drawing comparisons between the show’s focus on unfettered and corrupt commerce and its effect on human lives, and modern American markets, in particular those in play during the Bush Administration, 2001 – 2009; the show is, to Drysdale, a barely veiled critique of neoliberal ideology and late capitalism, and therefore a continuation of standard Western tropes being employed as symbolic stand-ins, cultural representatives for anything but themselves.⁶¹

Despite critical praise and multiple award nominations, *Deadwood* failed to hold on to its strong early ratings and was cancelled after three series. Although, as Fargher suggests, HBO’s subscription based audience are ‘up-market’ and ‘savvy about the way the series simultaneously employs and subverts the genre codes of the western,’ and as Patricia Nelson Limerick argues, ‘as a mental artefact, the frontier has demonstrated an astonishing stickiness and persistence’ and is ‘laden with positive associations’, this sustained subversion did not hold appeal for an American audience perhaps unable to completely give up on a romantic myth of a West so entrenched is it in their perceptions of that history, or to consider how their own individual and national identities are dependent upon that history.⁶²

Richard Slotkin, discussing frontier myth, states:

Its ideological underpinnings are those same ‘laws’ of capitalist competition, of supply and demand, of Social Darwinism, ‘survival of the fittest’ as a rationale for social order,

⁵⁹ McCabe p. 61

⁶⁰ Rommel-Ruiz p. 106

⁶¹ David Drysdale, ‘“Laws and Every Other Damn Thing”: Authority, Bad Faith, and the Unlikely Success of *Deadwood*’ in *Reading Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, pp. 133-144

⁶² Fargher p. 62, Patricia Limerick ‘The Adventures of the Frontier in the Twentieth Century’ in *The Frontier in American Culture, essays by Richard White and Patricia Limerick*, ed. by James R. Grossman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994) pp. 66-102 (p. 94)

and of ‘Manifest Destiny’ that have been the building blocks of our dominant historiogeographical tradition and political ideology.⁶³

The *Deadwood* camp is a microcosmic representation of the notion that capitalism and the ‘Wild West’ operate hand in hand historically and culturally and the effects and echoes of this still reverberate now. Histories and fictions of the West document, recreate and often idealise the race to the top, to strike gold, and the need for a hierarchy among even small, newly formed societies, however lowly or crass their inhabitants. Almost everyone and everything is rough and ready which, along with the promise of striking it rich, is framed as the appeal of the camp – a place outside of bureaucracy, taxation and governmental control. Milch himself suggests that ‘*Deadwood* is a show about how order arises out of the mud’ or ‘men coming together out of the most limited motives to create something larger than themselves’, and about proto-societal ambivalence to this progress.⁶⁴

In dragging itself out of the mud, figuratively if not literally, the camp in *Deadwood* conversely limits minority groups in the wake of its unstoppable advancement. I am interested in how gold, the arbiter of value, power and purpose in *Deadwood* and the force of both social progress and regressive violence (one often at the service of the other), affects its characters in the context of McGowan’s *American Carnival*: how *Deadwood*’s society is formed and who it is composed of if, according to McGowan, ‘the controlling hegemony within United States culture is insistently white, male, and economically advantaged’; how those that do not belong in this limited category are depicted and how they function within the show’s narrative.⁶⁵ Of particular significance is how the narrative and the visual production of *Deadwood* present the relationships between the dominant, white, male population and Native American and Chinese communities within the camp, and how these relationships fit into a narrative that charts the unrelenting march of civilisation, as well as how the spaces and places in which these factions exist, within and without the camp, help us interpret these relationships and their reflection of broader American history, taking into account migration and immigration histories also.

The 1870s were a transformative decade in the westward expansion of the United States. Triggered by the after effects of the Civil War, uncontrolled investment in the railroads and other economic factors that severely depleted bank reserves, depression hit the country in

⁶³ Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998) p. 15

⁶⁴ David Milch, *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2006) p. 135

⁶⁵ McGowan, p. x

1873. Problematic Reconstruction continued in a disjointed South, and in 1875 the last of the Sioux wars began. The gold rush and the economic possibilities it opened up were the thrust behind this chapter of the colonization of the American West and gold, according to David Milch, is the ‘totem’ around which the *Deadwood* camp and its inhabitants are organized. Even those who aren’t prospecting are in camp to make a living off of the back of the gold rush, as hoteliers, saloon owners, launderers and merchants.

This wealth, and the promise of further gold strikes, consequently pushed the country into the world market and engendered a self-congratulatory national mood. As Carol A. O’Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss state, ‘Capitalism emerged as the prevailing force in world history by the nineteenth-century and as an all-pervasive aspect of American life, especially in the West.’⁶⁶ However, this new giddy lurch of success was problematic, and issues of race, culture and immigration converged with anxieties over how best to secure America’s economic future.

In *Deadwood: Stories of the Black Hills*, a textual accompaniment to the show, Milch suggests that ‘a gold strike promises a social space where the promise that all men are created equal will finally be fulfilled, and every man-jack among them will be a king, outside the falsifying structures of social classes and legality.’⁶⁷ It is straightforward enough to read *Deadwood* along these lines; with its bonanza claims and isolation from the metropolis and state and civic restraints, the camp could be viewed as the Bakhtinian ‘second world and a second life outside officialdom’ where ‘all were considered equal’, a Jeffersonian town where, to borrow a phrase from *Deadwood* saloon owner Al Swearengen, everyone gets a ‘square shake.’⁶⁸ This is Mark Berrettini’s reading, in terms of state control and interpellation at least; he proposes that *Deadwood*’s subjects resist interpellation, that the ‘camp is a space where jailor and jailed might become partners or where a sheriff might overlook the past crimes of his condemned prisoner.’⁶⁹ The camp offers a fresh start, unconsolidated and outside the influence of national or organisational interests, and as the show progresses, ‘we do not see the clear success of law over criminality present in so many Westerns, but rather the operation of law alongside criminality to resist consolidation, outsiders, and interpellation.’⁷⁰ This resistance is challenged, however, and eventually overcome, in broad

⁶⁶ *The Oxford History of the American West* ed. Clyde A. Miller II, Carol A. O’Connor, Martha A. Sandweiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) p. 196

⁶⁷ Milch, p. 45

⁶⁸ Bakhtin, p.6

⁶⁹ Mark Berrettini, ‘No Law: *Deadwood* and the State’, *Great Plains Quarterly*, 27 (2007) 253-265 (p. 256)

⁷⁰ Berrettini, p. 261

financial and governmental terms if not in localised ones, by George Hearst's manoeuvres in the camp.

This aligns with a generally accepted understanding of the western experience - that of a regression into savagery necessarily followed by a (reluctant) return to civilisation and a renewed and revived America and American. The filth, foul language, farting, drinking, fucking, murder, the spilling and exchanging of bodily fluids could all operate as examples of Bakhtinian grotesque realism, the lowering of all that is high to a base, material, earthly level in which all participate. Swearingen's reliance on using a knife over a gun, Charlie Utter's flatulence and E.B Farnum's constantly sweaty palms all speak to the portrayal of the *Deadwood* camp as a place free from unnecessary social strictures and unnecessary manners.

Just as 'the influence of carnival spirit was irresistible', so too was the impulse to move westward and seek out opportunities away from a bureaucratic centre of control for many nineteenth-century Americans.⁷¹ Paul Wight and Hailin Zhou call Milch's *Deadwood* a 'backwater hell-on-earth' but it does appear, in one sense, to be a that great, mythologised leveller that scaffolds national misremembering of the region, a place that offers the same odds and pleasures to 'every man-jack.'⁷² Freedom from law and governance allows all of Milch's characters the space to become their basest, most human, most American selves in pursuit of gold, or 'the colour' as George Hearst calls it, meaning the camp becomes a mutable, shifting place out of reach of the controlling hand of the East.

If Milch's *Deadwood* embodies this spirit on first impression, it does not retain it. Swearingen and Bullock's failed attempts to resist the Hearst capitalist juggernaut ironically rely, as Berrettini states, on their using the apparatus of officialdom, interpellation and civilisation - elections, public health drives, education and religion - to stave off those very things in reality. The narrative amplifies Swearingen's advice for Lee, one of many of his opponents for which the sentiment seems equally applicable: 'My god, act civilised even if you ain't.' Swearingen, along with Bullock, must compromise, must model being good subjects, and must use the tools of civilisation to cling to independence from it for as long as possible against the eventually overwhelming tide of national influence and annexation.⁷³ Freedom turns out to be merely the mirage in the desert, and inevitably we soon find the camp is beholden to the hierarchical structures, power plays and exploitation its inhabitants

⁷¹ Bakhtin, p. 13

⁷² Paul Wright and Hailin Zhou, "Divining the Celestials": The Chinese Subculture of *Deadwood* in *Deadwood: A Western to Swear By* pp. 157-168 (p. 158)

⁷³ Berrettini, p. 261

were, in part, escaping, evident only two months after the town's inception; this reversion both recalls old tensions and creates new ones, and we find ourselves facing familiar genre concerns, primarily in the role and treatment of Native Americans. Long standing prejudice is most clearly revealed in characters' language. South Dakota tribes are referred to as 'savage fucking red-men', 'blood-thirsty', and 'godless heathen cocksuckers', and are treated, in an ongoing collective state of cognitive dissonance, with as much if not more disdain and disgust than the 'U.S fucking government'. The town's Chinese population come in for equally derogatory treatment, as do the camp's black, and disabled residents.

Swarengen, proprietor of the Gem Saloon, is the unofficial director of the camp's interests. He is also one of the most frequent, although not the only, purveyor of abusive and racist language - the whole town exhibits its prejudices openly. This vocabulary, and the intense focus on Al and his saloon - effectively the centre from which the camp is run - exposes as false the promise that Deadwood is a free-for-all and the West a cultural phenomenon that rendered every man equal. Instead, the camp reveals social structures that correlate explicitly with George Lipsitz's assertion that '[m]ore than the product of private prejudices, whiteness emerged as a relevant category in American life largely because of realities created by slavery and segregation, by immigration restriction and Indian policy, by conquest and colonialism'; white as a category in *Deadwood*, trumps equality as a concept.⁷⁴

When Sol Star tells business partner Seth Bullock '[e]ven in an Eden like this, wrongs sometimes occur,' (2:3), he is being sarcastic - Star is high from treatment of the bullet wound he sustained in episode one - but the idea of the West as possible paradise, or an 'Eden' on Earth, is significant within *Deadwood's* cultural and historical context. Roderick Frazier Nash states, '[t]he story of the Garden and it's loss embedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites.'⁷⁵ He goes on to explain that western attitudes towards wilderness, sprung from this biblical association, conceived it as 'the earthly realm of the powers of evil', necessary for freedom and 'spiritual catharsis', but not a place to remain indeterminately.⁷⁶ Nash argues that a foreign, wild environment was a threat to a man's survival and one that had to be overcome. Its forbidding physical characteristics became intertwined with a moral character or, more accurately, a lack thereof. The American wilderness was 'a cursed and chaotic wasteland' filled with wild

⁷⁴ George Lipsitz, 'The Possessive Investment in Whiteness: Racialized Social Democracy and the 'White' Problem in American Studies', *American Quarterly*, 47 (1995) 369-387 (p. 370)

⁷⁵ Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (London: Yale University Press, 2001) p. 15

⁷⁶ Nash, p. 24

creatures and wild men, a wasteful, vacuous place, its transformation into cultivatable land by white settlers only fit and right given its unleashed potential and the imminent dangers it posed in its untamed state. It was also imbued with the threat of its influence, and its latent ability to reduce once civilised pioneers into savages. Nash suggests that ‘[a]s a consequence, frontiersmen acutely sensed that they battled wild country not only for personal survival but in the name of nation, race, and God.’⁷⁷ Their very identities were at stake, their status as emissaries of the nation state wrapped up in their success or failure.

Star’s phrase is doubly suggestive, and the notion of Eden further compounded, given that Milch compares white treatment of Native Americans, and specifically the invasion of the Black Hills, to the concept of ‘Original Sin.’ In 1868, the United States Government signed the Treaty of Fort Laramie with different bands of Lakota, Dakota and Arapaho Indians. The treaty guaranteed the Black Hills to the Sioux (now known as the Lakota) as part of the Great Sioux Reservation, incorporating all of modern-day South Dakota west of the Missouri River. Chiefs Red Cloud and Spotted Tail signed; Crazy Horse and Sitting Bull refused. In the 1870s, President Grant’s Republican government walked a fine line between appeasing the military (Generals Sheridan and Sherman argued that the army should have a more substantial, interventive role in keeping order among the Native Americans), and social reformers and a Department of the Interior anxious to integrate Indians into a peaceful farming life on reservations, or, Edward Lazarus states, to ‘save the tribes by corralling them until they could be broken of their doomed culture.’⁷⁸

In 1874, General Custer, on order of Sheridan, carried out a reconnaissance of the Black Hills, looking to set up a new fort and, crucially, to search for gold. In previous years, civilian parties had ventured into the Hills to look for the very same, following strong rumours of gold in the region, but had been dissuaded and pushed back by a military that was in truth more sympathetic to their cause than that of the Indians whose land they were protecting. Custer found what he was looking for, but the Sioux would not sell the region for any figure near affordable. The government was presented with two completely incompatible motivations to reconcile. Lazarus asserts that the ‘Indians did not value gold; the Hills themselves were their treasure and they guarded it vigilantly.’⁷⁹ Their stake in the spiritual and domestic value of the land was at odds with those determined to mine the Hills for profit.

⁷⁷ Nash, p. 24

⁷⁸ Edward Lazarus, *Black Hills, White Justice: The Sioux Nation Versus the United States 1775 to the Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) p. 44

⁷⁹ Lazarus, p. 73

The government, unwilling to refuse access to the miners and anxious to procure the Hills, issued an ultimatum to the tribes: they were to return to their reservations from other parts of the territory where they were wintering or face repercussions. Poor weather prevented them from returning even if they had wanted to acquiesce. Consequently, the government declared that the tribes were to be considered hostile, the government reneged upon the Treaty and the Hills became fair game for settlers and prospectors alike.

Soon after, the Lakota and the Cheyenne, led by Crazy Horse, defeated Custer and the Seventh Cavalry at the Battle of Little Bighorn in 1876. This victory proved to be a profound cultural shock to the nation. As Slotkin states, ‘‘Custer’s Last Stand’ went against all expectations: even Friends of the Indian had not supposed the redskins could do no more than die defiantly under the sabres of the cavalry.’⁸⁰ Calls to avenge Custer’s death soon followed. President Grant expanded the army’s jurisdiction to include not only the hostile Lakota but also the many thousands of Indians who had stayed peacefully at the reservations, away from the fighting. Threatened with rations being cut off and a heavy military presence at their agencies, the Lakota were forced to permanently sign away their lands.⁸¹ Their victory at Little Big Horn was short lived and Custer’s plans came to fruition, as Al Swearingen observes in *Deadwood*, ‘Custer sorted out the fucking Sioux. Crazy Horse bought his people a good fucking ass whooping’ (1:3).

According to Milch’s reading, by invading the Hills Custer, his cavalry, pioneers and miners violated the Treaty of Fort Laramie and the Lakota’s sacred land; they committed a form of ‘original sin’, and found themselves in the wilderness, outside of civilisation. However, in Milch’s *Deadwood*, as was the case in the real town, civilisation is rebuilt around the sinners and the wilds are tamed, transformed into a new Eden of commerce and development. Perversely, it is the Native American who becomes cast out, removed from their garden, limited to reservations and faced with punitive measures should they return.

Cresswell’s concepts are again applicable here. If, as he describes, ‘we do not live in landscapes – we look at them,’ then landscape is, at best, something to be explored in visual terms only, a scenic backdrop without significance beyond its aesthetic value. At worst, it is laden with the perception that it is intangible, a space lacking specifics, ‘a realm without meaning’, stretches of treacherous topography occupied by dangerous peoples without borders or edges, bar those of the towns that huddle within it. Conversely, ‘places’, like these

⁸⁰ Slotkin, p. 9

⁸¹ Lazarus, p. 92

towns or camps, 'are very much things to be inside of' and are given meaning beyond the visual through occupation by desirable inhabitants.⁸²

The camp in *Deadwood* is defined by its separation to the landscape wilderness around it and this separation is depicted, somewhat ironically given that we are dealing with great swathes of plains that have become one indistinct visual plane, through obfuscation. Throughout *Deadwood's* three seasons we very rarely see any environment other than the interiority of the camp. The pilot offers one wide, establishing shot as the camera pans from a wagon train approaching the camp to the settlement itself, nestled in the hills, depicting in a moment both the town's isolation and the settlers' drive to reach it. As the show goes on, we catch glimpses of 'landscape' from the camp, but it is very rarely the intended focus of the shot. It is peripheral, insignificant, despite its expanse, an undefined mass where it is the intricacies of position and power in the camp's society that matter. Any reference to the landscape is one rooted in notions of dominance, abuse and resource extraction. Cresswell continues: '[a]t other times, however, seeing the world through the lens of place leads to reactionary and exclusionary xenophobia, racism and bigotry.'⁸³

If landscape within the Western oeuvre is solely to be examined from a distance, or ignored completely, and wilderness to be escaped, controlled or reconnoitred, then it follows that those that occupy such spaces (not places) are to be treated concurrently. After the renege of the Treaty of Fort Laramie, Custer's defeat and a peace forcibly engineered with the down-trodden Lakota, the derogatory terms used by the characters in *Deadwood* after these events, nearly all referring to dirt and non-Christian beliefs, illustrate the removal of Indians from this Judeo-Christian, market-driven Eden and the manner in which they are conceptualised as a direct threat to it.

If *Deadwood* functions as a distillation of the West, and the Western is the stage of national American history, the lack of Native American visibility within the show is significant. Native Americans are more a topic of conversation in the show rather than a presence, and even then, characters are mostly passing comment about the camp's progress relative to their gradual submission. McGowan argues that the process of Westward expansion was an 'Americanisation' of the land that by extension facilitated the spread of America's carnival impulse.⁸⁴ The compulsion to expel Native Americans, to disassemble their culture and to perceive them as wild 'Other' was part of this progression, just as

⁸² Cresswell, p. 11

⁸³ Cresswell, p. 11

⁸⁴ McGowan, p. 3

pioneers both conquered and utilised, vilified and romanticised the landscape wilderness they encroached upon. Again, Swearingen crudely encapsulates this compulsion in saying ‘Ass fucking the dirt-worshippers’ is a ‘pleasure beyond gain’ (2:2); the exploitation and expulsion, the displacing and then un-placing of Native American people offers the settler a reassurance of their own necessary and natural racial dominance and of their geographical superiority, a chance to partake in, however removed, the carnivalized economic and cultural mockery of the defeated enemy.

In the same episode, Swearingen and Merrick, editor of the *Black Hills Pioneer*, discuss American expansion. Merrick expresses a belief that a ‘manifest destiny’ for the white race was at play in the region’s rapid development, a force that rendered the conquering of both ‘savage’ land and people inevitable. Al counters with the suggestion that this progression, and its effect on the Lakota, had been motivated primarily by ‘further commerce.’ Both ideas were at work in the territories in the 1870s. A perceived national (racial) superiority and a willingness to exploit resources and racial minorities worked in tandem, integral to the propagation of the American carnival impulse. In the pilot episode, Swearingen attempts to cover up the fact that he had employed road agents to rob and murder ‘square heads’ (Norwegians) on the road out of the camp, and for them to make it look like Indian work; to achieve this, he places a fifty dollar bounty on the head of every Native American brought into town and subsequently rouses racist leanings in his saloon clientele and a collective will to violence against an easy scapegoat for a violent crime he orchestrated, creating a diversion from his corrupt motivations, a repeated historical feature in the U.S and an echo of the events surrounding the Fort Laramie Treaty.

Swearingen acts an example of the dangers of regression when a supposedly civilised man enters the wilderness; he is the figurehead of white, male colonial power, the supposed antithesis to those groups he exploits. Originating from Manchester, England, the character retains traces of the industrial and metropolitan ties he himself is escaping in *Deadwood* as he treads a very fine line between piratical cutthroat and civic ‘man-of-the-town.’ We commonly see him in close-up, standing on the balcony of his saloon from which he can see a good portion of the camp’s residents go about their business; he makes this his business as necessary. He is a man compulsively in charge, even if this means cleaning blood stains from his own floor. As Jason Jacobs states, ‘[t]he balcony is the major space from which

Swearengen monitors the Deadwood camp; it represents his distance, his authority, and his purview of power.⁸⁵

He, and this site and symbol of his near-omnipresence in the camp (he uses spies and informers to supply information regarding what he cannot see or attend to), his balcony, are right in the centre of town according to the map in Milch's *Stories of the Black Hills*, which provides the layout of the camp in the series. Each major business or residence is labelled as is the graveyard, the mining area and the waterways and roads. However, the town's borders – Indian Territory – are blank, undefined spaces as they are in the show, the beauty and importance of the Black Hills abstracted or visually withheld from the audience through the show's confined setting, paralleling the absence of the Lakota within the narrative.

This map is important in and of itself. Geoff King states, 'the map is more than merely a passive representation of the territory. That which is marked on the map is affirmed as real'.⁸⁶ A map is a record and a judgement, a document and a form of communication: 'to be included on the map is to be granted the status of reality or importance. To be left off is to be denied.'⁸⁷ This enmeshes with Sibley's understanding of the power plays existent in the appropriation and designation of space: 'power is expressed in the monopolization of space and the relegation of weaker groups in society to less desirable environments.'⁸⁸

This designation was made manifest in the movement of Indians to reservations - they were removed from an ancient place they understood to be theirs and that was of spiritual value to them, yet the show's white inhabitants and their domiciles are present and marked on the map of Deadwood despite its relative newness in geographical and sociological terms. Sibley adds that 'exclusion may be an unintended consequence of commercial development.'⁸⁹ In the case of Milch's depiction of Deadwood, it is an intended consequence - the economic opportunities present in the land (gold) necessitate the expulsion of the Lakota from the Hills. As we witness the camp's gold claims develop in scale over the show's run, we hear less about the Lakota in the narrative and are given more images of man's dominion over nature and his canny extraction of its resources with new mining and communication technologies; Native Americans fade swiftly from their already limited narrative significance. In reality, the government engineered a situation that rendered the Lakota 'hostile' through

⁸⁵ Jason Jacobs, 'Al Swearengen: Philosopher King' in *Deadwood: A Western to Swear By*, pp. 11-21 (p. 20)

⁸⁶ Geoff King, *Mapping Reality: An Exploration of Cultural Cartographies* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996) p.

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⁸⁷ King, p. 18

⁸⁸ Sibley, p. ix

⁸⁹ Sibley, p. xii

the reservation system, effectively turning the Hills against them. In *Deadwood*, they are all but wiped off the map, not even present in the landscape wilderness they symbolically 'belong' in but removed altogether from social and topographical arenas.

In 1893, the Chicago Columbian Exposition celebrated the 400th anniversary of Columbus arriving in the western hemisphere. It featured two of the most well-known men to historicise and mythologise Western history, American historian Frederick Jackson Turner and former civilian scout with the U.S army-turned showman, William 'Buffalo Bill' Cody. These two men presented two competing interpretations of the history, character and origin of the 'Wild West.' Richard White suggests that 'Turner's history was one of free land, the essentially peaceful occupation of a largely empty continent and the creation of a unique American identity', a kind of natural osmosis of people into an empty, untapped space.⁹⁰

In his essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, Turner stated that '[i]n short, at the frontier, the environment is at first too strong for the man. Little by little he transforms the wilderness, but the outcome is not old Europe.'⁹¹ According to Turner, America was peacefully moulded out of a landscape that, although at first unmalleable, submitted itself to the steadying hand of the pioneer settler like a horse being broken in. In his essay, as in *Deadwood*, Indians are near written out of the scene altogether, given a bit-part in the grand narrative of the West that set man's dominion over the natural world as its prescient idea.

Buffalo Bill took a different approach, as White notes: 'Cody's Wild West told of a violent conquest, of wresting the continent from the American Indian peoples who occupied the land.'⁹² In his Wild West 'extravaganza', Cody depicted events from recent history such as the running of the Pony Express, pioneers being protected from Indian marauders, and even Custer's last stand. He even used real Native Americans as part of his presentation, Sitting Bull most famously, whose visions had inspired Crazy Horse to engage with Custer at Little Bighorn. A performance, the presentational negative of Turner's academic approach, Cody depicted a Wild West in which white settlers had merely responded to Indian aggression in their conquest of the land, making the frontier a story of white self-preservation, a show of resilient, survivalist spirit in the face of a murderous, wild people.

The dichotomy of the Indian role as presented by these two observers of the western scene echoes McGowan's notion of the display and displacement of the American 'Other' as

⁹⁰ White, p. 9

⁹¹ Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* (London: Penguin, 2008) p. 4

⁹² White, p. 9

enactment of the American carnival impulse. This was evidenced further by the showground environment it played out in, and in Buffalo Bill's reliance on using real Native American warriors as actors in his visual tale of the Wild West. White observes, 'This was the most complicated kind of mimesis. Indians were imitating imitations of themselves.'⁹³ Such 'actors' were obscuring their own selves and memories in payment for depicting Cody's perception (or certainly the most profitable, popular perception) of their people, their reality defined in Chicago by a previous aggressors' vision of their lives. Sitting Bull rode around the ring as the show's star turn and signed autographs, a paid-up employee of the 'white version of events' and visual hostage to white attendees' expectations. In Buffalo Bill's show, as in McGowan's American carnival, 'Otherness was a performed identity', a show put on for the white, ticket buying public.⁹⁴

Turner, at the same fair, had reduced Native Americans to a peripheral role in the whole span of Western settlement, figuring them as less significant than the non-sentient land they occupied. Land at least could be tamed, a wilderness could be reworked into a paradise; despite their connection to those lands, Native American weren't worth addressing as they had no inherent value. McGowan states:

It is within the homogenous category of American whiteness that any possible potential for utopia within US culture is contained. American carnival's displacement and display of the deemed subversive isolates such 'Others' as elements capable of disrupting the American utopic experience.⁹⁵

In the case of Cody, Native American 'Others' are disruptive, their aggression to whites, their natural leaders and conquerors untenable. In Turner's narrative, they are disruptive to the story of man's control over the natural environment and are written out as a result. In Chicago, 1893, Native Americans were both 'neutralized' (regarding their absence in one narrative and their much-replayed defeat in another) and 'glamourized', with Sitting Bull's token appearance in the show ring a visual confirmation of his defeat, a form of prostration and by extension a memorial of an obsolete Indian culture caricatured and carnivalized to sure-up white superiority through popular, low-brow entertainment. Both Cody and Turner subsequently became dominant figures in competing myths of how the West was won. The

⁹³ White, p. 35

⁹⁴ McGowan, p. 28

⁹⁵ McGowan, p. 16

Native American population, on the other hand, was used, ignored and misrepresented in these two different cultural shrines to the white frontier.

Deadwood reflects both of these discourses within its narrative; again, the Lakota appear very little visually, their role in the history of the Black Hills seemingly a prop to the prioritised narrative of the camp's development. We only see two in the entire three seasons of the show and the first is dead when he is brought to camp (1:4), a victim of the bounty Al Swearengen placed on them in the pilot. His decapitated head is carried into town held by his hair, his body left behind as only the scalp has monetary value. This plays out during the furore caused by the assassination of Wild Bill Hickok. The montage used to show these two events makes the contrast between Hickok and the Native American clear: the screen appears to blur or cloud slightly as we see the Lakota's head and hair waved around in the rider's hand, and clarity is only restored when the scene returns to the depiction of Hickok's death. This softened focus also creates a watery appearance on screen, as if rider and Indian are caught in a tide, a convergence of televisual aesthetic and identity, whereas the town's reaction to Hickok's death is depicted through the clearly rendered and tightly edited individual responses of those who knew him, at the expense of the ignored Indian, his murder inconsequential in comparison with that of a sharp-shooter, marshal and myth.

The next episode (1:5) reveals a man selling tufts of Indian hair for twenty-five cents each. This selling-off of body parts parallels the acquisitive souvenir taking that occurred during military massacres that took place during the Indian Wars, such as Sand Creek (1864), where the military harvested objects from battlefields that were later stored at national museums such as the Smithsonian and the Natural History Museum, and the lynching of blacks, commonly in the Southern states. As with lynching, teeth, finger bones and genitals were also taken from the victims and often kept or sold as mementos of a ritualistic and cathartic violent event that were supposed to purge anxieties over miscegenation and undefined racial hierarchies as well as deal expediently with socio-economic issues. This is in part an American adaptation of imported European punitive practices, as Richard Trexler, plotting the gendered violence that in fact shaped the European conquest of the Americas, states, '[t]he ancient practice of quartering or decimation of a corpse is, conceptually at least, the punishment that best helps us understand that sexual

punishments commonly fit within a larger body of insults that treat a victim ‘as if’ it was something or someone else.’⁹⁶

This ‘something else’ was a consequential and reductive sequence; such ‘slaughterhouse [...] practice’, Trexler continues, was a process that first emasculated or desexualised a person, to dehumanise them and finally to render them as dirt, base, not only not human but an abject organic ‘thing.’⁹⁷ These corporeal tokens were small, and sufficiently disembodied enough to remind the collector/owner of their victory whilst not substantial enough to act as uncomfortable reminders of a victim’s humanity or individuality. The removal of a person’s genitals took on a special significance, a symbolic dead-ending of the victim’s generative capabilities, and by extension that of their race or social group; it became a post-mortem stand against the perpetuation of the victim’s culture. Centuries on from its conquest, the United States repeated this destructive, and deconstructive, practice for the same ends – power and the maintenance of hierarchies.

McGowan relates this bodily focus to Bakhtinian carnival and its use of the grotesque and corporeal exaggeration in the carnival space. Bakhtin conceives that ‘[t]he grotesque conception of the body is interwoven not only with the cosmic but also with the social, utopian, and historic theme, and above all with the theme of the change in epochs and the renewal of culture.’⁹⁸ The difference again though, between European and American Carnival is clear: this American ‘atomisation’ of the body, whilst it might be productive for the seller, is purely destructive for the Indian.⁹⁹ The deconstruction of his body brings death and further indignity, as pieces of him are touted as wares by a white man who is complicit in profiting from his destruction, and part of a stabilising, homogenising, Americanising force rather than the destabilising, freeing and joyfully grotesque depictions and practices of European festive carnival. American carnival’s method again seeks to uphold very specific prescriptions of social, utopic and historical understandings. Bakhtin’s carnival is generative and celebratory; McGowan’s American carnival is punitive and employs and perpetuates a form of morbidity that contributes to its restrictive and repressive mode of operation.

The seller’s business is suddenly ended when Bullock throws the hair into a fire in a fit of rage. The root of his anger is at first unclear, seemingly just as much a fit of temper against a non-legitimate merchant (Bullock also loses his patience at the sale of ‘soap with a prize

⁹⁶ Richard Trexler, *Sex and Conquest: Gendered Violence, Political Order, and the European Conquest of the Americas* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995) p. 17

⁹⁷ Trexler, p. 17

⁹⁸ Bakhtin, p. 324

⁹⁹ McGowan, p. 9

inside’) as any moral outrage over misuse of a corpse. However, Bullock later has his own encounter with a Native American. When he goes out into the Territory to look for Jack McCall, who has just been acquitted of Hickok’s murder in a sham trial designed to give the right appearance of the camp to the powers that be, Bullock is attacked by a lone Indian and violently beaten before he manages to stove his opponent’s head in with a rock (1:5).

During the attack, the camera primarily presents Bullock’s perspective – we see close-ups of the aggressor’s face and waving hair as he lunges into view, again the camera sliding and in and out of focus this time to mimic the injured Bullock’s impaired vision. Whilst we later find out Bullock was attacked as he had, in the words of Hickok’s friend Charlie Utter, interfered with the Indian’s ‘big fucking medicine’, and while Bullock and Utter place him, as Charlie states is right and proper, on a burial structure facing west, the fatal beating Bullock deals out seems to change the sheriff, to regenerate him. The act of aggression is invigorative, and seemingly helps Bullock come to terms with the death of Hickok and regain composure enough to bring McCall to task.

Though the fight is depicted as fair and Bullock acknowledges their inherent similarity, that the Indian ‘was just trying to live, same as me’, that preferential weight is given to Bullock’s point of view in an interaction that consists solely of violence, recalls the defensive narrative of Cody’s Wild West – a reactionary response to an attack based on the illogical or un-Christian beliefs of a person whose belief system and culture was destined to be beaten or ousted. Whilst Bullock and Utter do the right thing by the Indian in death, he still must die, as collateral damage in Bullock’s quest to secure justice for the white Hickok.

The head of the Indian in episode four also ends up as ‘prop and ploy’ for Al Swearngen. Having paid the bounty on the head, he places it in a card box and keeps it to converse with. ‘Chief’ is both hidden and subjected to becoming the conduit for Al’s showy ventriloquism in these one-sided conversations, safe to interact with now that all that is left of him is a ‘severed, fucking head.’ The danger he once posed is neutralized and he is used by Swearngen as a silent audience for his wry commentary on the camp’s business and occupants, for instance in Al comparing ‘Chief’ to Johnny Burns, a foolish lackey: ‘Dead, without a body, you still outstrip him for intelligence.’ In his dismembered silence, Chief seems to embody another stereotype, most commonly found in revisionist Westerns of the seventies, of the wise, sage Indian, and of a wronged, peaceful people incompatible with modern world. He is given a strange form of respect, but a sort only possible in death, as is the case with Bullock and Utter’s encounter.

Al treats 'Chief' as a near-equal, a silent partner (though it is never confirmed that 'Chief' is an actual chief – his identity, beyond race, is left completely undefined); his is a reproving presence through which Al can self-identify his own flaws without having to expose them to the living. Al realizes in season three that what white settlement of the Black Hills did to the Native American population is now being done to the residents of the camp; George Hearst's voracious commercial ambition, government connections and dangerous, obsessive completism jeopardises the status quo and the safety and permanence of the camp and its residents. Berrettini states that '[t]he program represents cooperation between Bullock and Swearingen as the vanguard of the camp's opposition to consolidation and its attempts to enter the United States in a manner that will, for instance, maintain the individual property rights that exist in the camp (a claim that overlooks the camp's illegal status within designated American Indian land).'¹⁰⁰ Al makes excuses to Chief (who is upgraded in season three to a more discreet wooden box) for his failings in manoeuvring against Hearst in the interests of the camp, while still laying the blame for the decline of Indian populations in the Hills and nationally at the feet of those very populations: '[y]ou're not exactly one to be levelling criticisms on the score of being slow to adapt. You fucking people are the original slow fucking learners.'

When bartender Tom Nuttall purchases a bicycle and rides it along the camp's boardwalks for a bet, Al steps out onto his balcony and unwraps Chief, so he may 'watch' the ride. Swearingen apologises for Chief's low vantage, which must be maintained so that Al is not seen by the camp engaging in the macabre activity of keeping a rotting head in a box (2:8). Chief must watch the bicycle – a portent of a shaky but steadily approaching modernity – race underneath the balcony successfully as Al cheers Tom on, before being put back in the dark of his box once more. Chief becomes a stooge for Al's soliloquies, not even granted the funeral rites Bullock and Utter gave the other anonymous Indian out in the territory. As in American carnival, the '[i]ndividual subjectivity of the Other is overwritten, blacked out, by a cultural recourse to generalized masks and stereotypes.'¹⁰¹ Chief is removed from the Hills, boxed up among the enemy and, in his being denied a funeral, stuck in the limbo of (non)identity. As Al tells him after a tense conversation with Utter, 'every fracas ain't a victory Chief', the bodiless warrior recalls the multiple fracas and fights in the Indian wars, specifically the great cost of Indian victory over Custer in 1876, a triumph

¹⁰⁰ Berrettini, p. 254

¹⁰¹ McGowan, p. 18

twisted into a failure, and, in his truncated form, the visible absence of Native American's in or near the camp.

Deadwood is set in the decade previous to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, an act that saw all Chinese labourers, unskilled or otherwise, prohibited from entering the United States. The act passed, as Najia Aarim-Heriot notes, despite the fact that in the next four decades, 27 million Europeans were allowed to immigrate to America and only approximately 100,000 Chinese were in the United States in 1882.¹⁰² Comparable to the issues facing Native Americans, Chinese immigration and assimilation was a social concern tied up in dialogues concerning racial minorities and, importantly, notions of unresolvable difference, whether that difference was religious, racial, ideological or political. Aarim-Heriot continues: 'It is reasonable to assume that the starting point in explaining Chinese exclusion lies in the racist ideology that was deeply embedded in American society and had actually served to color the Chinese stereotype.'¹⁰³

Just as categorisation of who, or what, was Indian was tied to that of the nation's African Americans through the political ideologies and social problems of the period, so too was the fate of the Chinese. Both were bound up in the failings of the Republican Party, the national depression in the 1870s, resentment of 'radical Reconstruction' in the South and issues surrounding the value of free labour. Opposition to Chinese immigrants had begun well before the act of 1882, alongside a growing racialised national politics. During the first waves of immigration to California during the gold rush of the 1830s, the Chinese were tolerated, and even praised for being hard workers. However, when mining yields began to fall and job competition increased, resentment among white labourers grew, 'undesirable' jobs previously undertaken by the Chinese were 'needed' for whites and anti-Chinese sentiment grew dramatically.

Whilst Native Americans suffered at the hands of the nation and its media in part for a perceived unwillingness to, or sheer incompatibility with typical labour and farming methods, and the black population, also prone to accusations of indolence, had been the victims of an entrenched slave system, the Chinese came to America often willingly to work. Slotkin examines one newspaper of the time, *The Herald*, which debated the idiosyncrasies of each of these ethnic groups in 1876. *The Herald* suggests that the Chinese merged characteristics of

¹⁰² Najia Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, and Racial Anxiety in the United States, 1848-92* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006) p. 6

¹⁰³ Aarim-Heriot, p. 7

both blacks and Native Americans and were both an economic and moral threat to the nation. Slotkin argues that '[t]he paralleling of this editorial with one on 'The Indian Question' serves to underline the racial character of each of the major social conflicts'.¹⁰⁴ As Slotkin also recognises, the word 'savage', a counterpoint to all that was white and civilised, was also deployed as a blanket term, adaptable to whichever group its user opposed or sort to demean, from ethnic minorities to white strikers.

The will to work was turned against Chinese labourers in the 1870s, when distrust of 'coolies' – labourers brought in under contracts with bosses that undercut and undermine white labour by being much cheaper and more biddable – grew. As Aarim-Heriot suggests, '[i]n the antebellum period, both African Americans and Chinese immigrants were viewed as an undesirable and degraded labour element.'¹⁰⁵ Though this connection meant for a time that issues of Chinese rights and naturalization were discussed alongside growing receptiveness to black civil rights after the Civil War, the poor treatment and eventual exclusion of Chinese workers eventually tainted attitudes toward black social progress also, and reversed the previous advancement of both racial groups. This also revealed a Republican reluctance to remain loyal to the idea of universal equality, a concept that originally underpinned the ideologies of the governing party and led to an election that resulted in the withdrawal of troops from the South, ending Reconstruction and returning the region to something close to the white supremacist economic and social structure it had embodied pre-war. As a result, Aarim-Heriot concludes '[b]y 1875, then, the hopes for racial equality and justice for African Americans and Chinese immigrants were highly compromised.'¹⁰⁶

Deadwood again depicts the intricacies of the Chinese situation implicitly and explicitly. Derogatory language litters the dialogue. As both Native Americans and the Chinese are called heathens in the show, Chinese and African American people are referred to as 'monkeys', reflecting both the separate yet comparable and compounded situations of different ethnic groups and also the antipathy that existed between minorities despite this forced cultural coalescence; as Arnold Shankman notes, both white and black populations 'were suspicious of a transient people who were unwilling to Americanize themselves.'¹⁰⁷ Aunt Lou, George Hearst's black maid, can't bear to speak to Wu, the leader of the camp's Chinese population - instead the pair exchange suspicious glances when on screen together,

¹⁰⁴ Slotkin, p. 443

¹⁰⁵ Aarim-Heriot, p. 10

¹⁰⁶ Aarim-Heriot, p. 154

¹⁰⁷ Arnold Shankman 'Black on Yellow: Afro-Americans View Chinese-Americans 1850-1935', *Phylon: The Atlanta University Review of Race and Culture*, 39 (1978) 1-17 (p. 3)

and Leon the dope-fiend tells a Chinese man that he is 'less than a nigger' to him, establishing and exposing the ways in which racial hierarchies are constructed in the *Deadwood* camp. Cy Tolliver, Leon's boss, displays equal distaste, 'Celestials, they'll bow and scrape 'til six of them get together, then no white man's safe.', 'celestial' a derogatory term used most commonly, alongside 'chink', to describe a Chinese person in camp, an abbreviation of 'the Celestial Empire', a now obsolete name for the Empire of China.

However, unlike Native Americans and arguably the camp's two semi-permanent black residents, who run the livery located on the outskirts of camp, the Chinese appear to be very much 'of' and within the camp. 'Chinese Alley' is parallel to Deadwood's Main Street. The show's presentation of its population offers a window into the Chinese-American experience and reinforces the fact that, although they are much maligned, the Chinese population has a definite footing in Deadwood and is making a living from the services it provides for the white inhabitants. O'Connor and Sandweiss state that 'Mining corporations hired gangs of Chinese labourers from headmen, not to work in the shafts but to dump cars, remove surface rubble, cook food, and wash laundry.'¹⁰⁸

All of these services are represented in *Deadwood*; the Chinese then are not excluded as Indians are, but are absorbed into the camp, safe (or safer, at least) within its tentative borders and social structures against threat of Native American attack and against a wider national prejudice. However, if we reconsider Sibley's inquiry about who space is for, then their position becomes less clear-cut. The term 'monkey' lends an animalistic or primitive character to the Chinese, reducing their status further relative to that of the camp's white residents:

Exclusionary discourse draws particularly on colour, disease, animals, sexuality and nature, but they all come back to the idea of dirt as a signifier of imperfection and inferiority, the reference point being the white, often male, physically and mentally able person.¹⁰⁹

By situating the Chinese within these derogatory parameters and mocking their dialect and language as 'monkey noise', those like Leon and Tolliver cast the Chinese as abject, a necessary but near intolerable and disgusting presence in the camp. This relationship is

¹⁰⁸ Aarim-Heriot, p. 206

¹⁰⁹ Sibley, p. 14

further complicated by the services Chinese Alley offers: it appears to be the biggest purveyor of raw meat in the camp, thus one of the largest sources of sustenance for the camp's population but also a possible source of rot, flies and disease. All the town's laundry is taken there also; the Chinese are thus responsible for cleaning all of the used sheets and clothes, which in *Deadwood* are not short of mud, blood, sweat and other bodily fluids, stains that reveal a lot about its residents and business ventures. To borrow another phrase from Swearingen, the white population 'show their asses' to the Chinese launderers, giving them disgusting jobs that reveal the town's vices whilst in turn viewing the Chinese as objects of disgust themselves. This is true also of the way Wu, who Al calls 'boss-chink', and his flesh-eating pigs are used to dispose of the corpses of those who are killed unlawfully or in suspicious circumstances in the camp, normally by Al's hand. The pigs, though an animal commonly associated with dirt and debasement as Sibley notes, provide the clean-up operation for the town's murderous business men. There is a moral dissonance here in the way the town's white residents perceive their Chinese counterparts versus their understanding of themselves; the Chinese may have staked out their own valid claim to exist and earn a living within the camp, providing necessary services, but these services mean they are reviled for their work as well as for their difference, and are subject to both inclusionary and exclusionary impulses. Sibley states that:

For the individual or group socialized into believing that the separation of categories is necessary or desirable, the liminal zone is a source of anxiety. It is a zone of abjection, one which should be eliminated in order to reduce anxiety but this is not always possible.¹¹⁰

Chinese alley is one such liminal zone, one that most Deadwood residents are reluctant to enter but must enter all the same. Like the natural wilderness in relation to Native Americans, the alley is imbued with an immoral quality because of the services it provides. It becomes a suspicious area within the camp, a cuckoo-like culture ready to disrupt and displace space designated white, and as such must be heavily controlled. Its name – 'chink' or Chinese alley – is one such constraining mechanism, as it reinforces that the camp's Chinese population belong in one place and one place only (and that is an alley, not a street), just as the Chinese commonly being referred to as 'celestial' or 'chink' offers a recognition

¹¹⁰ Sibley, p. 33

of existence but connects them back to China, the homeland, and marks them as un-American, and not to be afforded the liberties and respect a 'native' is due.

Indeed, only two of the entire Chinese population are actually named in the show: Wu, the Chinese boss who has imported the camps existing population and, as Paul Wight and Hailin Zhou suggest, Al's parallel in Chinese Alley, and Lee, brought in by Francis Walcott, acting on behalf of George Hearst. Lee acts as Tolliver to Wu's Swearengen, and is to run, with Tolliver's supervision, 'a band of Chinese sex-slaves, brought in as bargain prostitutes for the increasingly underpaid miners, many of whom have been tricked or coerced into abandoning their old claims for lives as wage labourers in the Hearst orbit.'¹¹¹

That out of a whole community, only two Chinese men are named, and even then with one syllable each, alongside the manner in which they operate as proxies to white men, appears to be the exception that proves McGowan's rule that 'the individual subjectivity of the Other is overwritten, blacked out, by a cultural recourse to generalized masks and stereotypes of identity.'¹¹² Swearengen and Tolliver, through Wu and Lee, are affirmed of their own whiteness and dominance in the camp, and can therefore use their named Chinese counterparts as deputies in their fight for control over Chinese Alley and as surrogates in their tense and barely contained dislike for one another. Al dubs it the 'battle of the chinks', when really the conflict reaches further than that, this title hiding the true disparity between Al, representing what he feels are the camp's best interests, and the Hearst interest. Aided by Swearengen's henchmen, Wu wins the battle (though Al does not win the war, again another echo of the issues the Lakota faced regarding Little Bighorn hitched to Al's character like a form of poetic justice); Lee's throat is cut.

To kill Lee, these men must cross geographical and racial boundaries. They must complete their purpose without being recognised or be seen to be helping Wu by donning caricatured Chinese masks and garb to enter the alley unnoticed. This is a performative murder; they must imitate Chinese men to commit a crime, 'go native', become a savage to kill a savage, to, as they perceive it, regress for the sake of the camp's safety even further than the frontier space has so far permitted them. Even though the camp knows full well that they have murdered at Al's behest before, they must still dress up in this instance and inhabit another cultural and ethnic identity in order to act in the self-contained world of the alley and to preserve Al's interests against Hearst's looming presence at the end of season two.

¹¹¹ Wright, Zhou, p. 163

¹¹² McGowan, p. 1

Afterwards however, they can remove this disguise and return to Main Street, restored to the world of white men. Wu has only had them ‘on loan.’ Their dress-up is therefore different from that of the Indians in Cody’s Wild West; their roles are a temporary deception and they play them based on a visual stereotype that allows them to harm one of whom they imitate.

In Wu’s eyes, Lee is a cultural aberration, a traitor. He attempts to control the Chinese community through fear, is very tall, has a good grasp of English and claims to hail from San Francisco rather than China; suitably unimpressed, Wu calls him a ‘San-Francisco Cocksucker.’ Lee’s dealings with white business men in the camp do not sit well with Wu, despite the fact that he himself maintains a mutually beneficial business relationship with Swearingen (though as the series develops we see a persona; loyalty develop between both parties). If, as Randall E. Rohe states, in *Deadwood*, as in Chinese-American history, ‘the tight, almost self-segregated, nature of their settlements was dominant, providing the Chinese a measure of protection and the ability to retain their culture and social institutions,’ then Lee’s liminal qualities are dangerous as they invite further white interference within the alley.¹¹³ Lee is also immoral in Wu’s eyes: he is willing to kill his own people (something we never see Wu do) for financial recompense. Lee is almost too ‘white’ for Wu, as Milch states, ‘Wu is so endearing because he is so obviously prejudiced and at the same time the victim of prejudice. Yet he sees no contradiction between the places where he stands.’¹¹⁴ Wu too, until the end of season two, is very much concerned with maintaining his identity alongside that of his alley in the face of the white corruption and vice that he sees, and uses against itself when it suits him.

Aarim-Heriot notes that ‘[u]nlike the majority of white prostitutes who came as independent professionals or worked in brothels for wages, Chinese women were generally imported as captives of an organized trade.’¹¹⁵ This is also the case in *Deadwood*, as Wolcott, Tolliver and Lee take delivery of a wagon-load of Chinese prostitutes (2:4). Aarim-Heriot explains that identities of Chinese women were often compounded with labouring men – if all Chinese men were coolies, then all Chinese women must be prostitutes. Kerry Abrams highlights this amalgamation present in American cultural perceptions of the time, ‘[u]nfortunately for Chinese female immigrants, the purported involuntariness of their participation in prostitution did not make them more sympathetic as immigrants. The

¹¹³ Randall E. Rohe, ‘After the Gold Rush: Mining in the Far West 1850-1890’, *Montana: The Magazine of Western History*, 32 (1982) 2-19 (p. 6)

¹¹⁴ Milch, p. 207

¹¹⁵ Aarim-Heriot, p. 159

problem was their slavish character.’¹¹⁶ In *Deadwood* this is also the case; the only Chinese women we do see are sex-slaves and their complete lack of autonomy elicits very little sympathy (and sometimes downright antipathy) within the camp. Such women were condemned by President Grant himself as controversy surrounding ‘The Chinese Question’ grew in 1874, and they came in for the same poor regard as their male counterparts:

Like Chinese male labourers, Chinese prostitutes were charged with being cheaper. Besides being very affordable, Chinese prostitutes were considered to be much more immoral than white prostitutes because, unlike whites, they did not have the decency to refuse the patronage of young boys. Finally, Chinese prostitutes were arraigned for poisoning the next generation’s bloodstream with venereal diseases of the worst type.¹¹⁷

In *Deadwood*, these women are brought to camp in a cage and then put individually into smaller boxes with numbers on them. They become slaves to commerce and are unable to refuse patronage of any sort. Milch explains this depiction was based in real life events:

The truth was that they brought Chinese women in to be prostitutes in Deadwood and literally fucked them to death. They didn’t feed them. They just put them in these four-by-six-foot cribs and they gave them laudanum to so they would stop screaming, and when they were dead they would throw them out.¹¹⁸

The characters in *Deadwood* are shown at first to be reluctant to use these prostitutes, viewing the act itself as degenerate (‘I won’t fuck a Chinese, I got a mother alive yet,’) but are tempted into it by cost, (‘a lot of fellas, you know, outpaced by white pussy’s prices,’) and by Tolliver employing a vocal advertising campaign that exoticises the Chinese prostitutes and mythologises their sexual abilities, (‘Go for the strangeness,’ and ‘Among humans for grip, the China woman’s snatch has no peer,’). Chinese vaginas are also compared to anacondas and believed to have an ‘ancient way of milking you out of your sorrow’; a visit to Chinese Alley and an encounter with a Chinese prostitute offered an exciting, dangerous, un-American experience that caused, as Sibley argues, both fear and

¹¹⁶ Kerry Abrams, ‘Polygamy, Prostitution, and the Federalization of Immigration Law’, *Columbia Law Review*, 105 (2005) 641-716 (p. 658)

¹¹⁷ Aarim-Heriot, p. 187

¹¹⁸ Milch, p. 207

arousal at the transgression. All for only a dime. No matter that the girls, as a horrified Doctor Cochrane points out, ‘are fucking starving to death.’ To Tolliver, safe in the knowledge that Mr Lee as an ‘inexhaustible supply’, they are a commodity, a profitable - once eroticised and exoticised – enterprise for minimal outlay that will keep poor whites in the camp happy and therefore willing to work for low wages in the Hearst claims. They are not even given private spaces like the camp’s white prostitutes, but are kept out in the elements, exposed twice over in the alley. They are silenced by both their inability to communicate and by their forced intoxication and become objects to be used up in the camp as part of the ‘visual economy’ that privileges white, male, economic success and pleasure over the suffering and survival of non-white bodies.

The Chinese women do not get to cross the same boundary as their customers. They may have crossed an ocean and survived the journey to America, but they do not get to partake in any part of the American experience but are instead dragged under the wheels of its advancement. Lee burns them when they die, ensuring their remains do not return to China as they rightly should in the context of Chinese funerary rites. They cease to belong in either America or China, the living world or the afterlife. They are reduced, referring back to Cresswell’s definition of ‘place’, to a kind of ‘placelessness’, stemming from the distance that has been put between them and both Western and Eastern cultures. They enter the ‘realm without meaning’ and are forgotten by all but the most humane in camp.

Deadwood depicts a place and time that could have offered new possibilities for racial interactions, but that soon creates and enforces the very same prejudice found in the eastern and urban areas the camp was, to begin with, trying to differentiate itself from. What seemed like the ultimate land of opportunity, the Wild West, was really a moment, or series of moments, that proved conducive to a heightened racialized socio-political discourse and an increased suspicion of non-white peoples. Attitudes about land, space and place, the promise of economic growth, autonomy and a rise in immigration post-war created a West very much invested in retaining clear-cut racial categorisations, repetitively re-instating white dominance in all social spheres. *Deadwood* manages to reflect the different racial concerns and cultural events of the 1870s in its depiction of Native American and Chinese communities, as well as how these groups were victims of an American carnival impulse, exploited, excluded and stereotyped to suit the needs of white communities, the personal motivations of individuals and an American national narrative. It also lays bare, under the mud and blood of the camp, a past permeated by capitalistic impulses that misused and

excluded minorities and masked the motivation for this poor treatment with the great golden myth of the American frontier.

***Wonderful, Terrible Things: Ecological Freaks and Transient Bodies in Daniel Knauf's
Carnivàle.***

Carnivàle occupies a strange position in televisual terms. Its closest cousins in popular culture appear to be texts as disparate as Tod Browning's infamous *Freaks* (1932), so controversial it was banned in the UK for 30 years, Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love* (1989), Steinbeck's California and Dust Bowl novels and journalism, the Southern Gothic of Carson McCullers or Flannery O'Connor, or the recent *American Horror Story: Freak Show* (2014 - 2015). Though the majority of these examples feature those with abnormal bodies, freak shows, or nods to the freakish in their narratives, these texts are obviously and immeasurably different. 'Freakery' or the 'freakish' is not necessarily considered a genre in and of itself and is unbounded by conventions; there aren't set tropes to play on. *Carnivàle* then belongs to a rag-tag collection of loosely connected stories that present and regard 'the freak' in both corporeal and cultural terms.

Carnivàle does appear to occupy and produce a specifically American manifestation of the Grotesque, an aesthetic device derived from hybridity, juxtaposition and the tragi-comic. William Van O'Connor does go so far as to classify the Grotesque as a genre, and a distinctly American creation; it is, O'Connor states '[...] a new genre, merging tragedy and comedy, and seeking, seemingly in perverse ways, the sublime.'¹¹⁹ He claims American writers specifically are fixated, not necessarily through choice, with all that seems ludicrous, abnormal or repulsive, being 'terribly preoccupied with the irrational, the unpredictable, the bizarre, and the grotesque,' descriptors that seem tailored to Daniel Knauf's peculiar vision.¹²⁰ This nebulous category, and the show's singularity renders *Carnivàle* difficult to decipher. Sincere and cerebral, neither outright horror nor fantasy nor history show but somehow presenting elements of each, and nowhere near as forthright – some would say exploitative though recent criticism has been more favourable - in its depiction of mental or bodily abnormality as Browning's *Freaks*, *Carnivàle* still makes for disquieting viewing. Knauf himself has said of his show '[I]ike a beautiful child born with its heart on the outside, it had no business surviving delivery, much less two seasons on television.'¹²¹ This ill-fated

¹¹⁹ William Van O'Connor, *The Grotesque: An American Genre and Other Essays* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1962) p. 3

¹²⁰ Van O'Connor, p. 4

¹²¹ Daniel Knauf, 'Foreword' in *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque*, ed. by Peg Aloji and Hannah E. Johnston (North Carolina: McFarland, 2015) pp. 1-5 (p. 1)

strangeness rendered its broadcasting anomalous in both the context of its content and its network.

Set between 1934 -1935, *Carnivàle* follows two narratives that run parallel, before their trajectories finally aim at one another. One tracks Ben Hawkins, a Dust Bowl farmer with inexplicable healing powers, as he is picked up by a travelling carnival while attempting to bury his mother in the dust that killed her. The other follows Brother Justin Crowe, a Russian immigrant (his real name is Alexei Belyakov) turned preacher in California, and his sister Iris (Irena Belyakov) as they set up a church camp for the state's migrant community. Ben and Justin act as avatars for good and evil respectively, each set on a course to destroy the other. Fore-cast to run for six seasons, *Carnivàle* was cancelled after only two; despite a painstakingly reproduced Depression-era aesthetic, the show's heavily layered mythology, biblical references, non-chronological narrative and slow pace tested audience patience and viewer numbers dropped off dramatically after the first episode.

However, viewer response to *Carnivàle* since its cancellation has given the show an even more unnatural extended life. David Church states that '[c]ult films acquire a select but devoted group of fans who engage in repeated screenings, ritual behaviours, and specific reading strategies,' a practice that both instigates and responds to 'the portioning off of cult films as freakish anomalies, a distinction echoing socially prevalent attitudes that separate 'abnormal' bodies from 'normal' ones.'¹²² *Carnivàle*'s 'cult' status then, according to Church's interpretation, would suggest that audience responses to its freakish content echo the typical social exclusion of those with bodily differences - though perhaps admired, praised as unusual, an object of fascination for a dedicated following, sometimes even fetishized, cult media is still sectioned off, placed at a remove from the culturally respectable and acceptable. That this behaviour normally occurs after a show's cancellation, retrospective viewers picking over the bones of a narrative once it's over, adds a pathological aspect to these viewing patterns that elides with *Carnivàle*'s thematic concerns and with the restrictive archetypes of McGowan's understanding of an American carnivalesque.

Knauf has accepted and engaged with the after-life of his 'baby', observing that 'everyday, the cult grows larger.'¹²³ When the show ended, viewers began to interpret, dissect and make predictions about where the narrative might have gone had it been picked up again, and a *Carnivàle* convention was held in 2006 for the truly dedicated - all the trappings of a

¹²² David Church, 'Freakery, Cult Films and the Problem of Ambivalence', *Journal of Film and Video*, 63 (2011) 3-17 (p. 3)

¹²³ Knauf, p. 4

cult classic. Except that this was an Emmy-award winning HBO show whose episodes cost around \$4 million each, with a biblical narrative and production values that might not necessarily attract such a niche and devoted form of fandom. Ronald D. Moore, one of *Carnivàle*'s executive producers, called it (at the time of its production) 'the largest and most complicated show on television.'¹²⁴ Was *Carnivàle* a cult sideshow for the initiated, too unusual to thrive on HBO, or was it very well-executed mainstream subscription television that was simply too dour and complicated for a general audience? Church states that freakery '[f]or many spectators, [...] serves as a visual shorthand for 'strangeness' or 'weirdness', making the films seem less accessible to 'normal' tastes.'¹²⁵ Many criticisms have been levelled at Knauf's show but 'tasteless' is not among them. *Carnivàle*'s subject matter then clashes with its production values in terms of assignation of quality. It is this liminality and ambiguity that sets the tone in regard to the show's content.

Rommel Ruiz states that 'narrative fiction can articulate grander historical truths while rendering historical details and content marginal.'¹²⁶ In *Carnivàle* the reverse appears to be the case - it is the 'details' that are integral to the show's presentation of those outside 'normal' American society. *Carnivàle*, as Knauf's baby metaphor suggests, works in ectopia cordis, from the inside out, a feature that is key to interpreting its representation of the very American cultural phenomenon it presents. The show's macro good/evil story arc then feels less important in this regard than its depiction of the daily trials and tribulations of its characters and their physical and spatial existence in Dust Bowl America.

The emerging critical focus on *Carnivàle* has, however, homed in on the show's dense, inaccessible mythology, its tightly packed references, its HBO-standard montage title sequence and its spatio-temporal idiosyncrasies. While these new readings are necessary forays into an as yet very underexplored show, the particulars of American visual culture embedded in its two-pronged narrative and its production have not yet been sufficiently investigated given their patent importance in a series that follows a freak show as it crosses some of the central and western states of America. Frida Beckman states that '[s]et in the 1930s Dustbowl and in California, *Carnivàle* offers a distinctly American historical context with powerful links to a specifically American identity.'¹²⁷ The two key projections of this identity in Knauf's show are the 'carnies' and 'freaks' of the *Carnivàle*, the travelling fair and

¹²⁴ Ronald D. Moore, 'Making *Carnivàle*: The Show Behind the Show', (2003) [on DVD-ROM]

¹²⁵ Church, p. 10

¹²⁶ Rommel Ruiz, p. 14

¹²⁷ Frida Beckman, 'The Theater of History: *Carnivàle*, Deleuze, and the Possibility of New Beginnings', *SubStance*, 40 (2011) 3-21 (p. 6)

freak show led by Samson the dwarf (though helmed by the mysterious ‘Management’, Alexei and Irena’s father and a figure invested in Ben facing up to his destiny), and the migrant community in California; both are marginalized in different ways but their narratives converge and offer up resistance to typical modes of prejudice. The show’s depictions of these two very different itinerant groups, how they interact with and stray from dominant American social structures and cultures within the show, reveal just how *Carnivàle* offers an insight into the lives of the ‘Other’ in Depression-era small town America and how the ‘Othering’ it presents is not as clear-cut as it may first appear. The image of Knauf’s ‘baby’ is perhaps more appropriate than even he may have realised.

McGowan states that within American Carnival, ‘[t]he individual subjectivity of the Other is overwritten, blacked out, by a cultural recourse to generalized masks and stereotypes of identity.’¹²⁸ *Carnivàle* depicts an unusual moment in American history, where this differentiating gaze and recourse to generalizations seemed to fall on members of a particular white community – Southwestern Depression-era migrants headed to California. Though a diverse group, these migrants were often lumped into one homogenous type by the Californian media and by its more long-standing residents. These migrants are stereotyped as ‘Okies’, a truncation of ‘Oklahoma’ and a disparaging term for people from that state and others affected by the Dust Bowl and other economic problems in the thirties. ‘Okies’ were, for a variety of reasons, perceived as inferior to Californian natives, many of whom had not lived in the state that long themselves.

McGowan adds that ‘[...] occlusion from systems of regular social interaction is made manifest by the maskings, distortions, and falsifications of identity that are intimately connected to the process of carnival.’¹²⁹ From the show’s pilot, we see this occlusion at work. A handful of migrants who live in a camp just outside the fictional town of Mintern, California, attend Brother Justin’s church. They sit at the back, shabbier and more down-at-heel than Justin’s more well-to-do congregation. One among them, Eleanor, steals from the collection plate. Though this act is punished in private by Justin - he makes Eleanor cough up piles of coins, the first hint we are given that he has supernatural abilities – this punishment actually confirms her faith and Justin welcomes both her and other migrants to church, stating they like anyone else have a right to worship. Crowds of migrants attend the next service,

¹²⁸ McGowan, p. 1

¹²⁹ McGowan, p. 1

piling into the back of the church, singing exuberantly and moving to the music, much to the chagrin of the 'normal' congregation (1:2).

James N. Gregory states that these "Dust Bowl migrants", 'Okies', and 'Arkies' more frequently, and 'Southwesterners' in more respectful moments, [...] have since the 1930s occupied a unique place in Californian society.'¹³⁰ He explains that migrants came from all over Oklahoma, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri, a broad swathe of America that 'lacks a clearly defined regional identity', and that California had long since been thought of as land where fortunes were made (a possibility obviously appealing to any itinerant group). Gregory also states that around a sixth of migrants were professionals and that various issues motivated their movement: '[p]rices, drought, floods in certain areas, even the boll weevil, accelerated the distress of farmers in the Western South and in some cases drove them from the land.'¹³¹ Despite all of these mitigating circumstances, the images and effects of the Dust Bowl and the migrant populations entering California in the thirties were conflated and the negative stereotype of 'Okie' became embedded in the minds of Californians. California itself was 'a society of strangers' with residents from all over the world, and since the Gold Rush had marketed itself as a land of opportunity; California agriculture had long relied on itinerant workers, and corporations targeted the Southwestern region in this decade, promising work in California that migrants found, upon arrival, was not available. Despite these extenuating circumstances, it was these 'Dust Bowl migrants' specifically that engendered a new-found resistance to newcomers and fell victim to a burgeoning distaste for and mistrust of 'Southwestern' culture, as Steinbeck identified in *The Harvest Gypsies* (1932), '[t]he migrants are needed; and they are hated.'¹³²

This conflation and ambivalence is reflected in the first episode of *Carnivàle*; having encapsulated the harshness of Dust Bowl conditions with the death of Ben's mother from dust pneumonia in Milfay, Oklahoma, the scene cuts to Justin's church where, though nowhere near the howling swirl to the East, Eleanor still seems to bear the mark of its association. She is thin and dirt covers her face and drab clothes; she seems conscious of her appearance and takes money because she and those in her camp are desperate. But despite Justin welcoming migrants to church, the presence of more 'Okies' elicits tutting and disparaging glances from the other worshippers and comments that the church is 'crowded,' a thinly veiled suggestion

¹³⁰ James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991) p. xiv

¹³¹ Gregory, p. 11

¹³² Gregory, p. 37

that these attendees are not welcome. William Ian Miller's appraisal of disgust encapsulates the behaviour modelled here; he states that disgust is a 'moral and social sentiment' that often works in conjunction with (though remains distinct from) contempt to rank 'people and things in a kind of cosmic ordering.'¹³³ Disgust manifests from a perceived danger founded in the possibility of contamination, of uncomfortably permeable bodies and social structures. In this light, the tight, regimented organisation and limited capacity of Justin's church elicit this negative response as the congregation perceives that if poverty is catching, tolerating poor migrants in confined spaces is risky and unpleasant. Unable to tactfully read their own rejection, the migrants multiply and start to colonise, or contaminate the status quo in Mintern.

David Sibley states that '[m]aintaining the purity of the self, defending the boundaries of the inner body, can be seen as a never-ending battle against residues – excrement, dead skin, sweat, and so on, and it is a battle that has a wider existential significance.'¹³⁴ On top of being 'dirt-poor', this residue that Eleanor seems to carry on her person bears two further layers of association – dirt in and of itself, a physical coating generally unwanted by a person or those in their proximity, and of the clouds of dust and sand blowing around Texas, Oklahoma and parts of New Mexico, Colorado and Kansas at this time (though storm dust reached as far as the Dakotas and the New York coast), images and imaginings that appended to the new neighbours with whom Californians were now confronted. If cleanliness is next to godliness, turning up dirty to church, of all places, (though it is due to a lack of facilities in camp, this is irrelevant to the Mintern locals) suggests an inability to remain clean and a moral or at the very least social failing - an inability to recognise which locations are available or appropriate for migrants to attend and which aren't. Justin's charity toward this group discomforts his congregation also. Miller suggests that 'to our disgust, the good is always engaging in unseemly compromises that implicate us.'¹³⁵ Justin's refusal to sever ties with those from the camp brings his congregation into far closer proximity with the Southwesterners than they are comfortable with, and his altruism indirectly casts Mintern locals as uncharitable, unwilling recipients of their own moral judgements, which compounds their need for physical separation.

These associations also crept into public health concerns in California, where worries over the implications of so many newcomers turned into fears over communicable diseases

¹³³ William Ian Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 1997) p. 2

¹³⁴ Sibley, p. 8

¹³⁵ Miller, p. 185

and media scaremongering over imminent outbreaks.¹³⁶ Migrants were de-individuated into a mass source of possible contagion. However, Gregory states that ‘less than 16,000 people from the Dust Bowl proper ended up in California, barely 6 percent of the total from the Southwestern states.’¹³⁷ Facts and figures bore less weight than common perception and migrants from other locations were subject to the same disapproval because ‘itinerancy itself was seen as a mark of failure.’¹³⁸ This was a significant inversion of normal American socio-hierarchical formations: ‘these were white, old-stock American natives, Protestant Americans, rural Americans, heartlanders who were now bearing the *brunt* of prejudices traditionally addressed to ‘foreigners.’¹³⁹

A stereotype was formed in the collective minds of Californians about who and what these migrants were, which placed them below white Californians, at a social level typically reserved for other races or social deviants. Previously framed as the epitome of Jefferson’s yeomen farmers – predominantly subsistence farmers on modest family plots that Jefferson believed formed the backbone of traditional republican values – perceptions about these migrants altered quickly and dramatically, and blame for the compounded failures of capitalistic attitudes to farming and land management, which relied on the overuse of deep ploughing, and unfortunate and extreme weather conditions, was placed squarely on their shoulders. Migrants came to be human representatives of the Depression and the dark clouds of the Dust Bowl, like bad omens in the Sunshine State – a role they fulfil in *Carnivàle* as their influx acts as catalyst to Justin’s turn toward evil. Though many in reality had relatives or jobs lined up in California, the common misconception was that they were an anchorless burden, or that their abandonment of their roots displayed a form of inadequacy, a failure to live in the bed Californians believed they had made for themselves. Had they remained ‘at home’, this prejudice would not have been levelled at them.

Sibley states ‘[a] group can be in the ‘wrong’ place if the stereotype locates it elsewhere.’¹⁴⁰ While regional stereotypes existed before and after the Depression, it was this movement from the Southwesterners’ ‘rightful place’ to the West coast in a time of crisis that morphed them into unwanted, dirty intruders. Sibley continues, ‘[t]he social positioning of the self and other is formed through a series of cultural representations of people and things

¹³⁶ Gregory, p. 87

¹³⁷ Gregory, p. 11

¹³⁸ Gregory, p. 68

¹³⁹ Gregory, p. 102

¹⁴⁰ Sibley, p. 100

which frequently elide so that the nonhuman world also provides a context for self-hood.¹⁴¹ This anchoring of human identity to the material world is particularly relevant in regard to the Dust Bowl. Extreme heat and drought in the early 1930s brought on prolonged and heavy losses in agriculture, produce and the finances of farmers. When strong winds hit they created dust and sand storms, the result of a landscape that had been stripped of any natural vegetation that could have held the earth together. Donald E. Worster states that '[e]arth is the word we use when it is there in place, growing the food we eat, giving a place to stand and build on. 'Dust' is what we say when it is loose and blowing in the wind.'¹⁴² It follows then, that 'dirt' is the label we use when that dust lands on somewhere we desire it wouldn't and subsequently we seek its removal, or our removal from the object or person it clings to. The black blizzards and sand storms of the Dust Bowl took on a significance beyond their already destructive powers. Worster states that '[t]he name suggests a place – a region whose borders are as inexact and shifting as a sand dune.'¹⁴³ So not only was it dangerous, it was also uncontainable, without confine or easily enacted solution.

This shifting mass, 'the topsoil of ten thousand farms' as Sophie calls it in the show, forms what Sibley would label an 'ecological account' of Eleanor and those like her in *Carnivàle*, the 'migrants, Okies, ginks and roadites,' as Mintern official Carroll Templeton calls them (1:3), unimpressed by Justin's plan to set up a church and orphanage specifically for this community. The transient, shifting (shifty) quality of the migrants causes unease in Mintern as does the fact that they're no longer on the move but settled near the town with hopes of integration, an equally unappealing quality. Even the prospect of them having their own church – a former Chinese brothel that Templeton, its original owner, is tellingly unwilling to part with at that – does not prove a suitable solution to the issue of space to worship. Miller states that '[d]isgust evaluates (negatively) what it touches, proclaims the meanness and inferiority of the object.'¹⁴⁴ Instead of the usual comparisons to disgust inducing undesirable animals or insects, unusually here the unfavourable association a social group contends with is a set of uncontrollable ecological conditions brought on by unregulated economic drives. The Okies' failure is America's failure, but the Mintern residents would rather not be reminded of that fact.

¹⁴¹ Sibley, p. 10

¹⁴² Donald E. Worster, *Dust Bowl* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979) p. 13

¹⁴³ Worster, p. 4

¹⁴⁴ Miller, p. 9

The Okies relegation is realised in the environments they are depicted in within the show also. Already in the ‘wrong’ place by being in California, they exist in liminal locations – a camp outside Mintern first, then in a much larger church camp of around 17,000 on the site of Justin’s ‘New Canaan’. Depicted most frequently by bird’s-eye pans across its many tents and crowds, and low shots of cars packed to the roof with the modest worldly possessions of those heading to the camp, New Canaan seems like an ever-expanding mass pulling in people from far and wide, but one still only comprised of temporary structures and uprooted visitors.

The camp straddles the two physical states and statuses that Tim Cresswell outlines: space as ‘a realm without meaning’ and place as ‘a meaningful location.’¹⁴⁵ It is named, it has a function and is intended to be an enduring settlement which imbues it with a certain permanency but, made up of not much more than canvas and the bodies of the faithful, it exists in a state of indeterminacy that speaks to the exclusive impulses cultured in Depression-era California. The migrants cannot be absorbed into towns, so are pushed out into a space with no significance, a realm no-one else wants.

Sibley states ‘[t]he oppressed [...] have their own strategies which challenge the domination of space by the majority, if only briefly and in prescribed locales.’¹⁴⁶ In *Carnivàle*, as in the 1930s, such a challenge is, in part, mounted through the migrants’ faith. Gregory continues ‘[a]t a time when other religious organizations were ignoring the Okies, Holiness and Pentecostal activists were busy preaching, recruiting, and setting up churches.’¹⁴⁷ Brother Justin, at first a Methodist preacher, evolves his migrant following into a form of Holiness church, targeting the Okies’ willingness to believe in him as a rabble-rousing religious leader (buttressed by occasional displays of his supernatural abilities). This form of evangelism meshed together migrant groups who found in it a commonality and a renewed ability to face the ‘climate of disesteem’ they in particular were experiencing.¹⁴⁸

Brother Justin’s Okies, in creating New Canaan, pitch themselves somewhere meaningful in an unwelcoming environment, using faith as guide ropes. On the outskirts of Mintern, Justin customises the Sermon on the Mount and assures the uprooted Southwesterners that they are God’s chosen people: ‘Blessed are the migrants, and the Okies and the Roadites, for they are the true Americans’ (1:9). Instead of quiet absorption into the melting pot of Californian culture and its multiple faiths in the thirties, Southwesterners recreated their own

¹⁴⁵ Cresswell, p. 10

¹⁴⁶ Sibley, p. 46

¹⁴⁷ Gregory, p. 201

¹⁴⁸ Gregory, p. 220

culture in a new location. Gregory reveals that an inability to integrate spiritually and geographically into California often evolved into an eventual refusal to do so, and a recreation of Southwestern culture and faith in new locales: ‘Settling in separate neighbourhoods called Little Oklahomas, socializing primarily with newcomers like themselves, they created a distinct subculture based on values and institutions brought from their region of birth.’¹⁴⁹ New Canaan may be a camp, but it marks a monopolization of space, away from the faithless or unchosen native Californians, and a refusal to bow in the face of an unreceptive new home. The dominant culture is undermined, even if only in a prescribed location.

Any Okie achievement, however, seems turned on its head in *Carnivàle*; the migrants follow Justin, who turns out to be an usher of evil. The souls he gathers at New Canaan are for harvesting rather than herding in the name of God, something they learn as he starts killing them with a sickle when he and Ben finally meet at the end of season two. His corruption and his lack of compassion for the migrants is alluded to through his sexual and physical abuse of the maids he hand-selects from the camp and is also evidenced in the juxtaposition of his immaculate house sat on a hill high and surrounded by guards above the ragged migrant tents clustered below. Justin renders the migrants foolish in their faith, their naivety punished in the narrative as Justin’s true objective is revealed.

During the Depression, however, migrants retained one privilege that set them apart from most other rejected communities in America – that they could and indeed did ‘pass’ for native Californians, or travellers from parts of America unsullied by associations with exodusters or the Southwest. Alternatively, they could simply deny to themselves and others that labels like ‘Okie’ had anything to do with them, as Gregory explains: ‘Treating the term as a synonym for ‘no-account trash’, other Oklahomans took refuge in their own feelings of respectability, assuring themselves that the label only applied to those who lacked ambition or morals or some other quality central to their particular understanding of decency.’¹⁵⁰ Given certain resources, clothing, accents, phrasing, and manners could all be changed, something a sizable proportion of migrants were able to do because, despite being called ‘Okie’ or ‘Arkie’ or ‘Roadite’, they were still old stock, white Americans. They could choose to fit in, to disappear into the standard social makeup of California. *Carnivàle*’s Okies choose not to, instead retaining their Southwestern identities, following Justin as their faith dictates. They

¹⁴⁹ Gregory, p. xvi

¹⁵⁰ Gregory, p. 120

reaffirm their ‘Otherness’ proudly and meet rejection with rejection, sectioning themselves off from normal society in the (mistaken, in this case) knowledge that they are God’s chosen people. This is a choice not afforded to many of the freaks that run the carnival in Knauf’s show.

In discussing ‘cult’ exploitation cinema - a label often attached to Browning’s *Freaks*, though its reputation has since been restored in some critical quarters – Church argues that ‘non-normative bodies are framed in medium shots or close ups that abruptly break classical continuity, with a film’s typically slipshod construction resulting in awkward cuts to the inserted spectacle.’¹⁵¹ Although, as I have said, Knauf’s creation is not as explicit as Browning or as heavy handed, in its first episodes *Carnivàle* appears to be borrowing from this cult tradition. As Ben reluctantly becomes part of the carnival troupe, we are given lingering shots of abnormalities or behaviours that emphasize this difference – a shot of Gecko’s lizard-like tail as it pokes through a hole cut in his underpants; Caledonia and Alexandria, the Siamese twins, playing cat’s cradle, a game that requires two people, only here the two people are joined at the hip; Lila, the bearded lady tending her goatee; the catatonic gypsy psychic Apollonia, motionless in bed. We glimpse these moments of difference for perhaps longer than we should, the camera furtively resting on these characters only a second or two, but long enough to place the viewer firmly on the outside looking in, to separate the cast of the freak show from a ‘normal’ physicality and location.

This aligns with Church’s reading that perceptions of disability or bodily difference as abnormal or ‘Other’ reinforce the deviancy of cult films and other cultural products that depict such difference. The creeping of the camera literally suggests something odd or illicit is occurring, that Ben is in a suspicious environment, something he voices when he yells, ‘I don’t appreciate being shanghaied by a pack of freaks’ (1:1), piling piratical, unscrupulous and animalistic connotations onto the already unusual crowd he now reluctantly belongs to. Upon first viewing we appear to have a modern example of American carnival impulse at work within the show’s presentation of its characters. In watching a show centred around freaks, one that lingers on their oddity, we’ve bought a ticket to look upon them from a distance, the camera’s gaze fulfilling our economically legitimated curiosity. McGowan states that, regarding this need to reject yet gaze upon the different, ‘it’s most tangible manifestations are those of the freak show, or of American side-show culture.’¹⁵² A television

¹⁵¹ Church, p. 6

¹⁵² McGowan, p. 1

show that in turn depicts a freak show is simply the latest incarnation in a long line of freak-based entertainment.

A generally unanimous critical understanding of the development of the freak show and its multiple incarnations (if not about whether freak shows themselves are commercially or morally acceptable forms of entertainment or ways of life) allows us to see that, in most instances, *Carnivàle* appears to be a faithful recreation of the actuality of travelling carnivals and freak shows in the 1930s. Robert Bogdan's seminal text, *Freak Show* (1988), tracks the development of such arenas of entertainment from their growth in museums in the nineteenth century through to their place in expositions and world fairs – designated sites of 'edutainment' – and their connection to the growth of fad sciences such as teratology, the study of people with bodies that deviate from a broad norm, all catalysed by P. T Barnum's take-over of the American Museum in 1840, the establishment that pushed the freak show to the fore of American amusement.

Those with congenital abnormalities had, of course, been exhibited before this period and the introduction of officialdom and organisation, often touring individually with personal managers. It was the designation of a particular arena for the public to learn and be entertained, combined with the notion that to go to see a freak show was a legitimate activity, that became key to its popularity, its longevity, and its resonance in the American cultural imagination. Bogdan states that '[s]ignificantly, once human exhibits became attached to organizations, distinct patterns of constructing and presenting freaks could be institutionalized, conventions that endure to this day.'¹⁵³ A growing preoccupation with the classification of different races, a taxonomic hierarchy and a growing divide between creationists and those who subscribed to evolutionary theories all created a climate in the nineteenth century in which the organized display of human oddities was a profitable proposition and a much sought out attraction. An unusual star was born.

This development gave rise to dime museums that sprung up, most frequently, in urban areas. They offered a similar, if often more tawdry experience at a cheaper price than their parent institution, the American Museum. Freak shows then found their way into circuses as side shows, providing entertainment for waiting crowds and an extra source of income for the circus outfit before the big top shows got started. They also became a part of World Fairs such the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia in 1876, and the later Columbian Exposition

¹⁵³ Robert Bogdan, *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) p. 11

of 1893 in Chicago, significantly where Buffalo Bill was blurring the lines of history and showmanship with his Wild-West Extravaganza:

It was at this exposition of 1893, in the area around Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show, that the idea of a collective amusement company was first discussed and the carnival as we know it was born. Alongside the daily appearances by Sitting Bull and the display of people from other countries are exotic primitives, a blueprint was formed for the organized touring of the abnormal body for the benefit of paying customers throughout America, not solely those in metropolitan areas.¹⁵⁴

Less concerned with the educational pretensions of its forebears, the travelling carnival took the show previously found at these larger urban meccas of edutainment on the road, giving small-town America a chance to see what it had been missing.

The early twentieth century saw the mood shift regarding freak shows and their various guises. A growing interest in eugenics, and in keeping those with 'bad genes' from passing them on, alongside a moral discomfort attached to the exhibition of those with differences for profit saw a 'medicalization' of so-called freaks develop, many ending up in hospitals and other institutions, shut away to be studied by doctors, not laymen. A resurgent interest in pseudo-medicines like phrenology and physiognomy followed Cesare Lombroso's theory that criminality and degeneracy was hereditary and could be identified through congenital defects and distinct physical characteristics; this developing concern with eugenics and genetic determinism as a means of classifying the 'quality' of certain races or social groups meant that, as Ardis Cameron suggests, a 'domestic 'Dark Continent' emerged' to trouble the social and genealogical integrity of the normative classes.¹⁵⁵ The popular appeal of freak shows suffered, as Bogdan notes: 'The eugenics movement promulgated the idea that physically and mentally inferior people were far from being benign and interesting; rather, they were a danger.'¹⁵⁶

Carnivàle, set in the dilapidated mid-thirties, captures this industry on the down turn; Samson's outfit offers a seedy, shabby show that moves around the small towns of the West and South-West in order to make enough money to survive. The outfit, with its freaks, its cooch dancers, and its rickety rides, encapsulates the last death throes of the side show, far

¹⁵⁴ Bogdan, p. 59

¹⁵⁵ Ardis Cameron, 'Sleuthing Towards America: Visual Detection in Everyday Life' in *Looking for America: The Visual Production of Nation and People*, ed. by Ardis Cameron (Malden; Oxford; Victoria: Blackwell, 2005) pp. 17-41 (p. 33)

¹⁵⁶ Bogdan, p. 63

removed from the grand, municipal structures and strictures of nineteenth century exploration and scientific endeavour; the *Carnivàle* offers up acts typical of the 30s and 40s, where, as Thomas Fahy states, ‘no intellectual pretext could be given for staring.’¹⁵⁷ A ticket purchases a right to ogle and partake in other fairground distractions; the small town visitors to the show never imply that there is any inherent educational value to their experience, barring an implicit reassurance of their own normality and even fortune, compared with the precarious and ‘Otherly’ lives of *Carnivàle*’s freaks and roustabouts. Visitors are there to be shocked, titillated and to ride the Ferris wheel, and look over the small, isolated society they have purchased a chance to stare at from up high - a literal though temporary elevation in their social status within the confines of the fair.

Fahy, aligning with McGowan’s interpretation of these carnival spaces, continues: ‘The freak represented what the audience was not - the Other, someone excluded from mainstream society for being different. In this way, the freakish body revealed surprisingly insecure power structures and suggested underlying anxieties about the ways individuals defined and related to each other in modern America.’¹⁵⁸ Knauf’s creations are pressed to sell visual access to their freakish body or ability, or failing that, an exotic or titillating experience like the cooch show, so that they may eat and drink and buy enough fuel to get them to the next small town waiting for much needed affirmation of the freaks’ multifaceted subordination. The roustabouts, though physically normal except for their leader, Jonesy – a crippled former star baseball player – help to create this spectacle for the same ends.

The freak was rarely allowed to simply be themselves, to present their reality, and instead had to create an act, or had one created for them, that presented their deformity or ability in a stylized manner (the exception being the 10 in 1 show – literally ten exhibits on show in one tent – where quantity and explicit clarity was placed above idiosyncratic presentation). Bogdan states, ‘[s]howman fabricated ‘freak’s backgrounds, the nature of their conditions, the circumstances of their current lives and other personal characteristics. The actual life and circumstances of those being exhibited were replaced by purposeful distortions designed to market the exhibit, to produce a more appealing freak.’¹⁵⁹ Though the *Carnivàle*’s acts are more low rent than any Barnum production, they all have their own ‘shtick’, a persona or set of quips and props that they utilise at show time.

¹⁵⁷ Thomas Fahy, *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2006) p. 10

¹⁵⁸ Fahy, p. 2

¹⁵⁹ Bogdan p. 95

However, even this could be flexible, as is the case with *Carnivàle's* cooch show. Derived from the hoochie coochie, a suggestive belly-dance-esque routine typically presented as being of Oriental, Middle-Eastern or even Gypsy origin that became popular through its presentation at nineteenth century world fairs like Chicago's in 1893, the cooch show swiftly found its place alongside freak shows in America's travelling carnivals. In the *Carnivàle* cooch show, run by the Dreifuss family, the presentation changes nightly; one day the dancers might be thirties glamour girls, the next, can-can dancers, geishas or hula girls, but the show always has one common theme - these costumes and routines are all window dressing for a highly sexualised presentation. Identity is flexible where profit is concerned, the self is set aside and the body hyper-individuated, though ironically this exaggeration subsumes the act into a generalised 'carny' or 'whore' identity and in the case of the cooch a generalised sexual function (primarily female though some female impersonators or drag queens danced the cooch). Though Berger is discussing the nude in Western oil painting specifically here, the act of looking and the structures and styles of cooch presentation produce the same effect he describes: 'The focus on perception shifts from eyes, mouth, shoulders, hands - all of which are capable of such subtleties of expression that the personality expressed by them is manifold - it shifts from these to the sexual parts, whose formulation suggests an utterly compelling but single process.'¹⁶⁰ The costumes, whether Eastern or Western, and the nature of the dance itself - even Western dances like the can-can are eventually reduced to a standard 'jiggling' movement in *Carnivàle* - channel audience vision to specific sexual areas of the body, the effect completed (for extra payment) with the 'blow-off' - full-frontal, legs spread nudity. Costume, props and the women themselves become peripheral to the directed gaze of the audience and the monetary exchange that channels this visual transaction.

Critical discourse regarding freak shows again concurs regarding the types of freaks on show and the ways in which freaks were presented. Bogdan suggests that there were two modes of presentation, the 'exotic' and the 'aggrandized' styles, and that performers generally sat along a spectrum of authenticity, either 'born freaks' (those with congenital deformities or other irregularities dwarfs, tall men, bearded ladies, those with no arms, or legs, or any limbs at all), 'self-made freaks' (circassion beauties, the heavily tattooed or pierced, sword swallows) or 'gaffs' (fakes). The exotic 'cast the exhibit as a strange creature from a little-known part of the world', and normally applied to non-white races;

¹⁶⁰ Berger, p. 59

sometimes these performers did come from Africa, or from little known tribes unfamiliar with western culture, but equally prevalent was the dressing up of black men and women to falsely cast them as ‘savages’ despite them having no physical abnormality and that they were often born and raised in the United States.¹⁶¹ The aggrandized mode was used for people with distinct bodies; these acts were often presented in uniforms or fine clothing and were given status titles, like that of General Tom Thumb, a hypopituitary dwarf and Barnum’s star act in the American Museum.

Carnivàle again faithfully reproduces these different varieties of showmanship. Walter, a member of the Daley Brothers troupe that the *Carnivàle* finds on the road, is clearly a physically normal, healthy black American. His colour is used to render him exotic and turn him into a ‘wild man’ dressed in skins, with bones in his purposefully unkempt hair. His act is a complete gaff, and exaggerates his racial ‘Otherness’, his colour is not ‘freakish’ in and of itself but is a marker of difference strong enough to build a freak identity upon. Characters such as Lila, and Lodz, her blind mentalist lover (he displays unusual psychic abilities including mind control and fortune telling) are aggrandized, dressed sumptuously, with fine clothes and jewellery. Lila curls her beard as another woman might her hair, and fans herself constantly, partly due to the heat of the region and partly a ladylike mannerism cultured to imply genteel respectability – a slippage between her act and herself. Samson and Gecko are almost always wearing a suit. Sabine, the scorpion girl, is also well-turned out in draped fabrics and furs with a heavily made up face. The Siamese twins are presented as pretty, young show girls who sing and do gymnastics, reflecting the fashionable look of the thirties, and a mimic of the real-life Hilton twins, stars of *Freaks* (1932) who were ‘packaged in the twentieth-century wrappings of stage and screen idols.’¹⁶² Even Ben, physically normal but supernaturally freakish, is turned out in a tailcoat and starched collar when he plays Benjamin St. John, a faith healer. When operating in the aggrandized mode the freak’s differences appear almost inconsequential beneath their distinct presentations, just for a moment at least becoming a little something extra they have about their person. However, these ornate costumes are part of the construction and just like the cooch fripperies, the singing and dancing or posing is incidental; it is the exposed flesh, hair or freakish skill that the audience has paid to gasp at. The props, manners and distractions used merely provide a build up to the ‘big reveal.’

¹⁶¹ Bogdan, p. 97

¹⁶² Bogdan, p. 166

As with Walter, other acts in *Carnivàle* are fabricated out of almost nothing. Several characters are ‘self-made freaks’, a snake charmer with elements of a Circassian beauty, a fire eater and a sword swallower among them. Samson is also not above using audacious gaffs to bring in audiences. When the carnival puts on a ‘fireball show’ (1:9), the aim to ‘trim the chumps for all they’re worth,’ he mocks up a freak called ‘Turtle Boy’ - a baby doll glued to an empty turtle shell. Supposedly ‘from the deepest, darkest bayou of Louisiana’, Turtle Boy bobs sadly in a small pool, fooling very few. A ‘man-eating chicken’ is also advertised (which is, of course, a human man eating a piece of chicken), eliciting the groans of those who have queued up to see him. But by then it is too late, they have already parted with their money, the mocked-up or pun-based performers a tongue in cheek reminder that the act of paying to see something freakish might appeal to the baser instincts of the audience and expose their private desires or characteristics, and that being foolish enough to spend their money on such rouses means they deserve to be had. If, as Miller suggests, ‘[d]isgust shocks, entertains by shocking, and sears itself into memory’, that memory is not dispassionate or without consequence; it produces both immediate and cumulative, reverberating sensations.

Alongside fireball shows, a practice, as Ronald E. Ostman states, called ‘shortcake’ was also carried out by carnivals and is evident in *Carnivàle*: ‘Patrons will be short changed by the ticket seller, who is often a ‘grinder’, taking up the banter as the talker trails off.’¹⁶³ Ostman also states that ‘[i]n a ‘grift show’ where the entire circus is set up to clean the suckers, ticket boxes are purposely built higher to prevent the patron from seeing the change as it is laid down (never counted).’¹⁶⁴ ‘Fireball’ is simply Samson’s name for this type of operation. *Carnivàle* depicts this practice and the troupe has a raised ticket stand for such wheezes.

Samson also sends Ben out ‘freak hunting’, a common practice that was meant to ensure a particular outfit signed the most interesting, deformed and therefore profitable freaks to their particular enterprise before a rival got to them. ‘Born freaks’ were in short supply and competitors had to move quickly to ensure they got the best acts. Samson intends to sign up a ‘Scorpion Boy’ he has heard about near Lonnigan, Texas (1:8). The tip turns out to be the result of a series of half-truths that lead Ben to a ‘Lobster Girl,’ and when he finds her, she has already been signed up by Phineas Boffe, a hunter from a rival outfit. The show also

¹⁶³ Ronald E. Ostman ‘Photography and Persuasion: Farm Security Administration Photographs of Circus and Carnival Sideshows’ in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body* ed. by Rosemarie Garland Thomson (New York: New York University Press, 1996) pp. 121-136 (p. 133)

¹⁶⁴ Ostman, p. 133

features the huge painted banners that provided advertising and structure for the carnival space - they frame an area of the camp ground with their huge size, a precursor to the act of looking, as Glenn C. Davies states: 'These images are designed to present information in a non-verbal manner, to communicate with visual dialogue.'¹⁶⁵

This repetition, the accurate recreation of historical freak show practice and presentation, speaks to the conventions Bogdan outlines, and the well-rehearsed homogeneity of freak show operations; whether they moved in the nineteenth century, the 1930s or on modern television, they follow a template of presentation that inherently fulfils McGowan's conceptualisation of the American carnival impulse. This is not the Bakhtinian carnival of inclusion and inversion; Knauf's *Carnivàle* is instead the antithesis to Bakhtin's notion that '[c]arnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.'¹⁶⁶ The *Carnivàle* is a spectacle, a sight to see and a set of bodies to collect that encode for the audience a way to see them; that is its primary function, though it subsequently becomes a place to live for those that must carnivalize themselves to fulfil that function. The American gaze that gave rise to *Carnivàle*'s real-life counterparts did not form immersive moments of inversion, but sites of instruction that might have utilised all types of people but certainly did not embrace them or their variety.

Such lessons, learned among the gaudy banners and 'step right up' atmosphere of the side show, were applied long after the show had moved on. The 'Other' was both displayed and displaced simultaneously in these specific arenas of entertainment and the pattern of social exclusion that informed their creation emerged from them also, carried out of these spaces into wider American culture. At carnival sites, this construction is literal; the displacement is birthed from the rejection of those with bodily differences from normal society, the display revealing an implicit need to still see this 'Other' on stage or in a pit, to know that you are not freakish, that you belong on one side of the ticket booth and they on the other. Again, speaking to the literal fashion in which carnivals and their acts exaggerated their own difference, and the routine and repeated ways in which this exaggeration was achieved, McGowan suggests that '[t]heir performance of otherness is scripted and costumed by the requirements of the white proprietor and viewer and by the stereotyped perceptions of

¹⁶⁵ Glenn C. Davis 'Memorial to the Milestones' in *Freaks, Geeks and Strange Girls: Sideshow Banners of the Great American Midway*, ed. by Lisa Stone (San Francisco: Last Gap Publications, 2004) pp. 63-85 (p. 66)

¹⁶⁶ Bakhtin, p. 7

difference abroad in the wider society.’¹⁶⁷ Freaks must manipulate their own bodies, or present them in a heavily stylized manner that obfuscates their real identity, to create a crowd-pleasing act.

Davis calls the freak show ‘a world where everything is the biggest or greatest.’¹⁶⁸ This language, used so routinely that its claims became ridiculous and particularly ironic given that these shabby twentieth century shows were far removed from their Barnum heritage, was specifically an advertising ploy to get visitors through the gate, when conversely it was the bodies and lives of those on the inside that were amplified to produce a feeling of superiority - culturally, bodily, and racially - in the viewer. Cynthia Burkhead states that ‘[a]s a business, the carnival operators, sideshow freaks included, do not participate in the revelry they sell.’¹⁶⁹ The freaks themselves are, in a sense, hidden, trapped inside the confines of the carnival. Only those that are physically normal in *Carnivàle* are sent on errands into the small towns they hover near and even this does not preclude mistreatment - Sophie is nearly raped by petrol attendants when they realise she is a ‘carny.’ To reveal their abnormalities by simply going shopping or to get gas, those with bodily abnormalities would lose their source of income by giving up the goods too easily, as Samson says to Lila when she is stood outside without a veil on as visitors wander by, ‘you’re giving it away for free’ (2:1). Deformity of any sort becomes something that must be withheld until point of sale, a commodity in McGowan’s ‘economy of seeing’, or it becomes immediately devalued, or worse, a tool in the hands of those who might cause harm.

The only examples we see of the troupe attempting to enjoy themselves and replicate normal social behaviours - and it certainly isn’t when they’re performing - is when the *Carnivàle* and The Daley Brothers outfit merge temporarily and hold a carny-only party in the big top tent (2:6), and when the group venture into Babylon, Texas; finding the town empty save one bartender, they have to create their own amusement (1:4). Babylon turns out to be full of the ghosts of miners who have died there and lingered, and the carnies’ visit does not go unnoticed; as the troupe dance in an otherwise empty bar, the camera pans away from the bar window into the darkness outside as if the group are being watched. The implication is that they might be trespassing, breaking an unspoken rule by drinking and dancing. This transgression leads to Dora Mae, after doing the ‘blow-off’, being kidnapped, hanged and her

¹⁶⁷ McGowan, p. 2

¹⁶⁸ Davis, p. 64

¹⁶⁹ Cynthia Burkhead, ‘An American Freak Show, an American Grotesque’ in *Carnivàle and the American Grotesque* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2015) pp. 142-151 (p. 142)

spirit kept prisoner in the ghost town. The carnival may travel but their mobility does not permit them to transgress delineated social spaces or identities. This notion of being in the wrong place, of crossing impermeable boundaries seems particularly pertinent to travelling spectacles of Otherness, as McGowan states: ‘The static inertia of such a carnival image is at times, ironically, part of a travelling economy.’¹⁷⁰

Carnivàle never lets the audience forget that this is a show on the move. Episodes are named for the geographical locations of the carnival at that stage in the narrative – Milfay, Babylon, Damascus – and we see repeated shots of the caravan of cars and wagons carrying tents and rides to the next location, dust circling around them. The carnies must, as Samson says, ‘shake some dust’, a loaded phrase that implies they must move on to make a living but also shake off their previous show, the looks of their previous visitors, the ‘dust’ of their performed or perceived identities – the status that the ticket buying public assigns them and the association with the Dust Bowl and its destructive effects. They must also outrun any retribution that might be sought after visitors work out some of their insalubrious business practices.

When the troupe do stop, we are shown eye-level and birds-eye shots of the carnival sat in the middle of nowhere. This, combined with these geographical episode titles, heighten this peripheral existence. The troupe are not really in ‘Los Moscos’ or ‘Tipton’, they are in a field or patch of dirt outside these towns, waiting for an audience to come to them, the giant star of the Ferris wheel lit up on the skyline like a beacon that announces their strangeness. Each location looks like the last; dirt and hills surround the camp, highlighting its insignificance and its vulnerability – tents do not provide adequate protection from violent towners, revealed by Dora Mae’s murder and by the later kidnapping and mutilation of Jonesy (2:9).

The banners give some structure to the carnival as does the entrance - a white picket fence a few feet long on either side of a gate with a lit banner above it that reads ‘CARNIVÀLE’, a strange construction that references the conventional ideal American home but fuses it with a sense of transgression, a distortion of normality. The fence abruptly ends on either side of the gate, giving only an illusion of something concrete. The entrance way lends a sense of incompleteness to the carnies’ home, a half-structure that can be packed away at a moment’s notice. We’re shown one particular shot repeatedly – so similar it could even be the same footage – a long shot of the carnival preparing to open, rousties setting up rides in the

¹⁷⁰ McGowan, p. 18

distance, the gate in the middle and the shows and stalls sat quiet behind it. The carny home and identity are literally constructed and deconstructed before our eyes. As with the Californian migrants, the itinerancy of the group and their position on the peripheries of these small towns become yoked to their already ‘freakish’ identities: an unstructured, collapsible home reads for unstructured, disordered residents. Like the migrant camp they are also concentrated – the troupe is nowhere close to 17,000 but it still represents a significant amount of people that prove ungovernable, unpredictable, and able to transgress established norms and locations.

If, as Sibley states, ‘the determination of a border between the inside and the outside [...] translates into several different corporeal or social images which signal imperfection or a low ranking in a hierarchy of being,’ then transience, already a demarcation of difference or a cause for expulsion, again amplifies the strangeness of the Carnivàle’s freaks and carnies, and places them firmly if not at the bottom of the social hierarchy then outside it, as the group is not in one place long enough to be incorporated into any one social system.¹⁷¹ The carnies are negatively ‘unbounded’ in the sense that their homes - tents, caravans, the space underneath a truck even - do not sufficiently delineate them from the outside world, as a standard dwelling would. This is a continuation of Sibley’s ‘ecological account of the self’, of non-human items or animals, in this case empty space and the trappings of itinerancy being used as a referential for framing the carny experience.

Their transience is again akin to the negative associations projected onto Californian migrants; however, certainly within the show, theirs is perpetual. They must always keep moving, an activity perceived negatively by those in the towns they visit but one necessary for them to make a living. Their rejection is two-fold; firstly, because they have some form of deformity, have been ‘Othered’ or have ‘Othered’ themselves in some way or that they work with or for those that do; secondly because that Otherness requires them to move around so that they may be seen and rejected, over and over again, by each new visitor in each new town.

The fake barrier of the ticket gate, incomplete mimic of the normal American house and its borders and the point at which entrance into the carnival proper is purchased, hints that the carnival is an in-between place, a source of attraction and repulsion for towners. If, as Kristeva states, the problem with the abject is that ‘[i]t lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated’, then the spatial positioning of freak shows just outside these towns, and their

¹⁷¹ Sibley, p. 14

drawing on the curiosity of the residents who want to look at but not engage with what they're being shown, becomes a source of tension between normal and abject groups and between the urges and fears of the normal individual.¹⁷² The show aesthetic is also uncanny in this respect: the barrier is a simulacrum of a home, or at least part of one, but it is also a space of entertainment; it is both private and public, disgusting and alluring, familiar and hidden - both *Heimlich* and *Unheimlich*. Freud suggests that 'an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary'.¹⁷³ The fantastical presentations that form the freak show's oeuvre are, therefore, a fantasy that emphasises the very reality of their abnormal bodies, and indeed their success and life despite these bodies, for this is the human form but not as we know it.

The travelling nature of the freak show solves one of the problems it creates. In *Carnivàle*, as in its real-life counterparts, any residual anxiety towners might feel about the troupe is eliminated by the show removing itself from their proximity - the freaks simply move on, their presence immortalised only in memory, souvenirs and ticket stubs. The temporary entrance of an able-bodied, predominantly white viewer into the carnival world might bring with it the excitement of contravening certain boundaries, of lowering oneself by crossing the ticket gate and giving those with bodies displayed as entirely different to yours your money so that you might recognise your own as normal, but this excitement is not counter-balanced with the fear that they may enter the normal world in return, because the carnies simply disappear in the night. The tension within the individual that the abject and the uncanny create, however, in both recognition and the need to look yet also look away, to display and displace, is less easily abated.

Miller suggests that '[s]omething pre-social seems to link in to a strong sense of disgust and horror at the prospect of a body that doesn't quite look like one, either grotesquely deformed by accident or disorganized by mayhem.'¹⁷⁴ This mayhem implies an energy or illicit life, an excessive quality that jars with the non-generative, dried out world of *Carnivàle*. Miller suggests that '[o]ur bodies and our souls are the prime generators of the disgusting. What the animals remind us of, the ones that disgust us – insects, slugs, worms, rats, bats, newts, centipedes – is life, oozy, slimy, viscous, teeming, messy, uncanny life.'¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982) p. 1

¹⁷³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny*, trans. by David McLintock (London: Penguin, 2003) p. 150

¹⁷⁴ Miller, p. 82

¹⁷⁵ Miller, p. 50

The very life of a freak is then, as mentioned, part of the shock a visitor experiences - that they have one, that they exist, and seek to thrive, albeit in limited parameters. If, as Miller continues, ‘the generator of disgust is generation itself, surfeit, excess of ripeness,’ then an excessive, or misshapen, or compacted body suggests a biological process or being that was once out of control and one that could be again, if not for the confines of the stage, the tent and the fence.¹⁷⁶ We have the uncanny manifest on a cellular level, the natural process of growth repeated with abnormal results, in manifold abnormal forms that threaten to overwhelm the normal.

The precariousness of this confinement, however, is not the primary driver of disgust; Miller states that, ‘[i]t is not that we fear intimacy with them or their intimacies with others; it is that we know how we see them and could not bear to be thus seen. The horror then is not being intimate with them (although that too), but in being them.’¹⁷⁷ The recognition that not much separates the viewer and the viewed, beyond a set, some props and circumstance, produces a rupture in the American carnival impulse that *Carnivàle* depicts, and takes the show beyond an uncomplicated framing of these visual cues. It creates moments of recognition that blur attempts to render the carnies homogenous in their individuality.

Dawn Prestwich, a writer and executive producer on the show, states that ‘our belief, you know, thematically, in this whole series, is that the freaks are the normal people and it’s the normal people, you know, who are kind of bizarre.’¹⁷⁸ *Carnivàle*, then, is specular; it holds a mirror up to the audiences that come to gaze upon alterity. Regarding these social binaries Sibley states that ‘[o]ccasionally, these social cleavages are marked by inversions - those who are usually on the outside occupy the centre and the dominant majority are cast in the role of spectators.’¹⁷⁹ In *Carnivàle*, the dominant majority are spectators - this position is not altered, it is this spectatorship that elevates them to dominance - but an inversion takes place in that the show is primarily filmed from inside the carnival, and particularly when the acts are ‘off-duty’, eating, talking, at leisure. While we are never given one clear shot out of the gate, an explicit outward gaze - we still get a sense of being firmly within the camp. Indeed, the suggestion is that many of those inside the carnival do not need or wish to look outward, as what they see when they do holds no appeal. The viewer sees the social and bodily norm through different eyes and finds that outward gaze is unforgiving. Rachel Adams points out

¹⁷⁶ Miller, p. 42

¹⁷⁷ Miller, p. 82

¹⁷⁸ Dawn Prestwich, ‘Making Carnivàle: The Show Behind the Show’, (2003) [DVD-ROM]

¹⁷⁹ Sibley, p. 43

an uncomfortable truth about the nature of paying to look at another person: '[...] spectators may be disconcerted to find their gazes returned, often laden with resentment or hostility.'¹⁸⁰

If what Homi Bhabha calls the 'scopic drive', 'the drive that represents the pleasure in 'seeing', [...] and locates the surveyed object within the 'imaginary' relation' sees audiences combining vision and liberty by paying to see acts of the 'imaginary' - freaks or acts constructed specifically to confirm their worst nightmares or prejudices or to titillate their worst impulses, all a by-product of implicit identity consolidation, then a returned gaze operates in a similar manner to the uncanny, and contests or dismantles that imaginary or at least confirms its unreality.¹⁸¹ Bhabha states that 'the recognition and disavowal of 'difference' is always disturbed by the question of its re-presentation or construction. '; the displeasured gaze of the act intercepts the scope of their audience in a way that illuminates the act as presentation, one tailor-made to extort the most profit possible from those that want to see it. Freaks can look back at their audience, and reassert their agency and disquieting humanity through their own outward stare. A ticket only purchases a certain amount of passivity.

Bogdan suggests that '[u]ltimately, showmen split humanity into two parts: those who were 'with it,' and those who were not.'¹⁸² Carnival culture was very much geared towards enforcing an 'us and them' relationship between carnival folk and towners, or 'rubes', 'yokels', 'marks', and 'suckers' in carny speak.¹⁸³ Rube is the term used most in *Carnivàle*, primarily by Samson, who frequently directs his troupe to fleece visitors for all they are worth, his insider language aimed at dividing the 'Other' - the towner in this case - from the savvy carny, and the towner from his wallet also. Rube, dating from 1896, was shortened from Rueben, which had a longer history as a conventional name for a country type - uneducated, unsophisticated or naïve – which is exactly how Samson sees most of those that come through his picket gate.¹⁸⁴ 'Rube' is a quality he tries to educate out of Ben, a foolish honesty he must shake before he truly becomes part of the group: 'Christ boy, when you going to learn that everything about this business is sketchy' (1:8). Talking to a towner, he of course says the complete opposite: 'We run a clean operation' (1:3).

¹⁸⁰ Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001) p. 7

¹⁸¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London; New York: Routledge, 2004) p. 109

¹⁸² Bogdan, p. 83

¹⁸³ Bogdan, p. 81

¹⁸⁴ <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=rube> [accessed 15/10/2016]

Ben's quick integration into the carnies world is met with approval; when he exclaims it was 'raining silver' after Ruthie's snake dance, she observes he is 'sounding more like a carnies everyday' (1:9). Contempt for the paying rube sometimes slips into or becomes part of the act itself. A woman watching Elastic Boy, a contortionist, shouts out, 'I bet he can lick himself just like a dog' (2:2). Without missing a beat, Elastic Boy retorts, 'If you's the alternative, I sure as hell hope so', cuing nervous laughter from the crowd, unsure as to whether a line has been crossed and which of the two has crossed it.

Nor are the freaks above judging each other. When they encounter the Daley Brothers outfit, Lila talks to the 'fat woman' about a bearded lady in another troupe, insinuating that her beard is a 'gaff', a fake made of horsehair (2:6). Gecko states that he hates albinos as they give him the creeps. The shabby presentation of Burt, the he-she, is also mocked - Stumpy Dreifuss calls him 'the worst damn he-she I even did see,' (2:6). A freak's position on the spectrum of authenticity could grant them status among their group and in the wider carnival world, and it would be naive at best to assume that carnies and freaks didn't have their own prejudices and preferences. However, despite gossip and internal mockery, *Carnivàle's* characters are a band less concerned with individual physical difference than with the broader differences that sit between towners and carnies and, barring Gecko's dislike for albinos, mainly harbour prejudices that stem from a sense of pride concerning their freak identity and carnies professionalism. Lila is not concerned when the spirit of the dead Lodz enters Ruthie and the pair have sex – Lila is perfectly willing to touch Ruthie's body, knowing Lodz resides within. Other relationships, sexual and domestic, function as normal, whatever the abnormality or act of the participants. The rousties, talkers, ticket sellers and cooch dancers are not physically different to towners but their job and attitude places them firmly in the carnival camp and to the camp the only difference that matters is that which lies between them and the towners 'Other.'

Indeed, *Carnivàle* engages in the creation of a 'generalized other' in its depiction of Babylon (1:5). The ghostly miners visit to the carnival explicitly creates a carnivalized and reductive version of the normal ticket buying public. The miners appear as if out of nowhere, all wearing dirty blue jeans, their faces indistinct; they shuffle through the gate in silence, lifelessly alike. Their pharisaic murder of Dora Mae (they brand her a harlot yet keep her ghost as a sex-slave) acts as distillation of all that is ugly about the American carnival impulse and the way it is operationally always in conflict – reject and look, displace and display, condemn and possess. Except here the miners are the worst features of normal society (in *Carnivàle's* context at least) presented as a homogenous, blurred mass. Their

brutality, predation, and deathliness appear in contrast to the life, dignity and compassion of the Carnivàle's troupe, something only further emphasised by the loving funeral service and orderly retributive ritual the troupe hold after her death. The miners are trapped, vicious and dull shades who kill seemingly because they cannot cope with the tension that exists between their disgust and lust, a sentiment Miller succinctly encapsulates: 'Men desire access to the vagina, but also fear it.'¹⁸⁵ The miners want the body of Dora Mae, even in spectral form, but loathe what that body represents. The show bestows upon them a non-identity and bounds them in a limited location - the mining town they all died in – an other-worldly punishment that consolidates their lack of individuation. Though dangerous within this confine, they're rendered pathetic and aberrant ghosts of the past, literal nobodies, who cannot escape the limits and limitations of their own death, and in their portrayal, *Carnivàle* casts one half of the visual binary, the spectator this time, as ignominiously pathological.

These binaries – normal/abnormal, townier/carny – depicted in the show first episodes, begin to disintegrate as the narrative moves onward. When Ben goes freak hunting (1:8), he encounters an auto-attendant with an intellectual disability as well as a skin condition and a speech impediment. We might be tempted to frame him within the same realm of identity as those in the carnival. He, however, reacts to those around him in a manner that surprises Ben and disrupts our expectations; he shouts abuse at a family of Okies who need to get their car tyre fixed, refusing to serve them, and when he sees Lobster Girl, he says to Ben that she's '[a] real freak, that one.' By verbally and violently asserting his own superiority, keeping the family at a physical and associational distance from himself, he denies or simply does not recognise any connection to those we assume he might identify with. He resists classification while happily denigrating and stereotyping others, rendering the family stuck in both automotive and social terms. His physical characteristics and the context in which he is presented might render him freakish to an external viewer – they certainly generate distaste in Ben - but freak is not a term or an identity he associates with himself.

Bogdan suggests that 'Freak' is not a quality that belongs to the person on display. It is something that we created: a perspective, a set of practices – a social construction.'¹⁸⁶ In the show it is a term employed by various characters, including the 'freaks' themselves. Though the auto-attendant might have a set of characteristics that could easily facilitate him becoming a 'freak' in certain circumstances, those characteristics alone are not enough to make him

¹⁸⁵ Miller, p. 102

¹⁸⁶ Bogdan, p. xi

one. He works a normal job and adopts the standard prejudices of those around him. He is neither 'normal' townner, nor a carny with the trappings that create a second, externalized identity. In *Carnivàle*'s world, he occupies a middle ground that sits in between the two possible states shown, itinerant/freakish and stationary/normal.

He is not alone. Jonesy also occupies a liminal position within the show's world. Klaus Rieser states that 'images are overwhelmingly present in American life,' and that '[a]mong this flood of visual representations, a limited number of images gain greater prominence and remain in the public consciousness for an extended period of time, thereby becoming icons.'¹⁸⁷ Jonesy, with a leg so damaged he must wear a brace which alters his gait significantly, is an example of what happens when a person situated in one arena of national iconography – in his case a promising career in national American baseball - ends up in another, a Dust Bowl freak show.

Michael Fuchs and Michael Phillips state that in America, sports are read as 'a metaphor for life,' and that '[a]mong sports fans, the common view is that the essential struggle for success is ritually enacted on the playing fields/courts of America.'¹⁸⁸ Flashbacks reveal Jonesy's knee was broken because he refused to throw a game. The price he pays for honesty is an injury that puts paid to his sporting career and finds him assembling a Ferris wheel for a living. He goes from Clayton Jones to Jonesy, Samson's right-hand man. However, despite his job and his injury, Jonesy is not a freak. Physically unusual, with his over-extended stride and imposing stature, Jonesy again occupies an unusual place within *Carnivàle* which both challenges and underpins the notion, broadly accepted and argued in critical understanding of freakery, that freaks are made and not born. What is Jonesy if not 'freakish' or normal? He is not a performer – his injury not been with him since birth but is a physical reminder of a former identity now lost to him. It represents what he was, not what he is now, and also, like the migrants symbolising the failure of American agricultural commerce, signifies the corruption at work on the supposedly meritocratic American sports field.

Babe Ruth, arguably the most famous baseball player ever, iconic in the early decades of the twentieth-century and still celebrated today, acts as the original figure to Jonesy's distorted mirror image, what Clayton Jones might have become had he remained undamaged. Shots of Ruth feature in the show's expository title sequence, alongside other clips of 1930s

¹⁸⁷ Klaus Rieser, 'Introduction: Theorizing Iconic Figures' in *Configuring America: Iconic Figures, Visuality and the American Identity*, ed. by Klaus Rieser and others (Chicago; London: Intellect, 2013) pp.3-21 (p. 3)

¹⁸⁸ Michael Fuchs and Michael Phillips, 'LeBron James and the Web of Discourse: Iconic Sports Figures and Semantic Struggles' in *Configuring America: Iconic Figures, Visuality and the American Identity* pp. 67-92 (p. 86)

footage (aid queues, The KKK, blimps, dust storms, Nazis, Jesse Owens, FDR) intercut with images of Tarot cards and biblical scenes that reference the more mythological narrative elements of the show. Ruth's play altered the way baseball was played, 'home runs' becoming the aim of the game thanks to his powerful hit. His physicality altered the American consciousness and became a part of American iconography, taking sports with it. Jonesy is Ruth knocked off this trajectory, strength diminished, his imperfect body necessitating a marginal existence.

In an industry hungry for new attractions, and where Samson can gaff up something as unconvincing as 'Turtle Boy' for a paying public and just about get away with it, there lies an implicit possibility that Jonesy could have been packaged as a freak, an act that passed off his injury as congenital or else displayed him overcoming this damage in some way, his failed baseball career ample material for a freak narrative that would blend one national preoccupation with another. Spectators who once watched him on the ball field might be drawn to see his antithetical new existence in a freak show. As it is, in *Carnivàle*, Jonesy stays off the stage; there is no mention of him becoming an act. Nor does the *Carnivàle* makes advances towards Maddy, the little girl Jonesy takes kindly on in the first episode; she cannot walk and must be pulled everywhere in a trolley. Jonesy lets her ride the Ferris wheel for free, an activity she can take part in without difficulty. She too could be trained as a performer - she is adept at moving herself when not in her trolley - but no approach is made to this end.

Instead, Ben heals them both, fixing the girl's legs and saving Jonesy's life when he is tarred and feathered after a woman falls from the Ferris wheel on his watch (a strange echo of the creation of the Chicken Woman in *Freaks* and another means of physically 'Othering' someone as a punishment, like taking a bat to someone's knee). In saving him, Ben also heals Jonesy's injury - when he wakes he finds he is fully mobile once again and, crucially, can pitch a ball. Maddy and Clayton Jones/Jonesy represent the precariousness of the body, the different bodies a person might have in their life - physiology and identity can move from normal to abnormal and back again; the space between these variations can shorten or disappear entirely. Jonesy morphs from famous sports star to cripple to near-dead to healthy. Migrants move from respectable old-stock Americans to unwanted Okies before reclaiming a sense of belonging in Justin's camp. Transience is not only geographical, but corporeal. Itinerancy is not, here, a moral failing, but a state that materialises in life, body and vocation.

American visual culture and carnival impulses respond and adapt to this precariousness, creating structures and locations through which to gaze upon and make judgement upon

marginalised people according to a shared understanding of social hierarchy. However, this codification isn't always easy to do, and generates anxiety because economic circumstances severely reduce the distance between normal and abnormal and render events such as freak shows uncomfortable and uncanny spaces of identification rather than straightforward opportunities to gawk at something reassuringly unfamiliar. Fahy states that in the Depression, 'the physical cost of employment, illness and hunger could often be seen on the body, the sideshow performer was often an unwanted reminder of everyday hardships and physical vulnerability.'¹⁸⁹ While after each show *Carnivàle*'s freaks and rousties move on, removing any physical or spatial issue related to their difference, the realisation that the viewer is only one bad harvest, or one bad accident away from the same existence and the same social status as those in the camp or the show, and the contrast between the strange yet successful (in biological and often economical terms) life in the *Carnivàle* – the excess, or excessive life – and the degenerated geology and economy of the Depression, starkly undermines the benefits of paying to look at abnormality.

However, while Ben's ability to heal those around him facilitates the show's depiction of the instability of both body and identity, it also raises further questions surrounding just who is a 'freak' and who isn't that are left unanswered. Just as there is an implicit possibility that Jonesy could have become an act instead of a roustabout, Ben's presence amongst a group of people who have physical or mental abnormalities infers that these abnormalities might be 'fixable.' Ben saves the lives of Jonesy and of Ruthie when she is snake-bit. He can cure physical ailments from the minor to the terminal through taking the life from one thing or person and channelling it to another. He can even cure or soothe grief; in the first episode he calms a migrant woman who can't seem to let go of her dead baby (1:1), and he fixes Maddy's legs though she had been born without the use of them. He can also heal scarred and burned flesh, as he does with his father, who has mutilated himself to avoid detection by Ben. He can do all this, yet not one of the 'freaks' in *Carnivàle* enquires about the application of his power to congenital deformity or other conditions, such as Apollonia's paralysis, after they either intuit what he is or find out when Jonesy tells them.

The silence in the narrative regarding these possibilities is difficult to interpret. In light of the history of freak shows and the committal of the disabled into hospitals after the appeal of such entertainments waned, Ben is perhaps Knauf resisting the 'medicalisation' of his characters; they don't ask to be healed because their bodies aren't 'problems' or ailments to

¹⁸⁹ Fahy, p. 80

fix. They function, not as the ‘Other’ to a normal, white body, but as dynamic, flawed individuals, each with their own idiosyncrasies. This is what Ben says to Maddy, when she tells him that her ‘Grammie says y’all are marked’; his reply, ‘Nah. They ain’t marked. They’re just people, that’s all,’ suggests that, like the spectrum of authenticity within the carnival structure, bodies in *Carnivàle* exist on a shared plane underpinned by a flawed humanity common to all, including Ben and Justin.

Alternately, the freaks’ lack of interest in Ben’s ability within the narrative could imply the converse to this argument; only those with ‘whole’, normal looking configurations are healed by Ben, implying, particularly within a narrative heavily reliant on themes of fate and the individual’s destiny within a grand narrative, that there are those that are freaks and those that aren’t. Jonesy shouldn’t have had his leg broken; Maddy, apart from her legs, is an otherwise ‘complete’ and normal looking child. Other characters within the narrative wouldn’t have become sick if it weren’t for the poor conditions the 1930s were inflicting upon them. These things are fixed in the narrative, a sense of order restored. These restorations seem to delineate the abnormal from the temporarily or wrongfully broken, giving their condition if not a physiognomic character than certainly a fatalistic one. Their role has been assigned, their difference pre-destined and unchangeable. They simply cannot ever be normal, as Garland Thomson suggests: ‘Never simply itself, the exceptional body betokens something else, becomes revelatory, sustains narrative, exists socially in a realm of hyper representation.’¹⁹⁰ Freakishness, unlike injury, grief, culture and creed, cannot be hidden, or healed, only exposed.

While *Carnivàle*, with its freak show setting, its Depression-era story arc and direction and editing that makes explicit an individual’s abnormalities, might appear to depict the display and the displacement of its freaks and Okies, and to reflect the binary this treatment constructs - ‘Otherness’ as opposed to normality, freakish as opposed to appropriate or expected, spectacle as opposed to respectable - it also works to display this binary is constructed on shaky foundations. The show raises more questions than it answers, from its indeterminate position between cult show and mainstream fare, to the ambiguous potentials that lie in its open-ended depiction of both migrants and freaks within its world. It faithfully recreates historical freak show practice, then subverts this convention by involving its

¹⁹⁰ Rosemarie Garland Thomson ‘Introduction: From Wonder to Error – A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity’ in *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, pp. 1-19 (p. 3)

characters in a biblical parable of good and evil, the forces of which are so alike and intertwined they are often indistinguishable.

Perhaps this is why its ratings did not hold; the abstruse offerings of Knauf's world are too impenetrable, too blurred, to appeal to all but the most ardent viewer. Ultimately, it elicits neither sympathy for the migrants or freaks nor disdain or disgust. Sometimes the viewer is placed on the outside of the freak show looking in, but more often than not we are inside it, looking out. It is left to us to form our own understanding about who or what is freakish or 'Other' from the show's unusual population, whether the 'freak' is a social construction or something more concrete. What it does illustrate clearly, however, is that there is another side to the American carnival impulse: that the act of looking at a freak, a carnny, an Okie, is not a one-sided transaction. The normal gaze does not render the 'Other' blind - your eyes might be met; your body, your culture, your way of life might be judged, and none too kindly; the cost of your ticket might cost you your dignity, self-perception and social identity, or all three. The tie between normal and 'Other' is inseparable, unlike a person and the money in their pocket, but an individual's position between them is always up for negotiation.

Competing Centralities: A Conclusion

These three shows, though geographically, thematically and temporally disparate, present through aesthetic and narratological means the American carnival impulse writ large on screen. Spanning the South, the West and the spaces in between, *True Blood's* age-old vampires, *Deadwood's* (neoliberal) portentous frontier and *Carnivàle's* pre-war, biblical myth meets American poverty and idiosyncrasy, offer a televisual reconnoitre of the United States, examining its preoccupation with the visual, before indeed documenting its inability to fully read the visual. We see the machinery of identity construction at work, the 'maskings, distortions and falsification,' at the heart of the impulse, and become witnesses to the visual assemblage of the Other.¹⁹¹

In *American Carnival*, McGowan is seeking to collapse the notion that a strict separation exists between 'the spheres of reality and carnival in America,' asserting that the 'two interfere with each other, continually involved in a process of mutual construction, affirmation, reconstruction and reaffirmation.'¹⁹² American culture is the sediment, the strata of this process, laid down over the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries, layers of visual cues and clues learned at showgrounds, midways, fairs and theme parks, small scale or large. Behaviours and responses adopted at these events bled into more quotidian environments and became insidious, a pattern to take away and replay, to repeat and revive as necessary.

Concurrently we also see behind the impulse, the disassemblage of the Other, the basements, balconies and banners that conceal the negotiation, manipulation or indeed collapse of this carnival impulse; we are presented with the re-assemblage of the Other on its own terms, the image of the it sent back out to confront and combat, through distorted means, itself. We see the Other's refusal to 'be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference,' alongside its 'failure' to be the preferable, dominant, complete, finished body, whether that 'body' is corporeal, cultural, social or taxonomic.¹⁹³ If, as Bhabha states, 'the stereotype is an impossible object', then the monstrous minority, the obsolete culture and the disassembled man are not as clear cut as the loci of this impulse would have us believe, nor are the communities and individuals that use and frame these conduits for such demarcative purposes, implicitly or explicitly, complete. Just as the boundaries and purpose of any given

¹⁹¹ McGowan, p. 1

¹⁹² McGowan, p. 4

¹⁹³ Bhabha, p. 46

location are negotiable, the reiteration of Othered identities never fully negates this Other's refusing or repurposing them.¹⁹⁴ The generalised 'Other', and indeed the generalised 'anti-Other', are a work of imagination, a costume, tar and feathers, white sheets, a black cape, a sheriff's badge, a dinner jacket. They are an aesthetic tool kit, a set of signs whose meanings don't always correlate completely, a façade that seeks to compound and compress a spectrum of individuals into its monological realm.

These shows present this imaginative realm as one vulnerable to both inversion and re-configuration. *True Blood* and *Carnivàle* see the Other reframe itself to undercut, humiliate, or financially or physically exploit the dominant individuals or social structures that render them Other to begin with. *Deadwood* and *Carnivàle* depict the ways in which people from a variety of social groups must engage in a process of disguise, compromise and avoidance with regards to society and identity to navigate interpellation, sublimation and the threat of violence. *True Blood* and *Deadwood* chart the slippage between a false, or mythic, binary; location and genre may separate the Other and its supposed antithesis, but the body itself, blood, effluvia, bone, skin, negates the separation it is supposed to create. The body is the earth (the conductor) for these amplifications, the builder and dismantler, if not quite destroyer, of carnival impulses. Indeed, McGowan describes the daily interactions that stem from the showground arena as 'subcutaneous'; while the word has no full antonym, these carnival spaces rely on the outer, the external, the skin, the dermal as their language. However, this dermis is more membrane than wall, and the multitudes of information it is supposed to convey is far more amorphous, transitory and universal than standard cultural reactions and readings first support.

McGowan also likens the two 'types' of carnival, Bakhtinian and American, to centrifugal and centripetal forces respectively, and just like the visual and cultural lines that tether American reality to its carnival unreality, one force does not exist without the other. On a body of mass travelling on a circular plane, centrifugal force appears to draw the mass away from the centre, to stretch it, to attempt to free the mass from the middle-ground; centripetal force does the opposite, and impels the object towards the static centre.¹⁹⁵ The analogy serves McGowan perhaps better than he realised: centripetal force is physical reality, the moving mass *is* pushed inward whereas centrifugal force only appears to be reality; it is an 'apparent force', in that it only seems to exert an outward push on the mass, dependent on where the

¹⁹⁴ Bhabha, p. 116

¹⁹⁵ McGowan, p. 11

viewer is stood - in the middle in this case. Again, it is a matter of vision: from the centre, the mass appears to pull away, but the centre retains control over the mass, and its movement and distance away from this governing middle. Centrifugal exertion is a disquieting illusion that appears parallel to the controlling forces that create its appearance. Centripetal reality is witnessed from the mass, from the outside in, from the object of control while motion (analogous to culture building by the dominant population) continues.

In appearance, American carnival is the 'closed, completed unit', that Bakhtin suggests old European carnival inherently is not, a finalised system, a circular world of repressive propulsion. However, even though American culture does appear to render the possibility of a European-style carnival impossible even in its festive spaces, the impossibility of that freedom, however temporary, does not restrict a counter-flow. Even if the centre we are shown remains the dominant population, and the mass moving around it remains the peripheral, liminal, generalised Other, this movement renders this Other impossible to pinpoint; it becomes a blur, hidden or sufficiently out of reach from the centre to engage in its own acts of construction and distortion in order to counter the regulating forces of its opposite, the equally homogenised anti-Other, and to render the centre's similarity, superiority and normality (the cornerstone of this dominant group) both ugly and precarious. The string that connects centre to mass ties the dominant group to the Other, and feeds disquieting yet familiar images and sensations back and forth along a dermal, corporeal, human connective. If Bakhtinian carnival works by reversing a vertical, hierarchical ladder, American carnival perceives itself as halting such reversal, but actually operates on a linear plane, the push and pull of identity negation and creation stretching back and forth between a multitude of different social and racial groups.

If, 'like America itself, television has always existed in a state of transfiguration, being continually reshaped and occasionally reinvented by a wide assortment of technological, commercial, and social factors,' then HBO in the mid-nineties to mid-noughties was at the forefront of digital subscription development, and helped to produce the instant and multi-platform visual world we now occupy, where serials are ubiquitous, and form the baseline of shared culture, against the flow of typical, mainstream television.¹⁹⁶ The shows I have examined, three of its biggest successes commercially or critically, offer up various incarnations of America's preoccupation with the visual in relation to notions of power, control and social organisation. Through their histories, analogies and aesthetics they present

¹⁹⁶ Edgerton, p. 2

American culture on screen, and chart the Othering, self-Othering and reverse-Othering that permeates this culture, societal reactions that were catalysed in museums, side shows and expositions and spilt over in wider culture. These narratives, granted, are only a fraction of HBO's output, and a drop in the ocean in regards to the plethora of quality series that have now matched or possibly even overtaken film as the way Americans consume and process their history, culture and future, but given that McGowan proposes a carnivalesque model unique to the United States that is grounded in visual interactions, it seems imperative to apply his framework to visual material in order to examine how prejudice and power, Otherness and normality, success and shame and space and place are constructed and deconstructed acutely and obliquely. These programmes show us that, however strong or unshakable we think our position may be, our gaze can always be returned, our body can be reconfigured, and our sense of self overturned in the showground that is America.

The Creative-Critical Approach: Framing and Writing Spectacle in a Gothic Western Hybrid

I wrote *Tarnished*, the novel that follows this thesis, understanding (and struggling with) the way in which Westerns are primarily a visual, and specifically cinematic, genre. They function as a vehicle for particular set pieces, the most common a gun fight but stampedes, train or stage robberies, rescues, battles between Native Americans and the U.S Military or Cowboys, bar brawls, court room dramas and public justice also featuring heavily in the Western narrative canon. These tableaux are shorthand for the genre – each is distinctly recognizable as a Western trope, and each is distinctly reliant on violence, or functions as the route to violence, which is more often than not highly choreographed and synchronously explosive and balletic. The Western genre is reliant, then, on both this violence and its main product – visible pain, pain that is specifically corporeal and is, whether immediate or enduring, expected, accepted and born with gritted teeth and minimal complaint, as Jane Tompkins suggests: ‘[p]hysical sensations are the bedrock of the experience Westerns afford.’¹⁹⁷ It is also reliant on overwhelming vistas that dwarf the figures that traverse them, and, in the combination of these elements, reliant on spectacle, one that forms frontier narratives in very specific, repetitive ways. These moments of intense sensation are often connected by a whole lot of nothing, or if not nothing then a form of high minimalism, enacted through scanty, tense interactions in sprawling wilderness or cobbled together settlements – men sat eyeballing each other, drinking whisky measures with a staccato tip of the arm, the slow swing of a leg onto a bar stool, horses hitched and waiting. When they aren’t depicting men being gunned down, they make a show of sparseness, of restraint, offering up a superfluity of the minimal while they wind their way towards the next enactment of violence or suffering. Westerns are gruelling, and deliberately so – skeletal set dressing in skeletal narratives punctuated by the short, sharp excess of jeopardy.

Westerns, of course, have an extensive life on the page, with plenty of comic-book and pulp fiction examples printed after the Second World War, the pulp stories in particular adhering to strict narrative formula, utilising the Western inventory within short, easily consumable lengths. Well-known Western literary fiction exists also, Cormac McCarthy, James Fenimore Cooper, Glendon Swarthout and Charles Portis all popular and enduring Western authors (the latter’s *True Grit*, 1968, in my opinion both a near-perfect example of the genre and a near-perfect disruption of it also in its depiction of two ineffective, bickering

¹⁹⁷ Jane Tompkins, *West of Everything* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) p. 3

men being out-done by a redoubtable, determined teenage girl who is certainly more ‘cowboy’ than they will ever be). However, the most famous Westerns are films (indeed *True Grit* is better known as a piece of cinema, with both 1969 and 2010 seeing the narrative hit the big screen); even if these stories start out life on the page, they find an audience, and arguably their true form by being swiftly made into a movie, the stock Western a sort of multiple exposure created and curated by the likes of John Ford, John Wayne, Kevin Costner, Clint Eastwood, Quentin Tarantino, Howard Hawks and Sergio Leone, among many others. We rely on these names and faces to communicate the genre before the titles haven begun, as we do the set pieces outlined earlier or the archetypal *mise-en-scène*: sun bleached rock, bone dry grass, leathery men, the spray of burnt gun powder, a bullet through flesh – all take up the work of genre communication without the need for language.

Westerns lean toward the visual so heavily because it creates a reality that the typed word cannot and renders further or linguistic explanation seemingly redundant, frivolous or overwrought. Tompkins continues, suggesting that ‘Westerns satisfy a hunger to be in touch with something absolutely real. It is good that the eye has to squint at the sun, since what the eye craves is the sun’s reality.’¹⁹⁸ Reality and unambiguity are valuable to the genre, firstly because they engender the kind of physical pain mentioned above that takes precedent over and indeed negates any psychical suffering that characters might be forced to exhibit or apprehend in other less concrete forms; characters in Westerns don’t tend to ‘think’ but instead act, the action taken always presented as a form of organic response, or as organic as possible where guns are involved – grievance meets grievance, gunfire meets gunfire, death meets death until one person, or indeed no-one, is left standing. It is valuable, secondly, because the Western has come to stand for frontier history in the public imagination, the ‘movie version’ overlaying the actuality of the frontier like no other historical period or moment and its cultural counterpart.

Lee Clark Mitchel suggests that ‘[p]art of the reason Westerns are so invested in historical authenticity (far more than musicals, detective stories, soap operas, or other popular forms) is paradoxically because they aspire to mythic resolution of crises.’¹⁹⁹ They use authenticity, reality, the physical and tangible to create a fiction from a historical fact, this fiction then culturally read as fact; the Westerns visual assemblage, laden as it is with stereotype, aesthetic-standards and narrative formula, appears as a further manifestation of the highly

¹⁹⁸ Tompkins, p. 3

¹⁹⁹ Lee Clark Mitchell, *Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 24

stylized Barnum approach to freak show presentations, trappings that both hide and highlight the body underneath them, that straddle reality and unreality. Such stylization, focussing through standard set pieces on what the Western *is*, conversely, manages to reveal (unintentionally) what it is not, which is, of course, reality. Equally, its mythic Odysseus, the cowboy gunslinger archetype, inadvertently contains the same tensions. He (and 99% of the time it is a he) is a stock figure, visually assembled – hat, boots, guns, stilted walk and jaded eyes – a Halloween costume with next to nothing underneath, both real and unreal. Yet he is still the ‘hero.’

How then, was I to present this visual spectacle and its attempts at constructing such mythologized places and people without recourse to a camera? To find ways of writing the visual? Early feedback on the novel was that the interactions between Cal, John and other characters were too much like stage directions – John sits here in such a way, Cal looks over there in a particular fashion. There was lots of eyeballing, lots of clenched jaws. The tropic features of a Western film – sitting, staring, shooting – weren’t translating naturally into particularly interesting prose. What creates tension on screen was becoming wooden on the page, the effect of all these small, significant movements and expressions that perversely create the scale the Western aims at diminished into near-redundancy. I was stuck, in part thematically and in part practically, my Western collapsing under the weight of its own genre, my attempt at high minimalism insufficient.

Though the two projects were written in a form of symbiosis from the very beginning of my PhD, organically and often accidentally folding over one another as they took shape, and though I had always set out to write a Gothic Western – not an arbitrary decision by any means and one I shall come back to shortly – it wasn’t until discovering the significance of the World’s Columbian Exposition which took place in Chicago, 1893, that my narrative really took its final form. Though it occurred thirteen years after the period in which my novel is set, this event proved an incredibly useful historical and thematic anchor for the constructive processes of both my thesis and my creative work. As I mention in my thesis, the Exposition saw Frederick Jackson Turner declare that the frontier had ended, and that this closure signified the ending of the primary period of American history. At the same time, Buffalo Bill was displaying his Wild West Extravaganza (just outside the White City showground as he hadn’t been formally invited to attend), complete with a star turn from Sitting Bull, playing a cowed version of himself. This was, in essence, the first ‘Western’, a not quite true-to-life reiteration of frontier conflict choreographed by a key figure from the winning side in the Indian Wars. It was a show, and it was wildly successful, modelling to

huge crowds just how the frontier could be monetized, glamourized and typified now that it was ‘officially’ over.

Alongside this, the architecture and apparatus of American exceptionalism was concretized by the huge exposition itself, the White City an attempt by its creators to create a prototype of a utopic American metropolis, the exhibitions on display part of a great exercise in education and entertainment that standardized and modelled the American carnival processes McGowan outlines – how to view, directly and habitually, the American Other in relation to the American norm. The midway near the main exposition ground set in motion the practice of organized, travelling freak shows, the carnival process made portable. It was also one of the earliest movie theatres, with Eadweard Muybridge using a zoopraxiscope to show moving images of animal locomotion to paying crowds; the first instance of the hootchy-kootchy dance which become again the portable suggestive side show act, the cooch show, as depicted in *Carnivàle* and often an added bonus act at freak shows or travelling fairs; finally, the exposition was the hunting ground of H.H. Holmes, America’s first famous serial killer, who killed women in his ‘murder castle’, a hotel only a couple of miles from the showground, which came complete with the machinery and conceits we now associate with modern horror – trap doors, chutes to the basement, stairs that lead nowhere, dissecting tables, vats of acid and a crematory. He’d set the ‘hotel’ up with a view to taking advantage of the Chicago crowds, and would often sell the skeletons of victims to medical science, a perversion of, or perhaps a gross distillation of the exploratory aims of the exposition itself, money made from the suffering and erasure of others.

Holmes may seem like a tenuous connection to this project, but his illicit activities at something as purportedly spectacular as the World’s Columbian Exposition, activities that both preyed on and utilised the structures of the event itself, confirmed to me what I was trying to achieve with the novel, via the study of an American carnivalesque. Chicago functioned in essence as the moment when American history ended and became myth, something not to be studied so much as repurposed and presented as evidence of Manifest Destiny. It established the ‘visual economy’ McGowan proposes, with various modes of cultural production creating links between the body, identity and the actual economy that persist still, rather than following the standards of European carnivalesque which free, if only temporarily, the individual from each of these strictures. Holmes taking advantage of the greatest showground on earth at that moment (becoming a near-mythic and fictionalised figure himself), killing and disposing of its audience members with futuristic, mechanized methods, suggested to me that the shows exceptional aims were also the source of its own

disruption. American carnival is condemnatory rather than celebratory, a mix of constructed excess and punitive discomfort – rather like Westerns. However, even if Westerns, along with and as a version of American carnival, are static endeavours that seek to rigidly prescribe rather than disrupt, they may still breed the sources of their own disruption or reveal them hiding there in plain sight, like a murderer amongst Chicago’s lasso shows and Ferris wheels.

As said, I had always intended to write a Gothic Western, a decision set in motion by my love of and frustration with Patrick Brautigan’s *The Hawkline Monster: A Gothic Western* (1974), a text that clearly identifies the possibilities that lie in combining these two fields and stitches them together in a cheerily Frankensteinian form but doesn’t quite manage to produce more than the sum of its parts, or take its own efforts particularly seriously. I believe both modes (I resist calling the Gothic a ‘genre’ as the Western is – though it can often, convincingly, look like one, it is more a *modus operandi*) operate in similar fashions, relying on set-pieces, recognizable tropes, negative emotions, and, most significantly, death. Again, discussing Western predilections, Tompkins suggests that ‘[t]o go west, as far west as you can get, west of everything, is to die. Death is everywhere in this genre.’²⁰⁰

Westerns, then, seem haunted not only by their archetypal sources of conflict – Native Americans and unforgiving landscape usually – but also by their own cowboy heroes, who seem to seek out death over and over again in these narratives, moving around in a zombie-automaton fashion (think Clint Eastwood, in any Clint Eastwood picture). As Tompkins again identifies, ‘the type of heroism [the genre] seems to legitimize doesn’t produce a very viable person, a person who enjoys living with himself and other people.’²⁰¹ If then, because of their much used and abused protagonists, Westerns are inherently Gothic to some degree (as I believe they are), could this element be brought directly to the fore and used explicitly as part of the novel’s construction?

David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders and Joanne B. Karpinski suggest that ‘[w]hen the ethos of a culture’s past is integrated with the ethos of the present culture, the identity of the culture at that moment is at its zenith, and its literature may produce its definitive epic.’²⁰² The Western (the American epic) appeared, super-hero-like, just as the history that birthed it was finished, and the great unknown of the frontier was for all intents and purposes lost; it appeared again after great worldwide conflict and, ironically, super-hero narratives were culturally fading,

²⁰⁰ Tompkins, p. 24

²⁰¹ Tompkins, p. 128

²⁰² David Mogen, Scott P. Sanders and Joanne B. Karpinski, ‘Introduction’ in *Frontier Gothic: Terror and Wonder at the Frontier in American Literature*, ed. by Mogen, Sanders and Karpinski (Plainsboro: Associated University Presses, 1993) p. 16

remaining incredibly popular until the late 1960s, when their romanticized, simplistic depiction of America that was never quite truth began to jar with the decade's cultural and political conflict. Mogen, Sanders and Karpinski continue: '[u]nderstood in this cultural sense, Gothicism results when the epic moment passes, and a peculiar rift in history develops and widens into a dark chasm that separates what is new from what has been.'²⁰³ This rift, though it led to the genre's decline (not end – despite being repeatedly declared, like the frontier in 1893, 'over' it uncannily keeps on coming back), also led to the Western taking on new, less comfortable, reductive forms. The Gothic has taken root in the gap that has grown between American ideal and American truth, and that has always existed between American West and American Western. Texts such as Brautigan's paved the way for Westerns less secure and content with just what and who they were presenting, a steady pattern of loss and narrative corruption that has resulted in the Westerns being produced now being almost explicitly Gothic in both plot and presentation (HBO's reimagining of *Westworld* (2016 –), *The Homesman* (2014) directed by Tommy Lee Jones, adapted from a novel by Swarthout, and *The Revenant* (2015) directed by Alejandro Iñárritu, adapted from Michael Punke's 2002 text some of the more popular iterations). They do not do away with the standard Western set pieces by any means, the standardized spectacle of violence and void, but they do reveal their construction, and in that reveal, transform them into something obviously inglorious, atavistic or cadaverous. I began my PhD before these texts were released, and their production provides both a reassurance that my critical framework for the project and attempts at hybridization were not a misfire, and a textual field in which I can more clearly situate my writing.

Though I do not keep my characters in the West – they head East, subversively, as I wanted to place them in an environment where their guns and Cal's bravado would be essentially ineffectual, certainly until the novel's end – and although Blackjack is in part and provides within the plot a stereotypically Gothic villain and a source of uncanny doubling with both Cal and Esmé, he – I hope – through his fake skin, his love for his sister and his eloquence as compared to Cal, reveals Cal's narrative enervation. The Texan starts out as typical gunslinger (though not one without charm) and ends up, because of his self-interest, his callousness and his inability to feel or understand the feelings of others, an amputee doing and being what had formally disgusted him, what he had considered beneath him before, via this Gothic inflection. The death of his son, something that passed him by completely, and of

²⁰³ Mogen, Sanders and Karpinski, p. 16

the two people who connected him to that child and to his past, render him something of a dead end, though not one completely without hope as John's final word, 'yet', specifics (and an ending that leans more towards the Gothic than the Western, Gothic – despite its inherent negativity – often leaving room for redemptive possibility in a way that Westerns cannot due to their semi-mimetic historical finality). John's first-person narration positions us alongside him as he watches and must deal with the historic and contemporary failings of his partner and sees the spectacle of Cal fall away piece by piece, turning into something ugly and disquieting. We witness the trappings of the normal protagonist identity turn inside out, as we do in the three HBO shows I selected, revealing how precarious normality might be and how the Western's mythic reality is built on forgotten or repressed pain and dubious heroes. Cal's corporeal loss, the removal of one of the tools of identity creation he had – a hand that can hold a gun – remands him back into the 'real' reality, removing him from the mythic faux-reality he is performing *for* both John and meta-textually *as* a character in a Western.

The Gothic (which has as much life on the page as it does on screen) crucially also enabled me to undo or avoid some of the issues I was having with writing, with constructing the text itself. If the screen is a bounded space, containing the *mise-en-scène*, stock characters and action sequences outlined earlier, an unambiguous, impermeable surface that we can read without the need for interpretation, then a novel is a more immaterial, textual affair. Like Blackjack's skin, things can be added, taken away, unformed or entangled in a way that is more difficult in film; words, more easily than images, allow you to get below the surface. By focussing on *how* Cal is both charming gunslinger and Western spectre, through his freak show narrative and the narrative uncertainty made possible by the Gothic, rather than that he simply *is*, through two-dimensional images as a movie would, but also by allowing the Western imagery to 'speak' for itself and focussing instead on the descriptive possibilities of Gothic excess rather than the descriptive limitations of Western excess, I was able to circumvent to some degree the obstacles to writing I had encountered, retaining the Western but refocussing it, disrupting it sufficiently enough to present again a new authenticity again through the Gothic. If the Cowboy Gunslinger was a distillation of national identity from 1893 onwards, an identity constructed to hide frontier horror and glorify its successes, gaining life around the same time as travelling freak shows, sex shows and American entertainment culture as we know it today, then the Gothic is a means of showing his true face, of disassembling and reassembling him as both carnival spectacle and a revenant of reality. The Western hero, then, is transfigured into Gothic monster in his own right: tormented, disfigured, and traumatized by the lifestyle he aspires to. Cal lives on, a myth disrupted,

compromised and exposed to the one person still alive who loves him, a monument to, if not the failure of carnival impulses (they live on also), their artificiality and the barely-contained inadequacies of the Western hero.

Tarnished

The West is not what they say it is; it don't match them newspaper stories, the ones small boys read by candlelight, eyes bigger than the fear of the back of they momma's hand; it ain't the empty grassland scene Turner said it was, like a woman with a wild streak who only needs to be given four walls and a broom to turn wife; it ain't Buffalo Bill's hoorawing, and it ain't packs of men and horses running back and forth like geese being rounded up for the axe. It's teeth and elbows and knives, and long walks for low rewards, days and days of nothing for a few minutes of gunpowder, some whisky and a glimpse at a pair of tits. It's the slow burn of the sun on the back of your neck. It's the past, remembered wrong even by them that lived it: brown dirt turned into gold, dried blood set into romance, good and bad as interchangeable as cards in a hand and melted together like piss into dirt. It's only beautiful now, now it's dead, and dead it should stay; but the men that made the West, whose lives became its headstone, them shadows live on, and they names pass over the lips of America like enough talk could bring them back still, bring back the bullets and the scalps and the endless progress. I knew a man like that, once. Maybe I was a man like that, once.

June, year of Our Lord 1870. A common Tuesday in Kansas and getting on for evening.

Sunlight spread across the dust of Elgin's Main Street, bright and short-lived. It hurried off quick, but not before it picked out a mixed set of folks, hovering and jawing over the day's trials. It lit up the fat-ass photographer squatting in the middle of the road, his back end sticking out under the black pawl that covered his top half. His overstretched pants were worn pale on his thighs. The concertina view finder of the camera poked out in front of him like a face gone wrong in the womb.

Men and women in plain, beat-up clothes stood on porches and leaned out of doorways clutching their elbows. A few had stepped into the churn of the road. Off to the right of the street, a small, rat-looking man quickly moved a stump of graphite over a thick square of paper, trying to draw the scene. It warn't everyday a picture got took. Stood a few feet in front of that lens was one of the biggest names to ever throw his weight around both sides of Nebraska. You maybe heard of him. In them last couple years he'd become about as famous as Lincoln, his name near matching his stature.

Closer to seven foot than six, Cal Bryce Davies was large in every sense. And that morning he'd shot a man. Now that warn't an irregular occurrence, of course, but this was a vicious sonofabitch, name of Blackjack. You maybe heard of him too.

Cal sure looked the part, sticking out in that grey and brown patch of Kansas like some kind of magic beanstalk. His hair was corn blond, nearing the point of gold, and he wore it collar length and stuck back with so much pomade it shined almost indecent. He had long features on a matching long head with neat side-whiskers that he trimmed like it was religion. He was thirty-five, I think, and at that point in life I guess where the parts of his face had settled in such a means that you would have called him handsome, if you was the type to notice. Now you always saw him with his set of Winchesters on his hips, barrels and magazines blackened to show off the brass. He had to have the best. Propped up in his hand with the stock resting on the road was his Yellowboy, polished within an inch of its life – I should know, I polished it. With his legs spread apart and his rifle jutting out in front, he looked some like he was aping the three legs that propped up the camera opposite.

A way back on the side-lines, well that was me. John Farmer. Some called me Cal's shadow. I was his friend, and I tried to be his conscience. You could call me plain and it'd still be a kindness. I was scrawny, still am, and dark, with the kind of hair that don't stay put no matter how much you grease it up. And I'm short, no two ways about it. If you saw Cal and me from a distance I looked like his ugly-ass child, even though I had a few years on him. I remember getting that picture taken, remember the phlegmy sun in my eyes. I might be getting on now but that day sits clear as a rock pool without no life to disturb it right in the middle of my mind. I hated all that posing and waiting around; standing still never seemed like a good idea back then, you'd sink in the mire of whichever street, town, state you was in. When that picture developed, you could just make me out in the background, sour-faced, looking like I'd just been caught at something and had been made to stay and face my misdoings.

I better explain a bit more about us now, or you'll get to thinking I was just Cal's traveling caretaker or butler or some nonsense. Folks would wonder why he would need or want a partner, especially one as simple looking as me. Cal's voice was always loud and his presence big. I didn't talk unless I had to, though I got over that some as you can well guess with this account. I didn't like

exposing my accent. Cal always said it sounded mongrel, a slur made from not talking all that much and sometimes forgetting how to get my words out, and a strong hint of what he called ‘Louisiana bounce’. Not the nasal, dried up Southern talk you sometimes heard among trashy sorts of people that sound like they throats been baked to a crisp, but one cooked up from living down by the Mississippi in my youth, among dark-skinned folks, merchants and shined-up men of means that all had business by the river.

I warn’t there too long, but long enough to sponge up the talk. When I met Cal I let him speak for the both of us and it came natural for me to just hang back, sit in a dark corner watching people brag and fight and whore around me, which suited the Texan – I told him everything I found out. Being small I’d escape attention. I’d eye a room left and right, sizing everyone up till I reckoned I got the advantage on them all, found a weak spot, a tick, even with men twice my size. It was where being plain come in useful. You couldn’t ignore Cal even if you was deaf, blind and dumb as a post. Between my beard and my black, beat up old hat, I was just a pair of eyes under a brim.

Cal and me, we worked tight a fair few years. We’d been stuck together on buffalo hunts in Wyoming, just as the big war was ending. When Cal’s rancher father fell on hard times, Cal had wandered up west same as everyone else hoping to scrounge work or money or a good time, with big ideas and not much of a clue how to go about them.

Ask him and he’d spin you a load of horseshit about how he knew he was supposed to be out here, that the Texan stars had set him walking. Was one of his lines, the ones he used to stop people asking more questions. He didn’t believe it no more than I did. He might have been Texan but he warn’t stupid. He just didn’t have no qualms or mixed feelings over lying through his teeth to folks, that’s all, came off his tongue quicker than blood out a gut wound. Folks love some fate-talk, it can give even the smell of cow shit a bit of romance.

We just sort of stuck. Lazy days of killing slow moving, slow-witted creatures so lumbering and dark against the grass they might as well have had targets drawn up their flanks. You’d shoot them in the chest or head, the biggest bit, and just wait for them to drop. They’d either go right over or they knees would slam into the ground and they’d snort out they last while you got your tools ready. Then

you'd spike their nose, cut skin from bone and hook up a pony to pull the pelt off the carcass before a team came to treat it. So many were shot, men said it became like picking flowers, shooting at bottles.

The beasts are dwindling now. In a few short years they was near all shot up and eaten and made into skins in Wyoming so the work dried up and that job went quick as it came, the men all scattered round the territories for fresh herds. Them last few buffalo must feel like ghosts, like the Indians, not quite gone but heading that way quicker than anybody but Sheridan intended. They was like the gold in California, eaten up so quick folks didn't quite know what to do when they was gone. It warn't a job I particularly enjoyed now. It paid well and that was fine but I don't like watching things die, things too simple to fight back anyway. I needed to live though, and men in government had said buffalo needed to go cause the Indians that relied on them needed to go. That was where Cal and me differed; he enjoyed the shooting, didn't concern hisself with the waste of it cause, like a lot of folks, particularly Texans, he didn't like Indians too much neither. Fort Parker was still a sore spot with him.

Cal was always the one trying to do the fancy trick shots on horseback. He shot a buffalo right square in the eyeball one time. I did the real work, would pick them off from a distance, something Cal was too impatient to do. They'd be dead by the time I'd reached them, and they wouldn't have to watch me, hooks in my hand, waiting for they last breath to fall out they lungs. Cal rode a big Tennessee walker, chestnut brown, eyes prettier than most women. Cal had named him Jim, for no reason other than it seemed sturdy enough to suit. He loved that horse. It was maybe one of the only few things he ever loved. He'd run him right at a herd and Jim wouldn't bat an eyelid. He was an expensive animal, but he was fast paced and solid, and Cal in his reveries said he went about his work as dutiful as you might imagine any man could. I always found it funny he could admire devotion in that beast, be devoted to it even, but not reckon on it being of any worth in his dealings with people.

My ride, now he was another matter. Cal won him at cards while we worked the hunts and I didn't have the heart to sell him for glue, but he was the most misshapen horse I'd ever laid eyes on; he had a barrel belly and stunted little legs, and he ground his teeth something chronic, as if he were about to spit. I'd seen a Camel once, at a two-bit fair, and it had sprayed out a great yellow spume onto an old gammer's face when she poked it in the nose. We soon found that horse's temper about matched that beasts and he looked near as ugly, so Camel it was, but he walked forward and

backward, left and right, with enough convincing. We was a strange little four, wandering the Great Plains, the bitter North-West, the shining sands of California, Cal's reputation rolling on bigger and bigger like snow falling from a tree branch creates an avalanche, and just like a handful of melt can make a valley impassable, we couldn't carry on wandering forever.

That day ran away with us quicker than anyone could reckon on, no-one thinking to throw some reins over it. We all tumbled out into the street in the lemonade-colored light of the Kansas morning, the sun still too weak to burn away the dew that swolled up the wooden walkways and softened the ground. People ran between doorways to get a better look, hovered on porches and balconies, biting they nails, standing like crooked scarecrows in the early haze. Cal walked his way towards Blackjack's gun. He hadn't been in a shoot-out for a while now; for all the talk and the pictures and the fairs they spit out and suck back up about the West, they was uncommon. If you wanted to be sure to kill someone, they warn't the way to do it – you'd just as likely see your own guts on the ground as not.

A loud crack tore the air. It rang off store fronts and rattled windows. Then two more rounds from one, then the other, of Cal's revolvers. There was a deep, quiet second, the noise eating up all trace of itself when it died, then a heavy slump as Blackjack went down sideways. Cal said later that it seemed like it took him hours to fall, but it's always like that when you waiting for someone to drop. His arm hit the ground and the force of it made his gun go off; I heard a sharp, high pitch whine, then the lamp hanging above my head shattered. Little jagged points of glass fell over my face and down my shirt-collar, tooting at my skin. I pulled, thinking the sonofabitch warn't yet dead, not with a chance aim like that, but he was cheek down in the dirt, grinning. His limbs was still.

Normally gun fights was supposed to heal any particular sore that opened when men spent too long in places that let them fester. Cal said they was like fucking, or relieving yourself - hours, maybe days of tightening, of your guts twisting in need, for just a moment of charcoal and sulphur-flavored peace, and the reassuring sight of blood. Either you killed a man or you killed his pride, which near enough had the same effect. That fight, though, that was just the beginning of mine and Cal's problems.

This was a restless time now. The troubles left behind after the big war between North and South still rumbled on, though President Johnson was out. Big, bad, war-hero Grant had been given the reins of the whole country in sixty-nine, and he had every intention of patching the Federals and the beat-up Confederacy back up and keeping it all how it should be, whatever that was. I ain't sure he knew hisself.

The overland railroad had been finished, the different lines all sewn up, stitched together with pick axe and spike. It had been years in the making, but the Union Pacific, Central Pacific and the Western had been joined and America finally had a line that spanned the whole damn country. The Pacific Express could take you from Council Bluffs, Iowa right on through to San Francisco and back again. The big iron horse was tearing up the land, connecting city to city. There was a lot of noise over it, newspapers all declaring it a triumph; folks could travel in 'speed, comfort and safety!' so the advertisements said. I thought they was noisy, dirty things myself but who was I to stand in the way of progress. What else? Folks in California had dug up hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of gold since it was discovered out at Sutter's Mill in the forties, but it was fast running out and people were getting mean over it. They'd gone at it too quick - folks then hadn't got no restraint, or sense of playing fair. Rockefeller, for instance, now he was a cutthroat sonofabitch. He was eating up the competition with his Standard Oil Company and his big ass refinery in Ohio. He flooded the country up to its neck with black gold, making sure it was his product and his product only that was lighting up America. Sheridan and Custer was closing in on the Indians in Kansas and the Territory. The Sioux finally got the run on Custer up in Dakota in seventy-six but that only bought them a quicker end. Women in Wyoming was given the right to vote; lots of folks got all uppity about that one now but it seemed like sensible news to me. I read the papers. America pushed her outstretched fingers and open palms into the West quicker than anybody could keep up.

Cal and me had been making the most of this new land, new money, new opportunities to make old mistakes. We had stumbled across Elgin heading south from Abilene, Kansas. It was right across the Arkansas River, opposite Wichita, one of a couple new cow towns in Kansas. They'd sprung up on the developing cattle run up from Texas up to the new railheads that gave herders access to the

North and East. Cows fetched big money up there, worth about ten times as much as they were in Texas, where they was overrun with them. Back then, Cal and me had been planning on heading South to see about buying up some cheap beef cattle, to try the herding game. Cal knew enough about cows, being from ranching stock and we reckoned we knew the trail well enough.

Abilene was top dog then, but other places were growing quick as the Atchinson, Topeka and Santa Fe line plowed west through the state. Elgin was having its moment. It would later be replaced by Dodge. Like I said, the railways was booming. Other lines crisscrossed the east and was, creeping into the territories, opening up the land like never before. If you studied a railroad map it looked like a man's veins, lines going this way and that, tipping out people and goods wherever there was money to be made. It hadn't reached Elgin then but it warn't far off and the town had been made a cattle shipment point. It had already got an ugly reputation.

Elgin was made like most mid-west towns in them days – settlers didn't go in for no imagination. Everything was formed round a main street, Elgin's being west, just off the river. It was all strangely packed in, like crooked teeth in a weak jaw, in spite of the space around it. There was a measly little square at one end with a water pump and hitching posts that was already half horse-chewed and peeling with rot, and a scanty little sign that looked like it had been carved with a pocket knife, pointing out a handful of roads and directions. Drab-fronted shops and businesses lined either side of the drag, connected by wooden walkways to keep your feet out the dirt. It was the usual set up - smithy, hardware, livery, general store, hotel and an undertaker. There was always an undertaker. The fancier establishments had signs on canvas, painted letters outlining the nature of each business. The rest had tar paint on wood, if they had anything at all.

What Elgin didn't have was no law maker, or jailhouse. It was something of a spill-over from Wichita City. Men went out there to spend their money on drink, women and tables. It was dirty, and ram-shackle, and like all them half-finished, that'll do, new towns that seemed to have grown out of the mud they made, it stank. Horsehair and cow-shit and too many spilled beers to count, stamped into the slop of the road; when drink gets trampled and left to sour the smell it gives off is unholy; it can make your whole-body retch if you catch it wrong. Men didn't so much run than slide along the street,

trying to get by each other while avoiding the hawkers and carts and horses that swam up and down the mire in the middle.

Cal and me, we took it all in, our horses' hooves dragging in and out of the mud. Folks stared, eyes beady. We left our rides in the livery and headed towards a sprawling worm-pink saloon with a big balcony and porch out front, window shutters thrown open up top like eyelashes on an ugly doll. From a distance, it looked brand spanking new and fancy but up close you could see it had been thrown up quick. The wood was already bowed from being hammered in wrong and the paint was cracking, and pooled in places like little, pale lumps of fat stuck to the walls. A pack of women leaned out over the balcony, smoking and talking, making their trade known. *The Lucky Stars* was painted shaky in big black letters onto a canvas hung between the top of two porch struts. We walked past it, headed to the hotel directly opposite, *The Central*. The whores watched our approach like they was weighing us up. Cal obliged them by removing his hat and waving before we sidled into the hotel entrance and they burst out laughing like crows about to land on a carcass.

A broad old bull was slumped over his desk, snoring away under a sheet of grizzled hair the color of Kansas rainclouds. The lobby was otherwise empty but bore traces of other guests, the unvarnished floorboards was scuffed and covered in grit you could feel under the soles of your boots, and a rag tag collection chairs was pushed away from tables like folks without manners had left in a hurry. The smell of breakfast still hung faintly in the air, eggs, old milk, smoked meat. We rang the reception bell next to sleeping man's ear and he roused himself, cleared his throat and spat.

'Welcome to the Central, where everything's within easy reach.' He stretched the words out as if he'd said them more than a thousand times before, his voice thick and full of catarrh. 'Ray Daniels. This is my place. You new in town?' He answered himself before we had chance to speak. 'Course you are. Everybody is.' He leaned over his desk a little and I could hear the bones in his shoulders click in the dusty silence. He cocked a thumb toward the door.

'Don't let them girls bother you gentlemen, they looser than a stud's saddle on a pony. McCay over there at the *Stars* will have them bleed you dry before you know it.' He winked at us with a gummy eye and I reckoned I knew where he spent his money. He dragged his palms over his face,

revealing bloodshot eyelids, and the flesh of his cheeks seemed to sag, refusing to return to its former aspect.

‘Now, you gentlemen want rooms? Names?’ We gave them and he gave us the eye in return. ‘Davies... I reckon I know that one. You look like one of them fucking big shots, does the circuit round these places like a whore works a room. Well I don’t want no trouble, I seen it all before.’ He gestured out into the road, like the past was playing out somewhere beyond his yellowed finger tips. Cal raised his eyebrows just a second, then smiled blithely at Daniel’s and kept quiet, holding his hat polite between both hands. Daniels carried on without giving us a second glance.

‘Bills due every other day. Sign.’ He jabbed at a log book on the desk, then stuck two brass keys, shined up from age and palm grease, down in front of us and disappeared behind a dirty flap of canvas at the back of his reception.

My room was small and bare but it was clean enough. There warn’t no stains on the walls or floor so it was a pace ahead of most other places we’d stayed in. It was probably too new to have acquired the usual marks folks leave when they pass time in hotels. I set my pack down on a scanty little chair by the door that was more an unvarnished collection of spindles than something you’d trust to take your weight. In front of me was a small, low bed that looked like it had been dropped in the centre of the room and forgotten, mattress thinner than a pauper’s widow; next to that on the far wall was a squat little dresser and one lonely window, shut up and stitched over with cobweb. I went in and peered at myself in the rusty looking glass on the dresser. I looked thin, my face more bone and matted beard than much else. A grey rag was draped on the rim of an enamel bowl sat next to the glass, the water inside it covered in a fine film of indoor dust that floated on the surface but otherwise clean. I wet the cloth, rung it out then set about wiping down my face and hair. I could hear Cal next door, stomping about, getting settled. His bulk made most floorboards complain. After a few passes around my ears my water had started to look like long-abandoned coffee, the scum on the top thickened with the dirt I’d been carrying about me for days. Giving up at my neckline, I slid open the window to let the air dry my damp skin, the shutter tearing away each fine spider-thread from its anchor across the frame. The spider itself sat on its back on the floor underneath the window, its legs bent and pointing towards its centre like death had seen fit to sew it up like it would a fly. I picked it

up and dropped it outside, and watched it fall slowly through the dewy air until I lost sight of it and caught Daniels loping across the caked-over street and under the canvas of *The Lucky Stars*; he looked once behind him, back to the hotel, then tipped his hat at the girls still up on the balcony as the sun spat out its last on their tobacco-cloud skin.

We spent the next couple nights in the saloon, playing cards, drinking, listening in on town business, getting sleepy on the fog of stale bodies, whisky, pipes and women that grew stronger as the hours passed, and the night deepened. We'd figured on having a few days rest before heading on to other things. Word went round the town that Cal was there quicker than sweat soaks into sand so the saloon was bursting, men trying to get him to join them at poker, spin a story, notice them in some manner, like little girls traipsing after their sweethearts in the schoolyard. Cal probably pressed more flesh than the president hisself that week. McCay, the owner, he was as bad as the rest, wanting the Texan to sit at the bar, feeding him whisky, crooked business ventures, idle gossip. Cal let him act the fool. He was used to it. The whores was always inside by then, doing good business with the Texan or some other guy with pockets as weighty as his balls. We saw more of Daniels than we wanted; if he warn't slumped in a corner he had his hand up some skirt or down his own pants-front.

The hotel did have a couple of other guests who decamped to the *Stars* at dusk like we did; one was a reporter from a Wichita paper who looked to be enjoying what Elgin had to offer more than he was documenting it. No doubt he'd fed back to the city that Cal was in town - he'd asked him for an interview more than enough times. There was also a couple of young big-eyes who said everyday that they was heading for California but never seemed ready to leave, and a collection of herders and stockyard roustabouts that filled out the saloon as soon as dinner at the hotel was over, the cow-shit on their boots going stiff as they sat getting loose. The saloon was as shabby inside as its front suggested, with broken tables and chairs scattered about wherever there was space, a drink stained floor that sucked on your boot-leather and a bar that had several of its wooden boards kicked in, so you could see McCay's feet moving about behind it like the world's worst peep show.

Same as in every other saloon, bar, or backroom joint we found ourselves in, Cal spent money there like the dollar was going out of print. He had plenty means of making it, mind. He'd saved

some, earned some, and put some away in a new bank that had sprung up in Cheyenne. He'd done a bit of man hunting for money and for law (unofficial, you understand), won at poker, traded, never settled to any one thing cept being Cal. His talents were that he was charming, and he could kill, and like a cobra in front of a hypnotized mouse he could switch on either of those things faster than you could decide which you was about to experience. Charm was in Cal's blood. If you didn't like him and you got to talking with him you'd get to wondering why you ever held such a false and ill opinion in the first place. He was just that sort, would make you feel at ease, ply you with drink and smiles. Nothing got done out there without drink - the act was as much a currency as the coins that paid for it - and given his size, he could outpace all but the most pickled dealers, cards or otherwise. He knew how to keep a distance between hisself and others without letting them feel it; he was everybody's friend, until he got what he wanted, then we moved on.

Neither of us could settle. Cal sure warn't the type for it, and it just didn't occur to me then. It felt like the country kept expanding and so did life; there warn't no end to things so we lived in constant movement. I had me an anchor once, a girl, in the early days out there before I knew Cal. Constance, her name was. She had me call her Connie but I liked Constance, it suited her best. She was quiet, dependable and dark, born in Louisiana and brought out west as a servant with the well-to-do family of a doctor. I met her in a store. In another dusty place out marked out amongst great swathes of nothing, she stood out to me like a well in a desert. She hadn't been given enough coin to pay for things the old man had sent her to get and the shop keep warn't entertaining no credit for her. I don't like to see folks embarrassed at something that ain't their fault, so I helped out and walked her back to their fancy new house. Of course, I couldn't go in, mind, but something made me swing by their backyard later. She fixed me up some fresh bread and jelly - you knew folks had money if they had jelly - and stood with me while I ate it over the fence. I reckon that was the sweetest thing I ever tasted. From then on, I met her on the sly, when the family was out, or at night. She'd always be trying to fix my hair and get the snags out. I'd sit still on the cold ground in they yard, trying not to move my head while she attacked it with a horsehair brush, and listen to her talk about her life, the doctor and his pinch-faced wife, how she didn't miss the Louisiana rain. Just looking at her tripped up

my insides. She warn't scared of me neither, which warn't usual - even back then, when I was much younger, I was near as pretty as homemade sin and I'd gotten the reputation to match.

The family went back down south when the war got serious, took her of course. I stayed in town til she left. I reckon I liked her much as I could like anything, but I watched her get put in that stagecoach just the same. I felt like my arms and legs was made of lead, stood at the roadside that morning. I'd stuck some money into her hands the night before, and a small keepsake of mine to replace the words that sat trembling in my mouth waiting to be said, me unable to say them, and she'd shaken her head at me, anger and tears pouring out her eyes, but she knew better than to refuse it. I watched as they stacked her small trunk up top the rig, watched as the coach tracks got covered over with dust as it wheeled away. I thought I'd never lay my eyes on Constance again, until Elgin pushed her right back into my thinking.

It was on the third day back in Kansas that things changed, and our easy days got turned on their heads. It started out grey, damp, the air too close, like one of them famous Kansas storms was brewing. The clouds churned in the sky, the summer soured already.

A man came into town in the morning, dressed all up in black. He had a goatish beard, a long leather slicker and a black horse, massive and thick built the both of them and moving like they knew it. Cal and me was up early, sitting on the hotel porch steps, chewing on cold bacon and looking over a paper for signs of trouble or work we could take advantage of. We watched him as he slowly rode up Main Street just as the first fat drops of rain started to fall. Folks out and ready for the morning's business quickly seemed to slip indoors. The town was quiet, cowed. We watched him get closer. It warn't that he was ugly in any normal sense - his face was regular enough but the skin of his broad neck and the top of his chest was covered in scars, criss-crossed and raised in angry patches on both sides, and his features all seemed too big, too proud on his face. He was clearly well fed but didn't look it somehow, in his eyes - he stared all about hisself, like he was taking it all in and it warn't enough, would never get to be enough. I could see they whites flash, even at a distance. He was pale, and his normal skin had that ill looking shine to it, like melted candle wax, the kind you get when a fever is upon you. Doors and windows closed as he went by til he tied up that beast of his right

outside the hotel and lumbered past us to go inside. He was huge, that was obvious now, but even then, his weight on the steps took us by surprise, and it felt for a second like they'd give and we be ass down in the mud beneath. I heard the heavy leather twist of a gun belt as he moved and blocked out the faltering morning light as he passed. Cal gave me a look I couldn't quite figure, like he warn't really seeing me. Then he spat out what was left of the meat he'd been jawing, folded the paper up in silence and we went inside.

The new man was leaning heavy on Ray Daniels' desk, arms spread; Daniels himself was keeping about as far back behind his counter as he could without plain running off. We sat down close to the door, greeted by other diners who had already made a start on their oats, and poured ourselves some coffee. The man said he was camped out on the edge of town a piece but if Daniels would oblige he would stop by in the mornings and eat breakfast at the hotel. Daniels warn't small by any stretch, but this man leaned over him like a dog does a fear-frozen rabbit. He started picking up the things spread across Daniels' desk, his bell, an inkpot, a small six-shooter, a rusted coffee pot, examining them like they was the bones of tiny creatures he'd stripped of flesh. Hand on his own throat as if to keep his voice steady, Daniels said the man could eat so long as he paid and asked his name.

'Most call me Blackjack,' he said, business-like, and looked round at the dining room. His voice was deep, but it had a strange lean to it, like he was trying to control his talk somehow. There was plenty of empty seats but he sat down heavily at a table directly behind Cal and set about drinking the coffee and eating the bread rolls that had been left by the table's previous occupant. He didn't remove his gloves or hat and he sneered all the while. There was a queer smell about him, something sort of off; it reminded me of catfish, seaweed, wet things, smells you don't find in a Kansas steer-town.

The Texan's shoulders were tight, like he could tell he was being looked over, and he was scowling. His eyes talked; live in places like that long enough, be around a person long enough and you stop needing words so much. He was hating being sat so close to this sonofabitch and not being able to see him but if he'd turned they pair would have been near nose to nose. I had a good view of Blackjack and he of me, though he stared at Cal near the whole time it took me to down my coffee, looking him up and down like he was a pig in a butcher's window, a small smile flashing over his face

as he slurped his drink loud, the cup looking like doll house china in his slab of a hand. Daniels' stilt-thin maid brought over two bowls of oatmeal – she was loathe to make Cal queue up for food with the other diners – but Cal, normally close to ravenous whatever the time of day, simply pushed his spoon around the bowl before letting it cool and set into a sweaty grey paste in front of him. The weather had reached a boil and heat and rain fell from the sky in equal measure, making a curtain of water outside the open door as it sheeted from the roof; the morning curdled. It was only when we finally stood, and Cal nodded thanks to Daniels, who was watching his dining hall with far more interest than was usual from the safety of his desk, that Blackjack spoke again.

'Be seeing you, Texan.' I tried to push Cal on out the door best I could; he didn't say nothing, but he sure gave Blackjack the eye before he stepped outside. Blackjack just stuffed the last of his bread into his mouth and smiled big at me so I could see the food sat behind his teeth. His eyes though, they was narrow as bullet holes in snow. I followed Cal outside and I felt like them eyes chased us out into the street and a while after.

Cal and me parted for the day. He was all for hanging around the hotel and following Blackjack, but I told him I didn't want to be making trouble before it needed to be made. He went off hunting, and I went about my business, the usual domesticities of a life spent on the move – checking the horses, cleaning the guns and buying up supplies as we was set on leaving the next day. I had a funny sort of sense about me though, couldn't settle; I felt like something was walking three steps behind me, following me around the street and into stores, like my day was passed by another. Someone was sizing me up, but whenever I looked over my shoulder there warn't nothing there but my own worry. I knew Cal was itching for a fight, was overdue one, and this new fella was one big loose trigger, but usually Cal went looking for trouble on his own terms. We warn't accustomed to it turning up and sitting with us at breakfast.

I was leaning out my hotel room window when the Texan returned, watching folks wrap up the day. Things always looked softer in the evening, folks had the edges knocked off them, had normally started drinking but hadn't got cut. Hazy squares of lamp light flashed up in the grey dusk. The rain clouds had cried theyselves out, but you could still feel water in the air, making your breath weightier

than usual. Cal had a big flabby boar tied at the feet and slung over his horse's rump, flesh jiggling like it was still alive. I watched him pull to a halt outside the saloon and have a couple of McCay's regular porch-hounds drag the beast down and tote it inside. Dead things are always unwieldy, and they struggled with the weight of it, the hog's bristly back skudding along the porch boards as they lumbered inside. I was sat down on the floor cleaning my boots when Cal appeared in my doorway. He came in dripping sweat and rain, shaking his head like a dog to get damp twists of hair away from where it was stuck about his eyes and forehead. He propped his rifle up and sat down heavily on my little chair, and it let out a thin, snapping sound that knocked its way around the room, us both holding our breath to see if the wood would bear him. Somehow it held, and the sound choked its way to silence under his weight. Cal shrugged, pulled his boots off and skidded them towards me. They left a grey, thick smear behind them as they travelled, like a sheet of rain cloud turned to clay and spread across my floor.

'You can think again. You got half of Main Street welded to these,' I said, picking them up in spite of myself. I took them to the open window and started up scraping the worst of the mud off with my pocket knife. 'Here was me thinking you was housetrained. We got to get you back to a city, so you can relearn some indoor manners.'

'Shut up, John. You hate the city.'

'True. I said it before, the more folks you cram together in a place, the less civilised they get now. That saloon is proof of that.' Cal laughed.

'Hold the lecture. But you're right about the *Stars*, the girls over there are about as pretty as fresh-shaved sheep and McCay is as crooked as a crowbar.'

'That hasn't stopped you spending your money and time over there like you ain't never running out of either. You've taken all them girls upstairs so many times over the last few days you'll be having to play eeny meeny to decide which one to revisit.' I fetched his boots back in and set my brush on them, flecks of the dirt that lingered on them still falling off onto my feet. 'Can't be having Cal Bryce Davies wearing no dirty boots now, can we?'

'You're just worried I'll show you up, John.'

‘Don’t you think I’m used to that, now? You want to show up the whole world, one sonofabitch at a time.’ Cal shook his head a little more, slumped and eased his legs out in front of him, wiggling his toes in his socks. He took up half the room, it seemed. His face dropped into a small look he had when he was thinking on something, cheeks sucked in, eyes slid to the right.

‘Spit it out. I had a long-assed day and I ain’t in no mood to be guessing what foolishness is pooling in your brain,’ I said, but carried on brushing, thinking he’d say it was nothing. To my surprise, he came out with it. I stopped brushing a moment to listen.

‘My hunt was off. Something scared away all the game, even though I’d gone a way outside town. Maybe I’m just tired, too much saloon air, but it felt like something was dogging me, you know. That one hog was all I could manage, and lord knows they’re not hard to hit.’

‘I had the self-same feeling. I don’t think I passed a moment today where it didn’t feel like I had me two shadows, my own and someone else’s. But I know what you thinking, and if it was that Blackjack fella, well he couldn’t have followed us both around, so one of us must have been imagining it.’ I gave his boots one last sweep about the toes and gave them back to him, now more leather again than mud. ‘If we’re to make anything of him sizing you up over breakfast, well, I’m sure we’ll be seeing him again, though if he wants to be stirring the pot, I suggest you let him carry on stirring alone. If we’re going to the *Stars* tonight I’d keep your nose clean and your prick dry. It’ll keep your head clear.’ Cal laughed but his eyes narrowed. He took a hold of the Yellowboy, swung it over his lap and fingered the trigger.

‘When have I ever done that? A man as ugly as that doesn’t show his face in public without reason. He wants something, I guarantee it. We’ll just have to find out what, won’t we?’

We headed over the road when it got dark enough that the streetlamps outshone the stars. Blackjack stood outside the corner of the *Stars* porch, waiting, it seemed, for us to put in an appearance. The sulphurous bar light of the saloon cast his shadow so long it met us well before we’d got up the steps. His mouth stretched open across his teeth in something that might have been a smile.

‘After you, Davies,’ he said, like Cal was some lady perambulating about town. Cal didn’t budge, and stood planted on them steps, frozen over. Blackjack repeated himself, ‘After you, Davies.’

This time he rolled his words out slow and deliberate and there warn't no fun in his voice. Cal stared at him, lip twitching, like a dog fixing to bear its teeth. Blackjack took a step towards him, pulling his coat aside to expose a large pistol, the likes of which I'd never seen before. It was long, curved, like a varnished eel. He didn't touch it, but he was letting us see it, letting it see us.

'We can stand here eyeballing each other like two virgins at a Sunday School dance or we go in and drink. Which is it going to be?' Blackjack said, running a hand over his face. Lamplight sat in the scars that wormed their way round his cheeks, making them seem like they glowed from within.

Cal was about to speak when a group of men, more bourbon than flesh, tumbled out the door as one and dragged him inside. Ignoring me, Blackjack whipped straight in after them and I got a drag of that smell of his as he moved, mud and reeds and something waxy. Cal was sat at the bar when I caught up and McCay was thanking him loudly for the pig, saying it would make for good eating when it was all portioned up. He waved his glass-rag over to the back of the saloon where another door opened out to the elements. One of the whores stood over Cal's board, upturned and splayed on a large table placed half-in, half-out the doorway. Her bloodied arms were working deep in its stomach, and a set of toothy knives lay in a row at its rocking hind, waiting their turn. Cal waved away McCay's thanks, downed the whisky he was given and begun looking dead straight at Blackjack across the room. He had sat alone at the table nearest the door and demanded a bottle. I took up my usual spot in the far corner, making a triangle out of the three of us.

Cal stayed at the bar, occasionally passing words with a few folks but keeping it short. Seemed like McCay had put something in the drink that night cause everyone seemed twice as wild as usual; men shouted at each other sooner than talk, McCay didn't think two licks about selling his whores cut-price and someone had taken up a fiddle that plainly warn't tuned, the player attacking his strings like he was trying to drag a mattock through old tendons. I sat with my hand on my gun under the table and Blackjack sat with his bottle, chewing a wad, his jaw going like someone was cranking it. He didn't say nothing, just stared at Cal. No good comes from staring like that. If you was going to stare, out in them places full of the drunk and the twitchy, well you had better be a lady, a simpleton or be admiring a man's hat, or chance was you wouldn't be in possession of your eyeballs for much longer. Like I said, Cal could shoot them out your head. I'd seen it.

I overheard some people talking on Blackjack. Seemed he'd paid visits to the general store, had pulled the shop-keep over his counter after asking about some glue or something. He'd gone to the livery too, throwing his weight about there before disappearing for the day, probably to scare off Cal's game. I don't reckon him and Blackjack took they eyes off each other the whole time they sat there. If anyone talked to Cal he replied without moving, without looking at them, speaking out the side of his mouth. The girls gave up on him one by one and wandered off pouting, back to more promising though less appealing prospects.

One of them started to ease up to Blackjack. I don't know what possessed her, other than drink. He looked like a man who wouldn't want hisself for company, let alone a whore. She was a sweet-faced thing, hair so mousey it was almost see-through. The rest of the saloon had quieted some, but now it fell to a slow, waiting hush, and the fiddle came to a hurried, painful stop halfway through what might have been 'Goodbye, Ol' Paint'. She obviously hadn't been listening to the stories, or she was just that hard up for custom she didn't care. She rolled her hands over his shoulders, slow, inviting, then down his huge front a little way, looking like a squirrel trying to climb along a sleeping bear. She was whispering something in his ear, and she'd got them misty eyes on that women get and men just can't do. She started to get lower and made to sit down next to him. He turned a fraction, slow, and gave me this smile, real toothy, a grin, like a gator gets when it's about to drag some unsuspecting thing under water and roll it around some. Before she could move any lower, he grabbed the back of her head.

There was the dead knock of bone hitting wood; then in the slack silence that followed I swear you could almost hear her brain slide round the inside of her skull. He let go of her, and she folded to the floor, blood busting out her nose. No-one moved, and the whore was quiet save for the wooden rock of her shoulders on the ground as she tried to stand. Blackjack leaned over and pushed her slowly back down, so that her cheek was pressed hard into the blood seeping out her face. He kept on til he heard the click of one of Cal's revolver's, then he smiled into its barrel and let go his grip on the whore's back. One of the other girls came and dragged her up by her elbows, skirting round Blackjack like he might be a rabid dog that hadn't noticed her yet. The bloody nose was liver-colored already but the whore's cheeks had gone white as her shift. Blackjack sprang up sudden, turned over his table

and sent his drink over everything round him. The whores ran from him and bundled themselves upstairs whimpering, the mousey one bent double and clutching her face. She left a slow trail of blood across the floor and up the stairs that no doubt she'd have to scrub out later. Cal stood, unfolding his legs out from under his bar stool, moving like oil in water, heavy, smooth, his outstretched arm inching closer to Blackjack's chest.

'What? You've been itching to pick a fight with me all day Davies, I just gave you an excuse. Not that that used to matter to you, you were never the type to worry about waiting for a reason to whip it out now. Are you more discerning these days I wonder?' My fingers tightened round my gun until the knuckles cracked. Whisky dripped from the up-ended table and wretched out the bottle spinning on the floor. Blackjack laughed, halted the bottle with his foot. Then he picked it up and drained it in one long stretch of his throat. He slammed the empty glass back down on the next table. The men sat nearest to him jumped like chickens at the crack of a rifle.

'Shame to waste it.'

Cal had shot men for much less than beating on a whore, and the crowd in the saloon, scared and lizard-eyed with drink as they was, well they was all staring at Blackjack like they knew he was dead on his feet and they warn't sorry none. The two men were like a pair of big-assed church spires, squared off against each other; both taller than any man had a right to be, they made the bar, the tables, stools, cups all look like dollhouse furniture, like they was two giants who'd wandered into a miniature town and somehow got stuck indoors. Blackjack spat out his tobacco and it landed, a rust-colored streak, on Cal's trouser leg.

'Here I was, thinking you were something round these parts. Folks pour sugar all over your name where I been but I'm disappointed. I wanted to know what you were made of, to see you in the flesh but, if I'm pushed to honesty, you just a two-bit studhorse who's been fed too much long grass and gone to seed...' I recognised something again in Blackjack's voice, something familiar.

'This coming from a man floating around lost and looking for trouble like shit in a street gully because he's too grotesque for decent society,' Cal said, disgust creeping over his face.

'Ain't no more lost then you, Cal Bryce Davies, a man who can't sit to nothing except drinking and whoring and playing with guns, fooling himself he's civilised. This ain't society any more than

I'm Queen Victoria and still you ain't fit to walk in it. Look at you, pulling on a man in a crowded room. What's the matter with you, you raised in a barn?'

I started to creep my gun up and out from beneath the table.

'There's no need for that, John Farmer. I see you. He may tote you round like the world's ugliest purse, but he hasn't got need of you now.' Blackjack jeered across the room, looking at me long enough for me to reconsider; I put the gun on the table, pointing at nothing but the wall, and laid my hands flat in front of me.

'What do you want?' Cal said, through tight teeth.

'I wanted to talk to you. But now I reckon I'm more interested in seeing if your insides shine as bright as your outsides.'

'Talk to me, or anybody else here tonight and you'll have a mouth in the back of your head to match the one at the front. The only reason I haven't shot you is so your guts don't stink out McCay's bar. You'll pay him for that whore's face, now, and then you'll leave, and if you come back then you'll be leaving by another means.' Blackjack, looking strangely pleased with himself, flipped some coins at McCay, who let them fall to the floor and roll away, no-one trying to catch them. Then he backed out the saloon without another word. I went out into the street and watched his retreat, the great legs of his horse painted in the lamplight until they merged with the darkness that marked the edge of town and disappeared.

The saloon sprang back into life. Cal sat back at the bar, face long as a stretched hide.

'It might have been easier if you'd have just shot him and worried about the cleaning bill afterwards,' I said to him under my breath.

'Thought you wanted me to keep my nose clean, John? Besides, that have been too easy. I got the feeling that's what he wanted, and I didn't feel like giving it to him. If he tries anything again, that'll be that.' He shrugged and swallowed the three measures that McCay lined up in front of him one after the other, putting the glasses down upended. He took out a nickel, put it under one of them, and started to move them about in overlapping circles like he meant me to guess where the coin was. I ain't never seen him do that before. He was a good hand at cards, but this grind was new and he did it

almost absent-minded, like his hands had a life of their own. I turned over the one that span the coin, but only cause the measures was made of glass.

‘Too easy is better than too hard. What are you forever telling me, that the quicker you can kill someone the better, even if you ain’t one hundred percent sure they deserve it. The more time you give someone, the more time you got to lose your nerve. Better to over-estimate.’

‘It didn’t seem right. He hadn’t even pulled.’ He seemed cagey now, like he didn’t want me second guessing him.

‘Like he said, since when has that bothered you before? Do you recognise him? He seemed to know you.’

‘I know him about as well as I know Queen Victoria. Let it go, John. Hopefully he’s halfway to the city by now, if he’s got anything north of his ears.’

‘At least let me check the guns over,’ I said. Cal sighed like I was an old woman intent on washing behind his ears, but he unhooked his belt and handed it over, passing me one of the new measures McCay had poured him. I downed it, and it was like drinking burnt rust.

‘Don’t have too many of those, or you’ll have nothing between your ears neither,’ I told him, and got out the door just before one of the glasses hit the frame and broke apart.

‘I’ll pay for that,’ I heard him say, laughing. ‘Pour me another.’

I headed back to the hotel to check over the Yellowboy and the revolvers. I didn’t want Cal to get into a shoot-out with Blackjack but I was always prepared for the worst. Never trust a man with no obvious motivation; they like cornered rats, you don’t know what they’ll do or how they’ll do it. I hadn’t squared him up, he could be a trick shot and we didn’t have no clue, though if he was we should have heard of him – we kept our noses to the ground when it came to big men, guns, anything that left bodies behind like breadcrumbs. It was pretty rare to find everyone in a town rooting for the same man, no matter how infamous the trouble maker. There was always someone who took against one or the other, always feuds, old or newly hatched, always rumors. It made for better betting. Even in a town like Elgin that was used to folks passing through, stirring up trouble over nothing, Blackjack had appeared like a maggot falling out a wound, horribly alive and no less terrible than the spoiled flesh it escapes.

Gun fights warn't frequent; like I said, they was better, more sensible ways of killing that warn't half so dangerous. Was common for bystanders to get shot but folks risked it to see a good one. Bullets could bounce off buildings or just go wide. I seen it happen. Cal and me once got in a tussle with a drifter as we left Wyoming - he'd been bothering folks near Laramie. I don't remember his name but if I recall correct he ran with Big Steve Long. He was a snaky sonofabitch but he was a lousy shot. Aiming at me, he hit a little girl in the leg, tore her thigh wide open. She'd been running to get out the way. Cal put one straight through his knee for that, then his hand. When he'd sweated for a minute or two and crawled along the road some, I added another in his head.

When I woke the next morning, I found Cal sat in the little chair by the end of the bed again, staring at the space above me. His eyes was glazed over and he was sat in that easy, lazy way of his, arms flopped over the chair arms, legs stuck right out in front of him. His pistols was in his hands, half pointed at the wall behind my head. I got up and pulled my boots on.

'That wall ain't going to draw, no matter how hard you stare it out,' I said, rubbing the grit out my eyes. He smiled.

'I don't know, it looks pretty twitchy to me.' He stood slowly and slid his guns into his belt, spinning both barrels first.

'How many?' I asked him.

'Whiskies? Or whores?'

'I withdraw the question, you keep that to yourself.' If he thought he was close to a fight, to chasing or killing someone, Cal craved women. Like I said, killing was enough, it brought a calm that eased his muscles and his mind to stillness, but til it was done he'd fuck til he was bored, tired or there was no more girls to buy time from.

'Not enough. I couldn't get away from McCay. I reckon he'd have sold me a piece of himself if I'd asked.'

We headed down to breakfast. Daniels was wandering about dolefully slopping out coffee and oatmeal. His dining hall was unusually full but quiet as an empty church, the open doors letting cold air drift in and settle about the corners of the room like it was waiting for a table. Sat square in the

middle, facing right at them stairs like he hadn't got no shame was Blackjack. He was surrounded by plates of food and half-drunk cups of coffee and he was still wearing that queer expression of his. His gloved hands rested on his big stomach and his legs was spread apart, knees bent around the small table in front of him. His crow eyes met mine as he pushed his hat brim up a notch and his gaze flew over me before settling on Cal. The Texan had come to a swift stop, like the dining hall was a pool of dirty water he didn't want to cross. His hands twitched, just a little. Daniels pointed a finger at him.

'Easy. I'm not cleaning up nobody's brains before I've served the eggs.'

A roomful of faces was staring hard at us, cups or spoons halfway up to they mouths, grey oatmeal sliding off them and falling onto the table-tops. Blackjack picked up his newest coffee, tipped his head back and downed it in one go like it was whisky, his eyes rolling backward in his skull as he swallowed. Then he did the strangest thing. He kicked out a chair in Cal's direction and asked him bold as anything if he'd join him. Cal was caught on the back foot, all those folks looking at him, but I figured he'd still refuse. He held his breath, though, took them final steps and sat down heavy, arms folded, and nodded at Daniels for another coffee. I pulled out a chair close by and slid onto it in silence. Daniels poured us each a drink, steam rising from the chipped cups like it did from wet ground, and the three of us sat, stiff-faced and upright like a wife and two mistresses forced together at a Democrat tea party.

'What are you doing in here?'

'Eating breakfast, like everybody else. If you hadn't noticed, Davies, this is the only place to get it. This ain't the city and I need to eat.' Blackjack gestured an easy hand round the room. In daylight, he was even harder to look at straight on, with that upturned lip under the black whiskers, and cheeks like a riverbed that hasn't seen rain for years. I found myself having to look at him out the side of my eyes, felt like facing him might turn me to stone. I ladled myself some porridge from a pot on the next table and people went back to their breakfasts, looking at us from under they eyebrows. Blackjack was eating like hadn't seen food in a month, bread and ham and porridge all going down, Daniels or his maid reluctantly fetching him more with each empty plate, and him licking his fingers and wiping his beard like he'd not ever heard of a spoon. He kept offering Cal food, but Cal ignored

him and sat there straight-backed with a face like he'd been made to sit next to a pile of off meat left out in August.

'What's the matter Texan, you not hungry? You look like Texas, you know, thinking on it. You stick out like a ripe prick round here in this dried-up place. Though you ain't much of a conversationalist. The way I've heard it, folks can't normally shut you up. You not good in the mornings?' He took another swig of coffee and I watched it fall down his gullet.

'You ain't heard shit, Blackjack. No-one will talk to you, and you sure jaw a lot for a man who's going to be face down in the shit of the street as soon as I feel inclined,' Cal said, mouth barely moving.

'Oh, no, no, no, Davies, you know better than that. You don't know what I want yet. I might want you dead, I might want to rob you, hell I might even want to suck your cock, you don't know; but you want to know, and there's smarter ways of finding out than threatening me.' Every man in the hall had his ass perched so far up front on his seat they'd be on the floor if they moved an inch further. You could almost hear the fat on the breakfast bacon turning solid as it went cold, untouched.

'Saying that,' Blackjack said, tipping his head in my direction, 'I'm not one for practising what I preach.'

Blackjack grabbed the back of my collar, lifted me from my seat and held me face forward in front of him, all before I'd chance to swallow the food in my mouth. It fell out from behind my teeth as he shook me into place and raised his gun to my head. I could feel the size of him behind me, his great arms, his hand at my throat like a farmer steadyng a sick lamb before he fiddles a knife across its neck. Cal drew his pistols and in the swiftness of it all it felt like he was aiming at me too, like two people meant to shoot me and that they bullets might meet in the middle of me. I remember thinking I might just die indoors, and hating that idea and willing Blackjack to at least drag me outside as I half-stood, half-sat in front of him like a man with rigour already, though he'd dragged me over as if I was a ragdoll.

Have you ever had a gun to your head? The bite of metal at your temple... it becomes your whole body, your arms, your legs, all changed by the cold kiss of that little black hole and the bullet you know is perched inches behind it, waiting to part your brain and burrow its way into your thoughts.

You move to that gun, not even so much to the man holding it, the hand on the trigger; the gun becomes everything, its mouth pulling at your skin like it would suck you in, and you picture yourself dropping to your knees, your belly, your mind dribbling out the new hole in your skull. You picture it, over and over, like something that's already happened. You move with the slightest twitch of the barrel, the smallest scrape on thin flesh of your head. You think you can feel blood surface, think you shot already. It terrifies you and calms you all in the same breath, and you realise you are still breathing, and the feeling starts up all over again. A ring of metal, on the thinnest skin.

'Don't move,' he said, and I remember thinking 'I ain't,' and smelling the strange stink of him, the damp, bottom of a river, old well left to sour smell, the tang of fish and the char of black powder, the last leading me back to the gun at my head and the fingers round my scrawny neck.

'Don't move,' Cal said, and I yelled back 'Jesus Christ, I ain't.' Funny thing is, if someone has a gun to your head, and they ain't shot you yet, the longer they hold it there, the less chance they'll pull the trigger. You're bait, a worm dangled in front of whatever they really want, but you must keep real still, real quiet, or else they'll remember you alive too, and might hurt them if they let you go.

Blackjack's voice rumbled over my shoulder.

'I'll shoot him Davies. Ain't a thing to me. Ain't a thing to you either, I reckon, but I'd like to be proved wrong. Put your gun down.' After what felt like the length of a day, drawn to stretch out even further, the black hole that led to the chamber of Cal's pistol, the thing in front of my eyes that seemed to twin with the one I could feel at the ridge of my skull, withdrew, and was re-holstered. It was replaced by Cal's face, eyes so wide and still he looked like he was near to growing a beak and pecking out Blackjack's eyes to loose me.

'Let him go.' Blackjack slackened the push of the gun, just a second, before connecting it again and the dull pain of the force of it spread round my jaw and pushed itself up into my teeth like dirty water seeping up out the ground.

'Sit down, Texan.' Cal lowered hisself, keeping his eyes on me. They glowed like a coal fire, but the rest of his features was dead, colorless, set on the long stretch of his face, his fists sat stacked lifeless on the table.

'Let him go.'

Blackjack's hands was like meat-hooks, and I was a runt's carcass, strung up to be sold off cheap. He stood up, dragging me with him. The strength that corded through his arm tightened as he lifted me, his fingers closing round my neck, gun still to my head. I could feel the blood leech from my face and a red haze spill over my eyeballs. I was choking, near silent, my lungs empty.

'Outside, Davies. We'll finish what we started yesterday.'

'That's fine, that's fine.' I could near feel the grin I knew was stretched over Blackjack's face. He dragged me out backwards into the street, Cal following, facing me as I clawed at my throat, getting nowhere with Blackjack's ironwork fingers. At least I was going down outside, though I felt like I might suffocate before anyone could draw, the huge shape of the Texan following me in a weighty, fluid step that matched the one I was annexed to. His eyes didn't leave Blackjack; he wasn't interested in me but in the current that held me, and pulled me away.

The light of the street was painful, and my mouth tasted like iron and bloody oats, and the faint flavor of spew that was trapped somewhere beneath Blackjack's hand. My clenched jaw was starting to slowly break teeth. Mud waited below my dangling legs as the red light in my eyes started to turn black and I began to lose my bearings. The things in front of me shrank into faded, distant versions of themselves, and Cal dwarfed to the size of a fly that drifts slowly in and out of your vision. Blackjack carried on dragging me backwards down the road, my body hanging in front of his. If Cal shot at him, he'd more than likely hit me. I was waiting for the bullet, thinking it was a risk Cal would take, but nothing punctured me, or halted the pull on me. I felt like waves under the moon, helpless to do anything but give in. Cal seemed to be holding back, a small figure hundreds of yards away, dwindling into a bright blur, a flicker I couldn't get into focus. I could make out people darting about either side of me, but his movements became indistinguishable from the piss pale sunlight that made a halo round him and bled into the ground like lightning gone soft.

I was about to go under when I felt my chin scrape along cold, grainy mud, and the light quickly soak back into my eyes, watering down the black haze til it disappeared. He threw me down like I was a bale of hay that was falling from its bindings, and my throat grew two inches in the moment I landed. I heard gun fire sail over my head as I crawled on my belly to the sidewalk.

Now, like I said, Blackjack went down easy. Cal barely had to think about it. One bullet did the job, the other two was just insurance. I wasn't even sure Blackjack had even fully pulled out his gun. I didn't understand it. He must have known that the minute he tossed me, Cal had him. I didn't need to bother drawing, though the glass that rained down on my head from the lantern Blackjack blew apart had shaken me. He didn't move again. I hauled myself up out the mud, sat on the boards in front of the hardware store and started to pick pieces of it out my shirt like so many ticks. There he was, lying on his side in the dirt, looking like a great fish someone had reeled in, beached and deflated, staring along at the half-baked clouds that hovered at the edge of town. Men started to wander over to the body, to nudge it with their toes. Someone tried to pull the gun from his hand, and they had to uncurl the fingers one by one to prise it away.

I left them to it and was hobbling down the street towards Cal and the hotel when I saw someone move on the saloon balcony at the end of the road. She had a sheet of long, finely curled black hair so dark it had a green tinge in the light and she wore a pale pink dress. She was completely alone, and dust swirled around her like had just kicked it up. She was staring at the body. No-one else seemed to have noticed her none, they were all too busy enjoying the corpse. Her face slowly turned to me; her eyes were as black as powder, and they made my spine feel like someone had run their knuckles up it. The lower half of her face was completely covered by a black silk scarf and she had on black gloves. She carefully held a finger up to her hidden mouth, then turned and disappeared into the gloom of the deserted saloon. I waited, half-expecting to see her slip out the front door but they stayed closed, and a hand on my shoulder interrupted my staring. Cal was grinning.

'The way you're looking at the saloon John can only mean one thing. Drink?'

That was when the photographer appeared. I didn't know the man's name, but we'd seen him in the saloon often enough, claiming poverty, being ignored by the whores until he'd found some money from somewhere. He was short and fat and had a crumpled face that was sweating from the effort of running. We stared at him as he dragged his kit up the street, waving at Cal.

'Well, ain't that the picture of enthusiasm over experience,' McCay said, offering Cal a hip flask. The Texan took it, rolled his eyes and tried to walk quicker towards the saloon.

‘Mr Davies! Mr Davies!’ The man was flailing like he was possessed. He tripped over his own feet twice, almost sending all his fancy equipment into the mud. The camera legs spun and dangled underneath the box, reminding me of where I’d been only minutes earlier, and my hand went up to my throat before I could stop it. It still felt like it was now too small to support my head. Cal forced a big smile and looked down at the short, panting man who seemed to barely reach beyond the Texan’s gun belt.

‘Channing – you own all these contrivances and you haven’t paid off what you owe at the bar in weeks.’ McCay jabbed at the wooden box and lifted its black, woollen shroud. The bulging camera lens looked like the single eye of some strange fish that had never before seen the light of day. ‘You know how to use this?’ Ignoring McCay’s inspections, Channing held out his shining palm to the Texan.

‘Would you object to being photographed, for posterity, sir?’ The request was met with murmurs of interest from the crowd, photography still being pretty novel. Cal paused, eyes to the sky. For a vain man, he wasn’t fond on having his likeness taken. He said it was bad luck, but really he just got twitchy at the thought of the picture or drawing not getting him quite right. What he really wanted to do was drink, I could tell, his fingers were twitching like they were wondering why they weren’t already round the neck of a bottle, but he finally conceded for politeness sake. Channing looked like he could have kissed his feet.

The self-appointed photographer, clearly relishing the chance to throw his ample weight about for the first time, started to herd folks off the street. The Wichita reporter was shouting out questions at Cal as he let Channing position him in the driest bit of road. McCay collared him and made him write down the barkeep’s version of events. I stuck a hand out to take Cal’s hat and made to walk to the saloon. I wanted to see if that woman with the black hair was still inside somewhere, though she’d made me feel like my guts were on show.

‘Now where do you think you’re headed?’ Cal grabbed the back of my shirt collar and near-picked me up, swinging me round to face the camera. People milled about behind Channing, a curious few nosing over his shoulder a little at the preparations the photographer seemed to be making.

‘Don’t be doing that to me.’ My hand went back to my neck again, and I pulled at my shirt. ‘I don’t need to be in no picture.’

‘Isn’t a matter of need, John, I’m not doing it alone, you’re keeping me company.’

‘Sonofabitch.’ I pushed my hat as far down over my face as it’d stretch. Cal called over a small boy, hovering moon-eyed among the pack of legs behind the camera. He’d probably never seen anyone shot before. He squirreled over and stood, tall as Cal’s knee, mouth open.

‘You hold this for me while I have my picture done, atta boy.’ He put his hat on the boy’s head, and it covered his entire face. He shuffled off to the side, cast into shadow by the huge brim, his tiny pink fingers lightly clutching the edges like they might burn him.

‘Stand how you like sir, you’re sure to make a good impression,’ Channing called, finally ready. He rubbed his hands over one another like he’d struck gold, before noticing me hovering in the street looking like a horse lost a rider.

‘He’s in it too, Channing,’ Cal said. The photographer looked me up and down with his piggy eyes then said for me to stand wherever I wouldn’t block Cal.

‘Fat chance of that,’ I said. Cal told me to quit muttering and look at the camera. Channing dove under his black cloth and I hesitated, looking round for somewhere to hide. Cal was fussing awkward-like over his pose, belt pulled up to flash the revolvers, the rifle out in front. I got myself as far behind his back as possible. Just when it was looking like we was about set to go, someone yelled hold it. Four big men staggered up, swinging the body of Blackjack between them, an arm or leg each. He dangled heavy in the middle, like that great pig Cal had shot the day before. McCay was directing them, naturally. They heaved him forward, past Channing, lungs rattling with the weight of him. The man hauling Blackjack’s left leg remarked that he’d started to go stiff already and that he sure did smell off. They dumped the body at Cal’s feet and it broke the barely set surface of the muddy road, and sank near three inches, like the ground was trying to take him already.

There was an expectant quiet. Cal coughed and looked back over his shoulder at me, then down at the body like it was a piss-pot someone had just emptied by his feet. Not noticing the Texan’s expression, Channing had the boys pull Blackjack’s body here and there til he got it just so. Now I’ve seen dead folks before, plenty, warn’t many out in the territories hadn’t. They look normal for a while

then rigor sets in and they set like a stone; the body contracts, and gives the face this pinched look, like they's offended by they own end. When that wears off, they start to look dead proper, and slacken til they turn greenish and the bugs come, or the undertaker gets their hands on them. Either way, the result is the same. But the fella who'd carried him was right – Blackjack did look more rigid than most, but he hadn't been down long enough for the clamps to really set it. His mouth was still in that half-smile that was unsettling in life and was now in death just plain worrying. One of his carriers had tried to push his eyes shut, but they sprang open each time, the lenses filmy. I was glad when they finally got him settled and hoped we'd be long inside before he got to stinking.

I was trying my damndest to stay still. I knew I was supposed to stare at the lens, but my eyes wandered every second or so to that body on the ground. When I looked real hard I thought I saw the pale eyes move just a fraction, the chest twitch. I shook it off as the final ragings of dying nerves – dead men have been known to twist or kick before, and I'd seen a corpse once bite a man's finger clear through to the bone. He was trying to steal the man's gold teeth. He got the teeth in the end but came away with the raving disease too for his troubles. I finally fixed my eyes on Channing and set to willing the exposure to finish, so that I hardly noticed when he called time. Cal dropped his stance immediately and turned Channing towards the saloon. I followed suit, making sure I walked clear around the body. That was when I saw her again, her face in the window of my hotel room, looking down at us with eyes dark as scorched earth. Then she disappeared, quick as Cal's draw.

'I didn't need to spend those last two bullets, but I thought I'd give him what he came for. He didn't even get a round out. I've half a mind to prop him up and let him try again.' *The Lucky Stars* was packed tight, the whores hovering round Cal like flies on a steer's eye. I didn't blame them none, they must have got bored out they brains lying underneath the same dusty pricks, shopkeepers or cattle men day in day out and this warn't any normal day in Elgin. Most folks always feel a little bit like they bullet proof after something big happens, even if it ain't nothing to do with them. Even I'd got a haze on me, but I sat back in a dark corner, stewing. Cal would have had a long night ahead of him if he'd felt inclined, with them girls offering theyselves up to him like they was courses in a big dinner. True to form though he warn't interested and McCay hauled his ladies up and told them to get busy

with whoever had the dollar. Most had got deep pockets that night, they only aim enough snatch and drink to send them into a happy stupor.

I needed to ask Cal about the woman I'd seen. I was straight she warn't no whore, and I'd never seen her in the bar. I'd half a mind to pass her off as a figment, something a poppy smoker might imagine when they ain't had fresh air in too long, but I didn't touch that shit and the note she'd had left in my hotel room was as real as anything. I'd snuck back up to our bunks while people poured into the bar and Channing's tintype sat growing a miniature Cal and me, and a new dead body to see what she had been doing up there. Sat on my bed was a tattered envelope, sealed rough with thick, dirty wax. What fell out of it made my guts touch my knees. I didn't want to take it out again. I'd read it once and stuffed it into my pocket, fearing the words written on it in ragged, spidery letters might crawl off the page and bite me.

Cal lumbered from the bar towards my table, staggering, looking like a giant that meant to smash up all the little tables and chairs and people beneath him. He eventually made it over and sat down with a big swing of his limbs. He looked me over and I raised my glass to him.

'I thought you reckoned McCay's whisky was cut rate?' he said, taking a mouthful from my bottle.

'It's like piss set on fire, but, like you said, I needed a drink.'

'What's eating you?'

'Ain't I allowed a drink?' I snatched the bottle back and poured myself another. Cal held his hands up and backed off but looked at me like I warn't fooling anyone.

'Quit eyeballing me. I don't want to drag you down from this high old evening.'

'We're in Elgin, ain't no such thing. Spit.' I held off, poured myself two more fingers before I pulled the envelope out from my back pocket.

'Look at this.' I handed it to him and he shook its contents out into his hand. A small tear of paper, and a tarnished ring that spun for a second in his open palm before it wound itself to a flat halt and sat, trying and failing to shine in the limp bar light. He picked it up and held it to the nearest lamp.

'Is that blood?' he asked, his thumb instinctively rubbing at the red crust that sat along the rim of the band. I took it back off him, feeling all of a sudden strange about his touching it. His eyes turned

to the note, unfurling at the edges. They skimmed over the words, thin as winter snakes in front of him. He must have read it a couple times before he looked up at me, half-cut confusion sat upon his face.

‘What does it mean, John?’

‘Constance is in trouble.’

‘Who?’

‘We’ve got to go to New Orleans.’

‘What? Why?’

I could see understanding slowly rise up his face, as he remembered who Constance was, and realised what I was saying to him.

‘You gave her this ring?’

‘Yes, when she left. It was my mother’s.’

‘You old fool.’ Cal grinned, his face slack.

‘Don’t joke with me right now Cal Davies. Like you said, that’s blood right there. We have to go. We’re done here. I almost died. You’ve had your fun.’ Cal’s expression fell, and he sat back in his seat like a sulking child, one hand tapping absent-mindedly at the pistol that hung on his right hip, the other fingering the scrap of paper as he reread the words scrawled across it. *Come on home, John. She’s calling you.*

‘No. We can’t go hauling ass down to New Orleans, just on the say so of a scribble and an old ring. You’ve gone crazy.’

‘I ain’t crazy. That’s my ring. And where else could that note mean? I don’t call New Orleans my home none but I don’t call no other place it either. It’s must mean there.’

‘It’s too risky.’

‘Since when has risk ever bothered you?’

‘Like you said, you almost died. We let that happen. We’re getting sloppy.’

‘She’s in trouble.’

‘How long since you last saw her? And how do you even know this is your ring? It’s so plain. There’s not a mark on it, save the blood.’

'I'd know it anywhere; if you showed me a thousand the same I'd know it. I took it off my mother's finger. I put it on hers. I know it.'

'Why did you give a negress a ring? I'm curious. You couldn't marry her.'

'It was the only thing I could do. Well, I thought it was, back then.' I felt my voice rising. Cal tossed the note on the table, and I scrambled to pick it up, but not before it had soaked up spilt beer from the damp wood. He held his palms up.

'So you want us to go looking for a girl that might be dead, we don't know, in a city she may or may not be in, we don't know - '

'I'm sure that's what it means.'

'- with no knowing who's taken her, or if she's even been taken?'

'Yes.'

'Not a chance, John.'

'Why?' I spat that word out like it had turned in my mouth. I was drunk, and I could feel the heat rising up my body, the dizziness. I rocked back and forward til it reached my mouth and turned itself into words. 'I have been all over this God-forsaken country with you, not for the pleasure of your company I can tell you, but because I thought we was working together, and that that meant something even in shit-heel little towns like this one, even to someone as self-interested as - '

'I don't make you do anything, John.'

'I know, that's what I'm saying. I've done things for you not cause you asked but because I thought it was right. Now I need your help and you won't give it. I knew you were a selfish sonofabitch but I thought you was a little better than this.'

Cal sat, still looking like a scolded child, chewing the insides of his mouth, insolent eyes staring at me across the small table. We'd been at a stalemate before but not one so heated, not one about something I cared so much for without being able to explain why to him. This warn't just about safety, or money, or having a good time. It was about me, and I didn't have the means to say that to him fully, didn't think he'd care none if I did. It felt like we was sat there for hours, though it must have only been a few ugly minutes of silence. Finally, he spoke/

'I have one condition.'

‘What?’ I said, not caring an ounce what he wanted.

‘We go through Texas.’

‘Done.’

‘New Orleans...’ He smiled, as if we was planning a trip to any other city, for drink, games, lights, girls, but the smile faded as soon as it appeared and for a second he looked frightened. His eyes flickered back and forth like a horse’s does when it gets whipped for the first time. I was so set on getting him to agree that I didn’t question his bargain none. I put the ring back in the envelope, tiny flecks of dried blood falling from it and melting into my damp palm, streaking its lines red. I sat holding the sodden slip; the words in front of me had spread into misshapen scrawls. It didn’t matter none, what they said was already branded on my brain. Cal took three great swigs from my bottle, and slowly his normal ease returned.

He told me not to wait up, then stood and addressed the bar.

‘I think we should play a little game. This will be my last night in Elgin, ladies, so you might indulge me in this...’

He left me, as I tried to drag my wits up from where whisky had buried them. I faded out Cal’s voice and the wash of bar noise, til all I could hear was my own pulse, lunging up and down my throat. At some point, someone passed me the tintype. Channing was upstairs, making the rafters creak, and had forgotten to reclaim it. It had got a little thumbed from being passed about, and no-one had remarked on it, other than to marvel at Cal, stood there smiling, with his guns and his trophy, or at the trophy itself, Blackjack, his dead eyes open and staring out like they could read your mind. But they was a shadow in my window, a half-formed shape that the camera hadn’t been able to capture. Her. I knew it; she watched the miniature Cal and me below her, but I felt as if that shadow was creeping over me somehow, its black eyes like a coast light that warns of the harm that lies waiting beneath, and I was sorry right then that I ever stepped foot in Elgin.

Come on home John. She’s calling you.

I never thought I’d go back to New Orleans, not even when Constance headed out, thought I’d closed the door on that whole place. I had hated it there, so much I felt sick thinking on it; but as far as I knew Constance was there, and the thought of her in trouble made my insides twist. I was winded by

my own feelings, flooding back after all them years, years that felt now no more than a minute or two, time passed by accident when you warn't looking. The Mississippi, we was headed for the Mississippi.

I woke early. I felt rough as hell but I hauled myself up and out soon as I could manage. Cal warn't in his room and his bed hadn't been slept in. The breakfast hall was empty, and Daniels sat slumped over his desk, his left foot in a pool of vomit, his head stuck to a bird's nest of receipts and tobacco. There was a lone pot of coffee sat cooling among the heap of trash strewn about the hotelier; some of it had slopped out when it was put down and it had left a wide, rusty stain that crept over the wood and mess towards Daniels' face. I poured a cup and wedged what was left of our bill under his cheek, then went down to the livery to collect the horses.

I found Cal in the saloon, dressed at least but smelling powerful strong of stale drink. The whole bar did; the overripe stink of a pile of warm bodies and spilt drink had kicked all the air out the room. He was slumped in a corner near the stairs, his head down on his chest. Most of the men of the town were still in there with him, with a few girls in various stages of undress. I navigated my way around them that was slumped on the floor and had a moment's fun thinking how best to wake the Texan. A sharp kick in the side of the rump did it and he woke with something in between a grunt and a yawn, his eyes puffy and drink-stung in the lopsided swell of his face.

'Was that necessary, John?' He scowled at me, then pressed the heels of his hands into his eyelids, bearing his teeth.

'You know you'll get no sympathy from me. I'm ready to go. Not sure I can say same for you.' Cal grunted again then hauled hisself up, arm by arm and leg by leg til he was on all fours, then standing. He leaned on the banister, swaying some while he stretched enough for a man of his size, with that much whisky to shake off, to get moving. I had always been able to spring up and do in the morning, kind of like how a baby cow can run near soon as it's born. With Cal it was always more of a process.

'Horses are outside. If we's going on this goose chase, we's leaving now, before you change your mind.' Cal gave me a look like he was real put upon, but I ignored him, and went back towards the

door, wading back through the sprawl of the previous night's embarrassments. Things shined on the floor, and something had darkened the boards near the bar, the stain stretching out in a wide half-circle. There was blood on the wall. I could hear him muttering under his breath, but he started to creakily pick his way across the room. A few of the guys sleeping on the floor had begun to stir, coughing and farting their way back into the land of the living. One of them piped up, his throat full of snot.

'You leaving now, Mr Davies?'

'Yes boys. John and I are headed for Louisiana, got business there.' That met with a few whispers of surprise and what for. Cal replied with a vague mutter about bars and bourbon, and said he'd no doubt be back in Elgin, to see those 'doves' again. Them that was awake all laughed at that, one so much that he was sick. It took me all my concentration to not let my morning coffee make an appearance and join the puddle that seeped towards my boots.

We walked our way east up Main Street, getting loose in the saddle again after a few days near all on foot. We moved slowly past the undertakers and saw that Blackjack had been given a coffin finally – he was propped up in it outside the door, head cricked to one side, rictus grin set on his face. His eyes was still clamped open, and they watched us pass without moving, a skin of dirt growing over his face already, dulling the sickly glow of his scarred cheeks. I turned back to give him one last look and felt a ripple of unease spread down my back as I remembered the way he looked in Channing's picture. But he didn't move, didn't step out into the road after us as I half-imagined he might; his body stayed propped up in its black leathers like an old burned tree trunk that is only one swift kick from crumbling towards the ground. Cal spat as we rode past him and got out into the open once again, away from coffins and oatmeal and the wide eyes of them that long to see death arrive on they doorstep, so long as it ain't there for them.

The Texan was quiet them first couple hours, and I enjoyed a bit of peace as we made our way out of town and I tried to clear my head. When we was way past Elgin, out in air that warn't fouled up in some way as town air always was, out in the grass, he started up whistling. The sound carried high over the wide fields around us, soft and light against the steady thud of the horses. He warn't one for

silence. On the road, I would keep quiet and Cal would talk at me til it was time to quit for the day. We was a way off that yet. The noon sun beat strong on our heads and lit up the grass round us, green and rich enough to make a horse fat and windy.

We had the wide, ponderous Arkansas River on our left. We'd stick with it til we reached the point it met up with the Salt Fork in the territory. Then we'd have to start crossing more rivers; Black Bear Creek, the Cimarron, the Canadians, the Washita. They all headed toward the Mississippi. Fat Daddy River, he dragged everything towards him - water, dirt, money, people - and churn them all up like they was all just nothing more than pebbles in a little mountain stream. And between us and it was a long drag through Kansas, Texas and, sat square between them, the Indian nations. It warn't no easy thing, traveling through that wide stretch of dust, scrub and skies so hot and blue they got to hurting your eyes, and it was made even more difficult with Cherokee, Kickapoo, Creek and Choctaw roaming wide. We didn't have no maps. Maps was for the government, the railroad companies and territory bandits; most just carried a map up in they head, or tried to follow the scanty signs along the trail as best they could and hoped they didn't get shot up with arrows or snake poison.

I was trying not to dwell on things, trying to keep my head up and not think too much on why we was on the move again. But that little space at the back of your mind where you put things that you can't tend to, or don't know how, that little space kept falling open like an overfilled grain sack and what was in it warn't hushing up. If I was honest with myself, I thought Constance was already dead. Not that I wanted that, naw, but you got to understand, years of seeing the poor nature of folks and the ease with which they die hadn't helped me conjure up hope none. I reckoned on this being a slow ride into a lost cause, but I couldn't leave it to chance.

Cal strangely didn't seem worried, despite his protests from the night before. He was probably hoping I'd thought to bring a few bottles along from Elgin. I had, but I hadn't told him that. He couldn't often sleep without drink and if he couldn't sleep he warn't never inclined to let me drift off either, but something told me we'd need all the rest we could get over the next couple weeks. The Texan's tune took on the sound of one I recognised and I joined in, determined to just plain not think as best I could but Cal took that as a sign to start up talking, his usual chat of drinking and dealings,

and an account of the idea he'd had the night before in the saloon, with all the ugly details left in. The song died in my throat and I settled in to half-listen like I normally did.

He had somehow convinced the girls to go all the way down to the river side. Most of Elgin's young, and not so young, men had followed them. I'd seen them from my window, the men coming up the road. They was heaving out whisky-warm clouds into the cold night air as they hollered and threw themselves about. The boys was carrying what looked like the whores' clothes, yellowing, faded puffs of cotton and lace escaping from their arms as they tumbled down Main Street. They looked like a pack of stray dogs that had just raided one of them fancy city stores. That was all I saw – my poor mood had stopped me lingering at my window.

'We all headed back to the saloon and waited on the porch. The girls ran all the way back from the Arkansas, naked as shame. You should have seen it, pale ass cheeks shaking in the moonlight,' Cal said, laughing. 'One girl, I forget her name, the one Blackjack introduced to that table, she pulled ahead and got back first. He didn't affect her legs at least, though she's got a great, vicious looking bruise, runs the whole length of her jaw. Nose is broken as well and she lost some teeth... anyway, she was met with a round of applause of course, but we only gave her her dress back after she'd had three big glasses of bourbon. We'd left McCay behind, but he was folded up in a corner when we got back so we served ourselves. I've never known a saloon owner mind his interests so badly, he drinks more than he sells and he gives away more than he drinks. I doubt he'll half a bottle left after last night.' Cal talked out of habit, to pass my time and his, but even I had to admit my ears pricked up when the Texan was jawing about the race, and I joked that Channing's camera would have been better used taking in those naked, moonlit asses than our ugly mugs. Cal laughed big at that.

We picked up pace and my mood picked up a little along with it. The sun warmed us into the saddle and smoothed out the horses' muscles. We'd got near five hundred miles to cover to reach Texas, a week of hard riding on long days through the plains. Flat grassland mostly, so unchanging you ended up thinking you warn't getting nowhere no matter how fast you ran. We could have used the trains, the new iron horses. That was what the Indians called them. I knew some of the chiefs had been to Washington on one once, had gone to see the President. It had been in the papers. Now that was a pretty picture, them sat there in those big bonnets, not hollering over they prairies but rattling

along in some pokey carriage, being served weak tea and listening to they neighbors drag about how the motion made them want to drop the contents of they stomach out the window.

Most of the Indians in the territories surrounding us had been killed and herded til they was tricked into giving up, but folks talked about one in particular like he mattered still. White Bear, his name was, though some called him Satanta. He was supposed to be holed up in the Territory, hemmed in finally by the military. Stories of him had been in the papers before too, and even Cal, who was usually unsympathetic to most Indian problems, took an interest, reading me the articles out loud whenever we got our hands on the news. People said he was big as a bear, with a red face and muscles to rival even the thickest docker, and that he liked to drink and talk and get about. One of his tribe had called George Custer a sonofabitch, which seemed true enough, but Custer had objected of course, and if men like Custer wanted you shifted, then shifted you will be.

Folks had stopped using the stages, once the railroads was up and running. The Pony Express had hung up its whip just as the war started and other services had declined, folks choosing not to travel in a small, stiff box on wheels with folks they'd sooner not pass an hour with, let alone a week. I had considered being an Express man myself when I was younger. I fitted the bill sure enough; small, wiry, no family to mourn me when I was shot up by Indian raiders or robbers. Cal wouldn't have got nowhere on it, weighing probably as much as the thoroughbrace itself, and stages had funny rules you had to stick to, like no snoring, no drinking and no shooting out the window at wildlife, so that was Cal out again. The funniest one was a prohibition on discussing Indian uprisings, when they was the very things of concern to you if you risked them journeys. I sort of missed the stages. They seemed the most natural way of moving things and people to me, next to horseback - wood and wheels and beasts moving and working together. The trains seemed to eat up so many men and horses they put to work on the track that the whole operation seemed like some great machine, chewing up ground and spitting out bone as it went. They called it advancement, but I don't reckon the men they buried in the ditches it left behind it would see it that way now.

I breathed me some fresh pasture air in deep and hoped the weather would hold. Crazy winds and storms often beat on the land we'd be covering. I'd never seen a twister back then, so I could only imagine, but I got the benefit of experience now. They scream and howl like they's some creature

inside them coils trying to get out. They suck the color out of the sky and the ground and spin everything together into a dark funnel that drills into the dirt. I heard they can chew up houses quicker than a man can chew a square of cornbread, and they spit out what they suck up like crumbs spewn over miles and miles. Right then I couldn't imagine no such a thing stirring up trouble. The land was open and calm, the sky full of fat-ass creamy clouds. There were little scrubby trees and tufts of long grass dotted about far as the eye could reach, pale but shining in the sun. The ground nearer the river was a little greener, the grass even longer, at the beginning of its summer life. Little flowers had started to spring up, the first of the season. I ain't too good at knowing the names of flowers, I warn't never taught, so I just admired them quietly, and felt cheered by their appearance. They was sunflowers too though, now I do know what they is - big, cheery, how'd-you-do plants, some so tall you felt like you should shake their leaves as you passed by just like you'd shake a man's hand.

We rode hard the rest of that afternoon and when we'd got some ways past the Ninnescah Fork, a gentle, shallow stretch of water that the horses picked they way across without thinking too hard, we decided to rest. We led the horses down a well-trodden dip to a shallow point in the Arkansas and let them drink. I filled up the canteens and the two of us sat on the bank with a flask. I looked out over the huge river in front of me, took it in proper. It ran smooth at this point in its navigation, almost as far as the horizon it felt, wider than most city roads, and its surface changed from charcoal gray to bluecoat indigo, depending on which way you tilted your head. Birds sat in tree branches or on smooth river stones, eyeing up the flies that skimmed over the water. We watched them gobble them down, tiny shimmering wings like thin silks that somehow gave a satisfying crunch between the razored halves of hungry beaks. The water smelled fresh. Up in Colorado, where it started, I reckoned it was so clean it'd be like drinking air, though the coming summer heat would dry it up, and burn off some of the goodness.

The two of us could have followed the Arkansas all the rest of its length if we was so minded, but we was going to ride the near one thousand mile trip from Kansas to Southern Louisiana through Texas. It would make our journey longer, which was starting to trouble me in the cold light of day, now that the whisky sweats had faded, but to tell the truth I was afraid, and wanted Cal and his guns with me however I got them. Cal clearly had a hankering to see his home territory again. He hadn't

got no folks left that he knew of, but he seemed bolstered by the thought of stepping foot on Texas dirt and I didn't know how to tell him a detour wasn't a good idea. As if he could hear his own footsteps in my mind, Cal elbowed me in the ribs and passed me the flask. The taste of McCay's whisky burned the clean air from my throat.

'You still set on this, John?'

'I'm squared up to it.'

'Well, alright then. Don't say I didn't warn you.'

'What's that supposed to mean?'

He didn't answer me, and we was quiet after that, taking up a blade of grass each to chew as we watched the horses feed on the bank, their shadows slowly growing on the water as the sun started making its retreat. When I heard Cal's belly rumbling, I dug out the net I carried in my pack and chanced my luck in the river. Dark little trout swam in their numbers along it, and I collected a handful that was flopping in the shallows. I got a small fire going and fried them up in their own oils. We sucked the flesh off the thread-thin bones til they was white and sparkling, and left them on the ground, like blades of grass that had paled with age. Our eyelids drooped, and I thought I could smell something strange on the late breeze that gently coiled over the river bank, something like burning, that dampened the smell of the trout and made my head feel heavy. Cal leaned back on the bank, sinking into his shadow. I hit his side to try to keep him awake, but I was fighting my own losing battle and soon the buzz of insects and birds and river sounds became the noiseless, blanketing sound of sleep.

I woke with a start maybe an hour or so later, flies in the corners of my eyes. The sun was near to touching the land to the west and our pants were grass-damp and stuck to our backsides. I got up cursing, booted Cal and looked out for the horses. They'd gone a few hundred feet down the river bank, which was strange as they wasn't normally given to wandering. I gathered up their trailing reins from where they hung low on the dewy ground and tried to get the beasts moving. Their back ends was all tucked up under themselves, tails twitching, the bleeding colors of dusk reflected in the huge

whites of they eyes. I pulled them back to Cal, which took some doing, them dragging they hooves and talking to each other in the shrill horse noise of nerves and flared nostrils.

Cal was squatted down over something near the water's edge, his pale leathers and straw colored hair harboring a pale green glow in the grass and the hazy river light. Hand automatically on one of his pistols. I handed him the reins and looked to where he motioned. Foot prints, faint where the grass had sprung back up, but there, picked out by the failing sun. They led to where I had found the horses, running alongside my own. I quickly looked over the animals, running my palms over limbs and faces and saddles, but all seemed right enough, though their ears were still so tight back on their head it looked like they skulls might show through they skin.

'Have we been robbed, John?'

'Not that I can make out.' I said, though that raised more questions than it answered. I checked the bed roll wound up on Camel's back where I kept a roll of greenbacks, and the rifle strapped to Jim's rump. Not a dollar or a round taken. My damp palms clamped round the cold stock of my own gun.

'Indians? For the horses?' Cal asked,

'Naw. They'd be long gone and we'd be floating in that river with our throats opened. We would have heard them. What were we thinking though, day sleeping out here like cats with our bellies up, horses un-tethered? We deserved to be robbed even if we ain't been.'

'I don't remember closing my eyes. Didn't hear a thing,' he said. I hadn't either, but I couldn't understand how. I slept light, my mind never far from its surface. It had saved my ass on more than one occasion, but nothing had disturbed me that last hour and my head felt heavy, like I'd drifted off for days.

'We should go.'

I was about to mount up when I saw something flickering down by the bank. I had to push some of the grass and twigs away to see it fully. Someone had planted a candle in the sand just above the line where roots met the water. They was two knee sized dents in the grass near it, and dirt piled either side of it, where someone had dug a small hole to sit it in. It was a pale purple color, wide and lumpy, the shape of an large egg. You could see marks where someone's fingers had moulded it, not like the fine, smooth tapers you could buy in a store, and the tiny trout bones we'd cast off earlier was pressed

into it like pins. It was still lit, but it was fading and the light spread a weak heat over my face as I held it up. It had a smell to it, lavender, and something bitter, like burnt hair. I passed it up to Cal, who pulled a face at it then turned it over himself. For a second it looked like a part of him might have recognised it somehow, and he pressed his finger in between the bones and into its rough, waxy skin like he was checking it for signs of life, but then he shrugged, and sneered at it.

‘Probably some Indian medicine or magic or whatever the fuck they call it now. It must be. A marker so they can come and find us again, have another go at the horses.’ He pinched it out and handed it back to me. ‘Keep it. Candles can be hard to come by.’ I got back on Camel and pulled the fishbones out of the wax one by one. They’d made cracks in the surface, and left small holes that reminded me of something I couldn’t quite picture as I ran my thumb down its uneven length. I realised we was now almost in complete darkness, with just a pale strip of watery orange light left for us to see by, spread over the horizon like an old bruise. We clicked the horses on, swiping away the bugs that bit at our ears, the flies that land and land, no matter how much you wave them away, they so flesh-struck. I looked out over the great, yawning space around me as I rode, my eyes roving the land and the star-lit river as long as I could make them out, seeing nothing but open fields slowly drinking in the darkness, and I knew that someone was there; they’d moved by us while we had our eyes shut, and had hidden now they was open.

We camped up by a large hickory, slightly off the river, its bushy leaves picked out in the wavering moonlight like they was a mass of gently shifting wings without bodies to pilot. The Kansas sprawl didn’t much lend itself to concealment, but at least we was covered some, draped in deeper shadow under the trees thick branches. It was a warm night, but I slept wrapped up in my bed roll. I’d got the creeps upon me. I lit the candle again to see if its light would offer some comfort but all it did was give off that strange smell, sickly sweet, and make the spring catkins, yellow and furry on the branches above me, seem to dangle down too close, spinning like grubs awaiting transformation. The tree creaked, and I strained to hear over it. Every little noise dragged me back from the pull of sleep that had taken me so easily before. My thoughts kept slipping between worrying about Constance – whether she was dead or in trouble and which was worse – and trying to figure out who or what had spooked the horses. Indians don’t leave no candles behind, or horses for that matter, but I couldn’t

think of no other explanation to counter Cal's; nor did I have no clue about who the woman I saw in Elgin was, though the charring wick of the candle, black in a swim of melted pale wax, brought back her eyes, clear and burning, as if she stood in front of me. And somewhere beyond her was Constance, somewhere behind the smoke and that bone-marked surface, hidden from my sights. Cal rolled over and hissed at me, his eyes yellow flashes behind the candlelight.

'Blow that out you fool. Do you want them to find us?'

I dampened my fingers and pinched the flame til it suffocated, and the catkins faded like embers as my eyes adjusted again to the dark. I tried to close them, to not think again, but I reckon it was only the familiar warmth of Camel, who came and stood as close as he could get, that quietened my thoughts and set me sleeping.

I woke the next morning, started up a fire for coffee and went down to the river to fill the canteens and scrub the sleep from my face. That was a tight, narrow little spot in its course, and the water was so cold it felt like a cut-throat being dragged along my skin. Dew sat in my hair and beard like shavings from the filmy moon that still quivered above me, despite the sun pushing its fingers through the sky, tearing away the last shreds of night like them cobwebs on my hotel windowpane. When I stood and turned back, shivering, Cal was up, a hundred yards away, perfectly still and aiming the rifle at me. The black barrel stretched out towards me, heavy, oily, in the damp summer sheen of first light. I stood, shaking, watching him, wondering if this was it, if he'd turned on me; it didn't feel unfamiliar somehow, as if a part of me thought it was only going to be when and not if. You can't be surprised when a dog who has licked his lips at you for hours finally sinks its teeth into you. That ain't to say the pain is any less of a shock, but the act itself was always coming, and it's happening breeds a certain sort of calm. I raised my hands slow, and turned to face him straight on, to present my bare chest and gut to him to make it easier, quicker. He held still, his face a blank mask of concentration. I was about to say his name when I heard a noise from behind me. Cal's gun slid a few inches to my left and I turned back.

On the other side of the river, a huge bull was walking along the bank. He lurched and staggered, his breath a fog about his head as it spewed into the air from his slack mouth. His head swung low,

huge, cracked horns tipping left and right like he was trying to shake something out his ears, which fell down the sides of his face like they'd given up on life already. His eyes were glassy, and seemed to swivel and stare at me yet not recognise what they saw. They grew wide, and even at that distance I could they whites was streaked with bloodied yellow. He tossed his head again then half ran, half fell into the river in a wave of froth and top-scum, pushing towards me through the water even though he could hardly lift his great skull, his back arching and bucking like someone was beating it with a rod. I could smell him, the stale smell of fever and beast and soured life. He kept on coming, thrashing his way forward, horns picking up weeds as he went. He was barely able to keep his nose out of the water. A trail of blood ran from his hind end into the river, streaking the water red, a thin winding stream that came up and sat on the water's foamy surface. He was near six feet from me when Cal put a bullet through the centre of his forehead, and the crack of the rifle blew smoke and shot into the still-forming dawn. The bull turned onto its broadsides, and the huge, square head sank nose first into the river, legs kicking like a bronc. A second, red trail crept out from the new hole in his skull and joined up with the other, making a rusty pool in the froth. The bull's ribcage deflated as the last of his breath left him, and his life floated away downstream. Cal raised the rifle, face still blank as flat disc of sunlight above us, and we walked back to the coffee pot. The cold river water that had sat on my body had turned to a colder sweat.

'You raised your hands back there, John. Did you think I was going to shoot you?'

'Naw... but there are things that would surprise me more.' Cal gave me a crafty smile and clapped me hard between my shoulder blades.

'Your skin is like ice, old man. Better dry off or you know what they say, you'll catch your death.' I put my old, dirty clothes onto my damp, clean skin and tried to stop shivering as Cal reloaded the rifle. Then we downed a second cup of chicory and watched the great hump of dead animal flesh slip slowly further into the river as flies began to creep out of the bank grass and circle above it.

'Bullseye,' Cal said, cocking his head as the bullet wound on the bull's head sunk out of view, and we mounted up for the day ahead.

The rest of the morning passed without any more trouble. We was nearing the Territory, and that would bring its own problems, though I was confident that if we was careful, Indians or any White

Bear warn't much to worry over compared to what Elgin had offered. We traveled steady most of the day, passing a few little scanty homes and farms, but didn't see anyone but a couple of drovers heading to Elgin looking for a good time not long after we'd got moving. Cal spent a few minutes with them, asking questions of price and supply, how to spot a herd lead, or an animal that's sickening, though Spanish fever was hard to miss; like that bull, it had them festering before they'd even died. Apparently, the further north or east you got your cows, the more money you was going to get, but some Kansas farmers didn't like the cattle running over they territory because the longhorn had ticks that bred the fever and infected Kansas animals. The herders didn't care none. They filled their pockets time and time over. I watched Cal's face get brighter and brighter, his eyes turning green with dollars and dimes. I nodded along, but all his talk of business got me worrying just how long we'd be in Texas for. I didn't want to be lingering.

The trail itself was littered with drovers' leavings, broken pots and pans, chipped cups full of dirt or worse, the occasional pair of pants or a torn shirt, shoes lost their partner, cow bones, patches of burnt earth from cook fires, lightning-torched tree branches, dried up cow shit - small pieces of the life and death that played out up and down the plains. It was strangely quiet though; all those signs, those remnants of slow days passed on the move, of meals ate, money made and lost, and we barely saw a soul. We could sometimes hear voices, carried over the fields from unknown places, echoes that drifted onward from earlier conversations; we'd see smoke in a chimney, smell meat cooking, or occasionally see a person theyselves, dead and lying out on the trail like like a felled tree no-one bothers to move, but we never caught more than a glimpse of anybody living as we cut into the meat of the day. Was like the world was doing its best to avoid us. Any other time I would have enjoyed myself, the feeling of being separate, of being alone, away from wood that warn't no longer trees, from churches and graveyards and dining halls, the grubbiness of people, but I warn't liking this. I still felt like something was there, making the hair on my neck stand up, like I permanently got one of those shocks you get from rubbing cloth the wrong way. I'd got my hackles up. The sight of the great river nearby, that only the day before I'd thought something of a wonder, was now just playing on my nerves, its froth and its bends whispering in a knowing tone, like something was about to spill over, and creep up those banks towards us. Soon we'd turn off it, and I was hoping I was just being jumpy,

that we'd be seen safe through the Territory, with the trouble of Kansas firm behind us, and the echoes of the trail turned back into voices, bones back into the flesh of the living.

We was right on the the Territory line when we finally came across what looked like a trading post that appeared to show signs of life. It sat in a dip formed by two large hump-backed fields, set west at a distance from the water. A squat little place, soot and smoke blew out the little stone chimney on its roof and the porch front offered up a couple empty chairs. It looked welcoming enough, so we walked the horses on down and tied them up outside. A small sign on metal hooks that said *buy or trade* in hand cut letters swung slowly from the entrance. It creaked back and forth, as if someone had not long ago pushed it, cause there warn't no wind in that dip to be moving it. It was a queer little spot for a store; the hills around it cast long shadows over the porch so the chairs didn't get no sun, and you could hear the river bubbling away like it was all around you, but you couldn't see it, or whatever was up on them hill tops above you. Was real still.

We walked in, and a shrill little bell above the door rang out into the sealed-up gloom and gave us away, but there warn't nobody there to greet us. The whole place would have felt freshly abandoned, like whoever had started the fire had just upped and left, if it warn't for the footprints left on the dusty floor that suggested recent custom. A rough counter ran around the inside of the cabin on three sides, behind which sat a flimsy looking door to the right and a stretch of tall, thin shelves that housed a meagre stock of goods, coated in the same thick film as the floor. I could hear the fire cracking and snapping wood behind the door, could smell it burning though its heat didn't reach us in the held breath of that little store, dust motes floating about our ears, landing on our collars. I dragged my fingers across one of the counter tops; it warn't sanded down, and it coated my hand and shirt cuff in a layer of gray clot as a line of splinters bit they way into the pad of my thumb.

'Anyone here?' Cal asked, stood in the middle of the floor, stooping cause the ceiling was a good few inches too low for him. The reply came in the form of a gun being cocked from behind the centre counter. The door banged behind us, cutting off the pale, cloud-colored light that had followed us in. Cal reached straight for his revolvers, pointed one just above the counter top and blew a hole through the wooden wall behind it before calmly asking again who was there.

‘Next one goes through the counter. I mean it now, whoever’s pulling on me better be speaking up sharp, I ain’t messing.’ I got my own gun out my belt and was about to creep my way forward when a voice like the hind legs of a cricket rubbing together came from down on the floor.

‘I’m coming up.’

A rifle was stuck up in the air but it warn’t aimed at us. The scrawny hand that held it dropped it down heavy on the counter, which made us both wince. A man slowly dragged himself up from where he’d been hiding, kicking up a dust cloud that wafted about his head some before drifting into the corners of the room. He was a sorry, scraggly looking sort, face like a dying hound-dog, with lank hair the color of eyebags that sat on the dirty collar of his plaid shirt. He was thin, pole thin, and the darkness of the store sat deep in the hollows of his face, so that he looked like some ghoul or ghost-man, who pops up from behind his desk to say boo to unsuspecting customers. He was afraid though, I could tell; his yellowing eyes darted between us quicker than a fly’s wing shakes.

Cal walked up to the counter, neck bowed, only lowering his pistol when he’d got a hold of that rifle and passed it back to me. The man flinched with each step Cal took, but seemed to relax some when I’d leaned his gun up against the door.

‘You normally draw on customers? You’ll be trading your life that way,’ Cal asked him, but he didn’t get no response. The way he said it even I couldn’t tell if the question was a joke or a threat. He started to look about the shelves, keeping one eye on the store-keep. The guy watched his every step, so tensed up I could see the string-thin cords in his neck tighten. He had a sweat on, and it gave his skin a glow in the half-dark. A drip traveled from his nose all the way down to the corner of his chin, landing with a little wet slap on the wood below, darkening the dust on the top. His jangly form only just seemed to cover over the fresh hole in the wall behind him. I bent down to look at the footprints that warn’t ours. They was a bit smaller than my own, in a line from the door, ending in a matching pair at the counter. Someone must have stood a while. The man’s eyes flickered down and his hands clenched in and out. He had them long, bony fingers that showed up knuckles the size of horse teeth. I stood and asked him his name.

‘Long Paul Short.’ His voice had as much substance to it as the dust that circled his head, like someone was speaking into they hand way off in the distance.

‘That’s a name and a half. You alone here, Long Paul Short?’ Cal asked. Long Paul Short managed the smallest nod.

‘You had a run in? Thieves?’ Cal asked.

‘Wasn’t no thieves.’

‘Indians then? We reckon we had a near-miss with some not long back up the trail.’

‘Wasn’t no raiders.’ If it warn’t painful for him to speak it was sure painful to listen to. I supposed it was from working in such a fly pit. I know it’s hard to keep things clean when everything around you is dirt, and inside is a few square feet in miles and miles of plain and grass, but that place, the more you looked at it, the worse it got. Cal looked disappointed with his answer.

‘You sure? They aren’t always dressed how you might think... was he tall, like me? Dark hair?’ Horror flashed across Long Paul Short’s face.

‘Dark? She...’ He mumbled, and my stomach tipped, but he cut himself off and shook his head.

‘They wasn’t no darkies.’

‘They?’ I started to ask but Cal cut in.

‘Christ, John,’ Cal said to me between his teeth, ‘he’s as slow as a dried-up river.’ He turned back to the living skeleton in front of us and tried speaking louder, slower.

‘Not darkies. Indians. Black hair, red skin? Did they come in here? You’ve barely got a thing left to sell, who stole it?’

‘Did a woman come in here?’ I asked, trying to keep calm. He kept quiet, so I asked again, raising my voice some. He just shook his head. I felt myself about to shout at him but Cal held his hand out and stopped me. He shook his head, as if to say the man was shot to shit, and didn’t know shit neither. We warn’t going to get no sense out of him.

We was all stood there, frustrated and silent in the stale murk of that store when Long Paul Short bent over all of a sudden. Cal and me twitched, but he was just picking up a filthy rag and a tobacco tin from under his counter. He wiped his nose over with the rag and shoved a wad in his cheek; his face was so thin it looked like some swelling had just grown out the side of it. He started up chewing and it seemed to calm him some, his eyes softening, the edginess leaving them some. It was only when Cal started pointing at the few scanty things left on the shelves behind the shop-keep - a couple

of dented airtights, some mouse-chewed rice bags, one lonely tin of pomade, a fingerprint-streaked jar full of dried slivers of salt pork that looked like lizard tongues beaten flat and cooked - that the shop-keep sprung into action and started to run about behind his counter like a rat in a gutter, stacking things up and waiting for the next instruction. If Cal paused over something, Long Paul Short paused too, on the spot like he was some clockwork toy waiting for someone to wind him, but his eyes kept darting over to the door so much that I felt I better take a look outside.

The door slammed behind me and set the sign swinging again. I could near feel my eyes grow as milky light poured back into them after being inside. I could just make out the sun, hovering behind a wash of thin cloud, but just like the fire inside the post, its heat didn't touch me. I was a little grey spot in the middle of all the gold and green and brown around me, great fields that stretched upward and onward towards the horizon. I couldn't see nothing out of sorts though, no trace of anyone, but someone had been there, not long ago, and they had scared Long Paul Short shitless.

I walked about the post's perimeter. Out front there warn't nothing but a heap of leg bone kindling and an outhouse and they was both clear. Round the back was a collection of 'stock' Paul had clearly got in trades; wagon wheels, stirrup irons, fence posts, sheep pelts gone stiff in the elements and stacked up like great, frayed piles of paper. Things too big to go inside. I poked through them, partly out of nosiness, partly to distract myself from the feeling of blood pumping too quick round my body. I whistled to myself for company, to fill the empty space with just a little human noise. I didn't like it there, and I liked it less the longer Cal took. I could hear him mumbling from inside. The cabin was made so poor that large holes had appeared between the perished logs that formed the walls. I put my eye to one, and Paul met my gaze instantly, his buggy eyeballs huge and glistening in the gloom like some pale, soft-bellied night-time creature I'd unearthed by accident.

I was sat looking over a pile of dried up saddle girths, wondering if any one of them was better than mine when Camel started fussing. I could hear him creating and went back round the front of the store to the horses. He'd got his ears back as far as he could, flat to his head, and he was trying to pull free from his post with as much determination as he usually dedicated to misbehaving. I put my hand to his muzzle and shushed him, and it was only then that I heard it and it stopped me dead. Someone was whistling the same tune as me, faint, up over the other side of the hills around us. I couldn't tell

which direction it came from; down in that dip it seemed like it came at me from every inch of pasture, the sound bouncing off every blade of grass, every wisp of cloud I could see on its way to me. I got on Camel quick as I could and got him up that bank, but when I breached the top there warn't nobody there. The open grass was as mute and empty as when we'd arrived, not a soul to even ripple the air with they breath. But when I strained my ears, and got Camel's feet to stop weaving, I could hear just about someone laughing, sharp little needles of sound that carried across the hills in rolling echoes, until one voice became ten, and I stood there atop a shaking horse and started to shake myself, cause I just knew, whoever they was, they was laughing at me.

Cal finally appeared, arms full of cans and brown paper bags, and we loaded up the horses and got into the Territory, turning off the river without any more nonsense. We crossed at Salt Fork, winding over red, stony ledges and long stretches of poor grass that was worn thin like a horse's pelt that's been chewed too much, then headed south, straight as the land would let us. Part way down we skirted round a thick, dark cut of Blackjack oak that had sprung up where the two rivers merged. The trees shook they branches at us, the leaves shivering along knotted spines sat above a tangle of roots and fallen trunks that disappeared inside the woods like scars disappearing inside a collar, the bark lumpen and pitted with too much age. In the shadows they cast, among the sullen gray branches that hung low and pendulous after years of being undisturbed by loggers or drovers I thought I could see a pair of bare feet, hanging away from the ground, soles slowly spinning in a little dance of they own. I looked away, and we walked on. We tried to give the cut a wide berth, but we had to travel along its edge some to get to a narrow and clear enough spot to water the horses and get them through the river growth, hitting away any tree branches high enough to claw at our faces. We got over a shallow section of water with long sandy banks, the horses cutting through it like it was no more than street puddles, and took up the rough trail road again when we was back out in the open. I noticed my arms and legs was aching more than was usual and I couldn't settle into the saddle; it felt like every rock of Camel's back, every misstep he took, slid up my back and shot pain down my limbs, like my heart had stood down and my nerves was coursing worry through my body instead of blood. Cal seemed happy enough just to be away from that store.

‘I’ve seen inbred backwater rancheros with more sense than that fella. If I ever lose my faculties like that I want you to put me down John, and don’t think twice about it.’

‘And what faculties would they be?’ I said. Cal laughed, and kicked Jim on quicker. In the end he’d bought up near every last thing Long Paul Short had, and we left his shelves only a stitch emptier than his brain. I’d half-expected his twitchy self to step outside and take pot shots at us as we left, but the door slammed behind us and didn’t reopen, and the smoke that drifted from the chimney died back in silence. I was thinking twice about telling Cal about the whistling, and the laughter. It had whispred away as he was stepping out the cabin and I didn’t want him to think I was going crazy, but the sound of it was still echoing round my skull. I was about to open my mouth, to try explain, when he started up talking about Satanta.

‘It must have been him, or some other real sonofabitch, to scare the idiot that badly. I wonder if he was robbed. There was barely anything there. What he did have, what I bought, why it’s probably older than we are... those cans are held together with nothing more than rust and good faith. Long Paul Short. What kind of name is that anyway? I’ll tell you... how he’s not been shot up already is beyond my reckoning.’

‘Whoever it was scared him was a woman. Those footprints was smaller than mine. And he said she,’ I said to him, tired of his line of thought already.

‘Indians are small, John. They don’t grow as well as we do. Well...’

‘Just say it, Cal Davies. You mean as well as you did. I know, I’m small. It has not escaped my noticing.’ I didn’t point out that he’d just thought it was the Indian chief, who by all accounts a military prisoner and who warn’t small in the slightest, that was terrorising folks. Cal laughed again, and the sound, like fast moving water down a deep well, circled us a few times before fading.

‘Could have been a squaw, John. Not that squaws are women.’

I bit my tongue and we carried on in our own silence, the landscape changed quietly as we got further and further south, the long grass drying and browning a little with each leg forward. In one place, it grew longer than I’d ever seen it, reaching our stirruped feet and higher, spiking the backs of our knees as we rode. Jim was a big horse but as Cal ran him up ahead even he looked like he was swimming through the stems rather than walking. It got hot. We sweated through our pants and the

hints of sores began to nag at my legs as wet flesh rubbed against cloth. It made the horses listless and snappy and they walked ponderous and flicked they ears and tails at any cow-flies that tried to settle upon them. We had to slow our pace some to keep them moving, but I'd begun to get a hurried sort of feeling come upon me, like we should have been going faster, like we should have been running, like I shouldn't have indulged Cal's whim to see Texas and strike a deal on some cows when we could have just followed the Arkansas River and got to Louisiana easy enough. Who knew how long it would be before we found someone willing to sell and lazy enough to take less dollar in exchange for less effort from hisself, how long it would take to arrange all the down and dirties like price and transportation.

My body got itchy, like it did when I was waiting for that picture in Elgin to be took. My skin didn't seem like my own. I felt like someone had stitched an extra layer on me, one that sat heavy and rubbed mine the wrong way. I was normally a patient man, and I didn't much know what to make of this new-found temper. If Cal talked at me or asked me anything I grunted or didn't answer none. The drone of flies in my ears wouldn't let up, and after a while I warn't sure if it was my mind that kept on remaking the sound, replaying it when all the flies had bitten me already, and flown off drunk on blood and the salt of flesh. I put it down to the land, being stuck on the trail, the only evidence you were getting anywhere the changing of day to night and the feel of the horse moving under you, the skyline always so far beyond your reach that if you was to guess the miles ahead of you you'd want to weep at the number.

Late that night, when we was both sat down in the dark, staring into the fire I'd persuaded into life, Cal surprised me and asked about Constance, said for me to tell him about her. I said I reckoned I'd told him all he needed to know and I wanted to leave it there, but he took to throwing little twists of grass at me. For all Cal's smarts, sometimes it warn't no better than traveling with a child, or how I imagined it might be anyway. I hadn't been around children since I was one myself, not that children stayed children long out in them cow-towns or on the trails. They worked; they got tired; they eyes would start to look old, and the rest of them soon caught up. Was like how it was with horses, or cows – if you couldn't run from birth, you warn't built for frontier living. I tried to get on with cooking as

quick as I could manage; we didn't eat too much in the day and by the time we stopped Cal was usually ready to eat me, the horses, and half the night sky. That night though he seemed set on distracting me. I reckoned I'd been feeling so sick and achy from keeping it all in so tight anyhow, thought maybe if I let it go some it would feel less like ten pounds of iron sat in my gut riding along with me so when the stew was done and Cal had got a mouthful of cornbread to work on, I eventually agreed to talk. Cal lay down by the fire, getting spread out, while I repacked the meagre things he'd bought from Long Paul Short to keep the rats and rain from them.

'Was she a looker?' Cal said, reaching over and spooning stew from the pot into his mouth without even waiting for it to cool. I ladled two bowls out for us but I didn't feel like eating.

'Of all the questions to ask,' I said, pushing my food about. He shrugged, then grinned at me.

'Probably not to you. You always going for sugar over substance where women are concerned, that ain't a habit that's shown any signs of stopping.'

'I take whatever I'm offered, then whatever I can pay for. I don't know why you don't do likewise.'

'Don't start that up, you know I don't enjoy that. Anyway, she looked like a queen to me.' Cal sputtered into his stew tin, juice running down his chin and onto his collar.

'That serves you right.'

'Sorry, sorry. What color were her eyes?' he said, dragging the back of his hand across his mouth.

'Brown,' I told him.

'What color was her hair?'

'Brown,' I said again. He rolled his eyes at me.

'She was a negress, yes? You ain't giving me much to go on John. I want to picture her some.'

'You's talking about her like she ain't with us no more.'

He ignored me and made a square with his two hands, looking up at the sky through it, balancing his bowl on his chest. I sat looking through the steam that rose from the black stew pot, still watching my food get colder, trying to picture her face. I didn't want him thinking about Constance, she'd no place in his brain. I'd played it out in my head I don't know how many times, how I met her, how I lost her, but it felt unsettling saying it all out loud again, like the feeling you get when something catches your

navel and it seems like the whole of your innards are attached, like something tugging on a bit of you you'd long forgotten about.

I met her in Carson City. It was true she warn't no beauty, not by Cal's standards anyhow. He liked his women pink and plump and silly. Connie warn't none of those things. She had a most serious expression, whether she was frowning or smiling or thinking on something, you knew she meant it. Warn't nothing put on about her. She had to keep sweet and quiet in front of her bossman, she said, but I never saw that, and I couldn't imagine it neither. Her skin was copper – she had a white daddy and a black mother, who she hadn't seen since she was fifteen, when the Doctor had bought her. She reminded me of a new penny, bright and shiny, the root of all possibilities. She was about my height and strong from hard work. Her bossman would work her ragged, I could tell. I'd mostly see her out in the backyard, in the early morning and after dark when the family were in bed, and what were little half-moons under her eyes at sun-up was always bigger and darker at sun-down. I'd put my thumbs on them and make her smile and when I took them away the darkness seemed to fade a little. She said I'd got the magic touch.

When the Doctor started making noises about moving back down south, when the word war started to pass over people's lips, then my thumbs lost they magic and those patches got deeper and darker still. She looked after that family well, better than they deserved. The Doctor – I forget his name but he was some dry, old boor from some well-heeled Southern town – he warn't a violent man, just real stern. Nearly caught me with her a couple times, sat on the back steps of their house that led to the yard and the ramshackle little room they'd had built for her next to the pig pen, so they didn't have to have her sleep under the same roof as them. I was a fast runner though, and had sharper hearing than I do now. I had to hide in with the pig once. I gave it half my breakfast to keep it quiet. Constance burst out laughing when I reappeared, covered in shit, without my oatmeal and nearly without the hand I'd held it in. That pig was vicious. It'd watch us with greedy little eyes as we sat on them steps for hours. Like I said, she'd attack my hair with a comb, saying she wouldn't spend no time with no raggedy-haired man, and I'd pick soot and hay and other small traces of her day from hers. We saw each other near every day too, quietly, with none of the showboating of lovers in public, no hand holding, or parasol toting, no dances or knocking on doors. Not that that would have been

possible anyhow, but we didn't miss what we couldn't have. We was sat there once, on a night like any other, and a rattler slid almost right up to my trouser leg. It was dark, and I'd not seen it none til it touched my boot with its nose and started to coil. She no sooner looked at it then grabbed a shovel, stomped the edge through that snake's head and dumped the two pieces out into the street. She was something.

The last night we spent together, we didn't speak. She was crying, which I had never seen before. I didn't ask if it was cause of me or the war, though I wanted to, wanted them tears to be for me, but that seemed such a selfish thought that I couldn't say it. I didn't know what to do, what to say. She sat in-between my knees on them familiar steps, quietly shaking, and I knew then that it was more than tears that was rocking her; it was like the vibrations of that war, the trouble it grew, was spreading like a fever, was creeping its way up our legs and trying to shake us apart. I should have just taken her away then, got out of town, but that idea didn't figure in my mind til I was watching those coach wheels spit dust and her fingers clutch the edge of the window; then it was too late. When I couldn't take the shaking no more, I carried her to her little room and held her and we watched clouds travel over the moon until it faded away into morning.

I told all this to Cal that evening, the sun going down on the Texan's upturned belly, word after word falling out my mouth and me with no way to pick them up and swallow them again. When I stopped, I found myself struck dumb over what I'd said. I was near shaking again, like she was that night years ago. I looked over at the Texan. He was flat on his back still, unmoving, eyes open but narrowed to slits. I waited for him to say something, to laugh at me even, to pierce the atmosphere it felt like my recollections had created, but he turned his back to me without speaking and covered hisself with his bed roll. I looked up, moon and stars sailing close above me, and wondered if Connie was out there somewhere, looking at that same sky.

We got up with the sunrise and passed the next day in a stony, cumbersome silence. Cal wouldn't meet my eyes. He seemed embarrassed, or embarrassed for me at least, and he didn't even take up his customary whistling. I felt chewed up inside. I was starting to feel more and more agitated about

getting to Constance, or whoever she was with. We got over both Canadians that day; lucky for us, even in silence, we still knew how to move together. We trod quick over them high upland prairies that rolled on and over and on again and up onto the dry, hollow land between the two rivers. Flat rocky outcrops stuck up out the ground, some in big wide curves, some spread apart more like giant stepping stones. You got up top of one, you could see for days, like past and future, where'd you been and where you was headed, was all written on a great line of stone.

We had to watch the horses going over the creeks. They coiled between the big rivers and drying, silty pools like someone had emptied a bag of snakes on the land and they was each trying to go their separate ways but was all still knotted at they tails. The creeks was sandy, and you was like to start sinking if you put a foot wrong. The banks got to be the only greenery left as we moved south; the water was lined with little plum trees with pretty white flowers that from a distance looked like ladies lace stitched to the branches, and blue grass and oaks, which grew with such enthusiasm it was like they'd sprung up to hide the water as well as drink up from it, to protect it out in a place that otherwise got so hot and gasping in summer it parched throats and bleached bones.

And we saw us a few skeletons, some of them human, skulls eyeing you up like they was cursing you for moving when they warn't no longer able. One we passed sat in the centre of a stretch covered in small, sharp rocks, laid out like dead seeds stuck on the surface of the unwelcoming dirt. He only had his top two front teeth left, and his cheekbones was pointed as arrowheads. If you that ugly without the flesh on your bones then lord knows what you looked like when you was walking and talking. Another still had his hat, but it was so weather-beat and misshapen it had dropped off the back of his head and filled with soil. It had become a nest for something, little broken eggs sat in its middle, yellowing in the heat. Cholera could still hit pretty hard out there, and if not that, then you could get snake bit, or bear bit, or just plain shot. Little prairie dogs scuttled out from their burrows under the horses' legs. Some darted in and out the man's ribcage. I'd seen them before, and normally I liked to watch them; with their little dark eyes and fat haunches and busy ways, they reminded me of overfed men in cities going about their daily whatnots. Right then though I had to keep one eye on Camel's feet and the other on just about everything else. I saw a wildcat curl out from behind some scrub up on a hillside and eye up the tiny, furred creatures that scraped they teeth on the dead man's

bones. It made the horses skitter, but it looked about itself and slunk off like it reckoned today warn't no good day to be coming out of hiding. I heard rattlers too, but even they stayed hidden, content to ward us away with noise alone.

We was right near the South Canadian when we spied a group of buffalo, an old, familiar sight. They lumbered and shuffled about in the heavy way I remembered, nosing around the damp grass by a narrow stream. The one nearest us lifted its shaggy head and stared at us square on, as if to say move along now, don't linger. Cal looked at me, eyes wide, and drew his pistol on it, like suddenly we was fifteen years ago and he was doing trick shots to amuse himself, his arm stretching out in one fluid bend like a memory playing out in muscles and metal. It closed its eyes, as if it knew what he intended, but I didn't want no shot echoing round us like a dinner bell to whatever else was out there, so I shook my head at him and we ran on, him with a glum look on his face. The buffalo watched us leave them, great shoulders leaning towards the earth like they was forever stood in a storm they alone must brace, when all around them not even the grass moved the day was so still.

We made camp on the south bank of the South Canadian. It was a good, sheltered spot, and there was just enough light left for me to catch a couple of feeble-brained prairie chickens. Didn't need no gun for those, you just net them or grab them and wring they necks. Cal made a fire, I plucked out the tawny feathers and before we knew it we had full bellies and another two sets of bones to leave out for the sun to varnish.

In those pauses, those red and orange dusks that melted into star-scattered nights, I found it hard-going to picture a life without movement, without Cal. I could imagine pieces of what I thought it might be, hanging pictures on a wall, making a bed that was more than old fur laid out on the ground, waking up to the same view every day, getting water from the same pump. But there warn't no clear, whole image there; those thoughts hung, not touching, on they own in my head, separated by dark spaces of unknowing, by stockades I couldn't see. There warn't even a picture of Connie, of no life with Connie. When I tried to make one, it was haze, and I couldn't see the whole of her; her muscled arms seemed to drift from her shoulders, her head from her neck, her palms from her fingers. She was frayed. Was like trying to make a map with hand-drawn scraps that came from different eyes. I wondered if she'd aged some. I know I had. She'd had that kind of face that stays so constant I bet I'd

know her in a crowd of thousands, but I still couldn't get her memory clear. It's funny how you can remember someone's being so well, feel them filling up the space next to you even when they ain't there, picture they shoulders inches from yours, but they image get so blurred you ain't sure if you can trust your own recollections. The quiet that had settled between Cal and me dug in further, and I could see his eyes reflecting the moonlight again as we lay there in the dark, any kind or familiar words trapped behind our teeth and us both too stubborn to free them.

Cheerless leaden clouds were gathering the next day when we realised we'd strayed off course. After a steady ride up a bluff with a long, steep incline, our tailbones sore from smacking into our saddles, we dipped down over a rise in the track and were surprised to see Fort Sill appear from the heat haze in front of us. It took us a moment to figure out what the hell the place was - a square surrounded by rows of cabins in the middle of a great clearing, spike-topped wooden fences, a few lanterns already lit, they orange glow seeping into a slow-moving, ink-stain dusk. Outside the perimeter was circular tents, sticking out the ground like great termite mounds. More than I could count, sat between us and the fort.

Now this was Sheridan's outpost back then, the new base in the south of the Territory; Fort Cobb in the west penned the Kiowa and the Comanche in between the two military bases. Sheridan had won a hard-fought campaign against them, and some of the most famous men of the time, Cal not included, had scouted for and fought with him. Cody, Hickok, Clark, all lent their names, names that probably didn't mean shit to the tribes but maybe that's why they lost. Underestimating men like that, men with not much to lose and nothing to do but shoot you, you asking for defeat. Still, they'd kept up fighting til they was damn near broken and then they'd ended up there for they troubles. In the near-dark, I could just make out a weather-worn country flag strapped to the pole in the centre of the fort quadrangle, the tiny stars hanging limp below a sky that held nothing but stubborn, gritty cloud and heat that lingered too late in the day.

I was irritated at myself for not being able to follow a trail. We had drifted west of where we was meant to be, but they had been no sign posts after we'd got over the Washita and it had felt like we was going straight. Sill was a big place, made of fresh-cut wood and gray stone, but it had already lost

its new look even though it was only just over a year since Sheridan had had the first brick laid. Shine didn't last long out there. The campaign had been in the papers too, is where we'd first seen mention of Satanta. This was supposed to be his new home. I reckoned on Cal being pleased we'd stumbled across it – he could finally meet the one Indian he had any sort of interest in, but he looked down at the fort through hawkish eyes, taking in the jagged-topped tents that sat below us, then he spoke for the first time that day.

'We should keep moving. We've still got some light left. No guarantee they'll put us up.'

'They're hardly going to make us bivouac in one of them tipis, or wigwams or whatever the Indians call them, are they now? I'm sure there's room for two more.'

'I don't know, John. Best we keep moving.'

I couldn't help but laugh. For once it warn't me wanting to keep on and fight tiredness and hunger. For once, the Texan looked a little afraid.

'The Territory's full of Indians in hiding, padding around like they always have and you don't bat an eyelid, and now they're in front of you, stuck in that camp, and you're spooked. Don't you trust the army?' I said.

'I don't trust anybody that puts on a uniform, so they can get told what to do by self-important sonsofbitches who want to use other men's dicks to satisfy situations they're too old and fat and drunk to deal with. And I sure as hell don't trust those savages down there to not try and cut our throats in the night.'

'Lord, if they tried that, Sheridan would have them strung up from that flagpole quicker than you could shoot them. Since when have you been worried about a few beat-up red-skins?'

'Since they tried to steal my horse,' he said, scanning the horizon, a sour look firmly set on his face. I reckon I only won him over when I said the army might feed us. His stomach had been complaining all day, and the strips of pork we'd got from Long Paul Short, more salt than meat and dried to boot-leather, made our jaws ache and our guts work hard for little reward.

We made a clear approach, weaving our way steadily down the hill, not wanting to appear sneaky. We reached the tents scattered about the perimeter, all the same sort of size, thin, sharp poles spearing the carcasses that formed their walls, the buffalo hides near unrecognisable as buffalo, stretched pale

and smooth, like they'd skinned the flesh from men rather than the black, shaggy beasts that once covered those plains. Some was undone, the hide pulled back to reveal the private little homes inside, clothes hung from the frame, blackened circles on the ground, the only remnants left from dead fires, different colorful, beaded things I didn't recognise, glinting like bug-eyes in the shade of the smoke-coated insides. The first people we saw was looking out at us almost as if they'd been expecting someone, a group of six men in long, loose shirts without color, they crowish hair covering the sides of they broad cheeks. They turned their sullen, tan faces to us as we got near, but seemed only to look us over briefly before returning their gaze to the trail we'd just ridden down.

Cal stuck close beside me, eyeing the men and women about him like a dog eyes a snake. There was a strange mix of Indian things and those that regular society used. Next to one large tent was a big, four-wheel perambulator - the kind freshly-hatched children got toted about in - but it didn't have no little red-faced babe in it; it was sat empty, covers tucked in, wheels moving it gently in the wind as if they couldn't tell none it was short of an occupant. All around was incomplete or broken things, wheels without spokes, spades without handles, an upturned cook-pot with no bottom, rust flaking away from its broken edge.

One of the tents had all the bottom layer of hide hitched up, revealing the skeleton of poles bent into the ground underneath. A lone, old woman sat in the middle of it, neck bent backward; her mattock-shaped chin followed the line of the angry splay of poles that pierced the tent-top and carried on up like they meant to stab at the sky overhead. They was piles of tree branches dotted around, lots from the little snowy plum trees we'd seen earlier. The petals was scattered over the ground as if someone had just got hitched. They drifted into the tent and circled the old woman, who turned her pin-sharp eyes to us without moving her head.

The Indians kept their distance, stopping whatever they'd been doing and standing still til we'd passed them by. They clothes was all mismatched, some draped in bright striped cloth that hung like loose sails about them; some had strips of colored fringing hung about their shoulders and tan, buckskin pants; some was in regular cottons or wools, or what looked like old army bluecoats. They all had the look of dried-up corn husks though, thin and untended, but they eyes were clear, and keen, all the color of Rockefeller's earth blood.

When we'd gone by, they went hurriedly back to whatever was occupying them before. There was a lot of whispering, of too-ing and fro-ing, all very sneaky, very private, like they was trying to keep something quiet. Chillun huddled round the women's legs and skirts, pulled close in, away from us strange men and away from the edge of the camp. Those that had was staring out into the prairie continued their watch, straight-backed as tombstones.

Unlike the camp outside, the fort was sleepy and subdued. Men leaned out of the little rows of barracks and smoked; a group sat on some steps leading down from a hut on the right, cleaning guns and boots and belt brass, whistling softly as they black hands worked they brushes. Now that was a strange find, dark skin in a blue uniform, made darker by the shine that grew on they polished kit. They careful army eyes caught us and followed our path til we got close, but they waited for a white officer to put down his mess tin and greet us. Cal looked like he couldn't figure in his mind whether he wanted to run away or set fire to the whole damn camp, but he cheered up some when they fed us, as I said they would. Beef and beans and bread, so much that my belly ached with the richness of it. Then, Cal being Cal, they took us to meet the command.

Brevet Major General Benjamin Grierson was sitting at a plain desk, a look of some concern on what you could see of his face. He had more hair on his chin than Abe Lincoln, sporting a great, curled beard that fell to his collar and a wave of thick shiny hair on his head that stuck forward like the hind end of a duck. Grierson now, he'd been a big name in the war. A staunch federal, his raid into southern territory in the Vicksburg campaign was lauded as one of the most effective manoeuvres in the whole fight. Afterwards, we found out, he'd stayed on in the army, organised the tenth cavalry with black soldiers and took up right there at the fort.

We sat in his quarters that night, and I watched the clouds knit even tighter through his window, suffocating the failing daylight until it blacked out completely. Even in that stark, army office though, I realised that I felt alright for once. Whatever had been dogging me, tugging on my nerves, warn't there, warn't at Sill. I warn't a bag of worry. It was like they was a great fence around that place, one that you could feel, like the fort was hidden up from whatever was out there circling us, at least for me. Cal still warn't impressed but being in the confines of the General's office had calmed him. That

and the drink Grierson had poured him, Old Forester, fresh out of the slick new glass bottles it was being sold in.

‘So, General, you got soldiers, blacks, and Indians here. That is not a situation I’d like to be sat on top of, I tell you now.’ He raised his glass to the General. Grierson smiled a friendly, tired smile.

‘Benjamin is fine in here. We mostly rub along fine too. A place way out like this, well you don’t get much of a choice. We aren’t at war now. Better to attempt civility I feel.’

‘Very wise. Even so though, you must get trouble. The campaign only finished last year.’ That smile again.

‘Well, I am helped by the Tenth Cavalry being such damn hard workers. Built most of this fort, are still building it in fact. We aren’t finished yet.’

‘Yes, we saw. Big company.’

‘They do their bit.’

‘We’ve ridden from Kansas. No major signs of your redskin wards until we got down the Arkansas some, and even then they didn’t take anything,’ Cal said brightly. Grierson looked surprised, then narrowed his eyes.

‘Well, that is reassuring. If unusual, I must say. Whereabouts, if I might ask?’

‘Just south of Wichita. Might not have been Indians,’ I said, quiet. Cal talked quick over me.

‘They all seemed pretty busy out there in the camp, scurrying around like rats in a hay field. Didn’t say a word to us.’

‘Really?’ Grierson asked, though he didn’t look surprised none this time. ‘Our agent has been working with them, though I’m afraid they do mostly what they as used to doing - whatever pleases them.’ He said this with a sort of drifting affection, like a mother too preoccupied to notice her baby is screaming, or about to fall into a creek.

‘Quite,’ said Cal, looking at the General out the side of his eyes. Soothed some by the warmth of the fire Grierson has started and the bourbon in my throat, I spoke up.

‘Cal here, he wanted to meet the chief. Shame he warn’t about.’ Again, Grierson looked a little puzzled.

‘Satanta wasn’t out there?’ he said, his eyes sharp, searching our faces for signs we was kidding him.

‘Not that we could see. We had heard he might have escaped,’ Cal said.

‘Had we?’ I muttered into my whisky. I didn’t know if Cal was making that up or if he’d read it somewhere and hadn’t told me. Either way it was news to me. His expression didn’t give me anything to go on; he just sat staring coolly at Grierson as irritation flashed across the General’s face.

‘So the papers have been peddling that nonsense. I must find out who’s been feeding this ‘information’ out from the camp. I saw Satanta not two days ago. The tribes are, I believe, preparing for something, some ceremony I suspect, but it is unusual for him not to be present. He hadn’t mentioned a hunt last time we spoke. He’s normally first out when anyone new visits us. He’s the one Kiowa out here who might have known who you are, Mr Davies.’ He tipped his glass at Cal this time, but his gaze drifted to the door behind us, like he wanted to leave. ‘I’m sorry he didn’t come out to greet you, he’s normally very affable, though whenever I’ve talked with him lately he has seemed a little quiet, I’ll grant you. They all have. They’ve been walking round the fort’s perimeter like dogs in a pen, sniffing the air, like they’re waiting for something.’ Grierson looked a little held in his own thoughts right then, like he too was waiting for some kind of smoke signal to appear to kind him out of that conversation, but he shook himself out of it.

‘So, where are you two gentlemen headed? Very rude of me not to enquire before. You mentioned Kansas, so I assume you’re heading south?’

‘That’s exactly it, General. John and I have both got a bit of business in Texas and New Orleans,’ Cal said, swallowing his drink whole. Grierson leaned over and refilled our glasses.

‘New Orleans?’ The General looked surprised. ‘To borrow your words, Mr Davies, now that’s a situation I wouldn’t want to be sat on top of.’

‘You been down that way, since the fighting stopped?’ I asked him. Cal downed his second whisky.

‘No, no, I must say it doesn’t hold much appeal. I like it here, at Sill, in the open, where I can see what’s coming. And I have enough to deal with, with the tribes here, and my regiment. We aren’t popular you know; people think I’m mad, to put armed black men in charge of Indians. Perhaps I am.’

His eyes flashed over the Texan, as if he knew Cal's thoughts on the matter, and might goad him into voicing them. He poured us each another finger of drink, which they both swallowed whole. I took a sip of mine and watched the light from the lamp on Grierson's desk twist and sputter in its thick glass housing.

'I couldn't speak on that, but I know what you did in the war, with that raid of yours. You damn near broke the back of Mississippi. Grierson here, John, set that state on fire.'

'Is that so?'

'I don't know about that,' Grierson said, leaning back in his chair, one palm flat on his desk, and the other clenched round his whisky glass like he might crush it.

'Don't be modest now, General. You didn't leave anything untouched. I admire that. Nothing could stop you. Railroads torn up, storehouses burned to cinders, bridges in pieces at the bottom of the rivers, slaves unshackled and free to roam, all under your command. Pemberton didn't know what hit him. I read all about it in *Harper's*.' Cal's admiration had an edge to it, like he was trying to pen Grierson in with ugly facts about his own life.

'Ah, well, that publication has been known to exaggerate. It was a small raid. Just doing my part.'

The two men was starting to look like they wanted to take they fists to each other and I couldn't quite figure why. Cal warn't normally this rude, or one to care about the war. Politics warn't a common concern of his; same as his views on the army, it was just men in suits talking when they should be doing and doing when they should be keeping they noses out in his mind. Grierson sat very still, looking out at the Texan from the mess of bushy hair that surrounded his face, dark and oily as a bear pelt, the softness quickly leaving his eyes.

'No sense talking on the war, now, gentlemen. Fight like that asks even the finest people to do foul things that are best forgotten when the sun's gone down,' I said, trying to turn down the heat that seemed to be rising off the pair of them. I finished my drink and put my empty glass back down on the desk. Grierson blinked, then smiled that weary smile at me.

'Quite.' Then he took to staring at the door, as if he was trying to see through us, and didn't say another word.

‘We’ll say goodnight now. Thank you for your hospitality.’ Cal stood without speaking, and we left the General to the orange glow of his sparse office, and the churn of thoughts we warn’t party to.

We stayed the night in an empty, unfinished bunk in the barracks. They’d brought in two beds for us and some wiry army issue blankets; the wool caught on the calluses that made up my hands, but it was warm and dry. Cal went in straight off, but I hung back, wanting some air. The fort was quiet, but I could still hear low rumbles of men talking, and oil lanterns hung round the square creaking on they hooks. The night breeze bothered the dust on the square too, lifting it up in little handfuls and putting it back down elsewhere. I could hear Cal clattering about, his bulk once again pressed into close confines. He never would make no soldier.

I never would have figured me for one neither, but I found myself thinking it might not be a bad life; duties to tend to, folks to tell you what’s what, so you didn’t have to think too much, bed to sleep in, instructions to follow. Not having to traipse across endless country for the promise of what? Saddle sores and food always on the wrong side of fresh. Confines, that was it; parameters. It must be nice to have parameters. Cal, and life with Cal, well, it didn’t have none. He broke them open like they warn’t no more than eggshells.

I took what I thought was to be one last look about, feeling the warmth of Old Forester slowly leaving my stomach, making everything feel colder than it had before. Then I saw him. A lone man, stood very still on the very edge of the fort’s perimeter, looking out northwards into the dark. His loose clothes blew out gently behind him and his legs was set apart, like he was bracing for something. The whispers of the fort seemed to die back, to scuttle away like spiders accidentally disturbed by a misplaced footstep, until the two of us seemed to be the only folks awake.

I walked the distance over to him and waited for him to turn about, for he must have heard me coming, but he didn’t twitch, not even when I got up next to him. His long black hair seemed to be full of starlight even though the cloud still smothered any trace of them above, and it rose and fell in one sheet with the breath of the wind. He didn’t move but his eyes turned to mine a second before returning to whatever he was looking at, hidden out in the secretive silence of the plains. I expected

him not to speak to me, to be wary, careful, like those at the camp had been, but he surprised me and spoke first.

‘Your friend, he doesn’t want to be here.’

‘Ah Cal, he’s just suspicious over those he don’t know. He means no harm.’ I thought I saw a flicker of a smile in the corner of his mouth.

‘He means *you* no harm. You are going south, yes?’ I must have looked dumbstruck, wondering how he knew that, when he smiled again and shrugged.

‘Soldiers talk. Particularly about your friend.’ He cocked his head to one side, like he was listening to something I couldn’t hear, and we stood there together looking out into a black and indigo sky that sat thick above the fort and the surrounding camp. Then his hand shot out and he grasped my arm, his fingers so strong and taut that I could feel them press bone. All I could hear was the wind, the trees gently shaking in the dark, birds settling in for the night, the walls of the barracks creaking and cocooning those that slept within.

‘What are you looking for?’ I asked him, my arm starting to ache under his grip. For the first time, he turned his whole head and addressed me. He had eyes as soft and clear as a racoon’s, and they took in my face like they recognised something in me, something under the skin. His grip loosened.

‘They are looking for you, yes? And you are looking for them.’ His head snapped sharply in a new direction. I moved so I could follow his gaze but all I could see was the very faint lines of the far-off rocks and hills that surrounded us, lit up faintly somehow, like they’d swallowed what the sun gave them and spat it back out when night fell. He released my arm, then pushed his hand onto my chest, forcing me backwards.

‘Best you go now.’ I was about to argue, when he pushed again, firm this time. ‘Quick now.’ And with that he ran, fast as a hare, into the dark, leaving me out there blinking alone at the emptiness around me.

Back in our room, I couldn’t sleep. I sat up in bed, the rough blanket tossed aside, looking at the open window; there wasn’t no glass in it and a damp cold slid from the empty frame and found its way to my bedside. I was trying to listen, to hear what the Indian had heard, to make out what troubled him so that he stood out in the dust when everyone else was sleeping, but all I could hear was

the slow rise and fall of Cal's lungs and the sound of blood between my ears. I found myself taking out the candle we'd been left again. It was near the length of my hand from wrist to fingertips, and it had a strange feel to it, like it might crumble if I pressed it too hard. The top had melted where I'd lit it before, making a small crater in its peak. I rolled it between my palms in the dark, rubbing the dents and cracks that covered its surface, feeling where whoever made it had moved their own hands to shape it. I pinched the wick, a rough piece of frayed rope, then dug out a match and lit it again. A low, purple light fell across the room and all the little marks, bits of crushed petal and grit and finger prints trapped inside the wax, were lit up as if from inside. It was rough-made, but once it got going it burned quick. A stringy coil of smoke whorled up about my head and made me cough, even though there was no wind in that little room. It smelled like lavender again, and burning hair. Cal didn't stir.

Hot wax began to run onto my hand, so I set it down in the middle of the floor, between our two bunks, and watched it burn away until there was only a small, thick pool left in front of me, setting from the outside in. The flame stuck it out a little longer, burning up what was left of the wick, before it sputtered out and died, and darkness crept back up the walls again. I crawled back to my bed and dreamt that I was walking on eggshells that slowly turned into Connie's face, flattened and cracked into pieces underneath me, bloody yolk spreading between my toes.

The next morning, I felt sick as a boy who's been sneaking his Daddy's shine. There was much milling about and folks wanting to see Cal and shake his hand or look at his guns. The General was up and already absent when we went to greet him at first light, but any drills or other duties seemed to have been postponed till we were seen off. He couldn't speak to us right away. An old, gentle-palmed siwash brought our horses round, so well turned out and glossy I barely recognised them, and the camp cooks gave us some strong, bitter coffee and a mess tin of bacon and grits each, which we ate out in the yard with the soldiers, listening to the busy clatter of spoons on tin bowls, distant birdsong, and the yowls of creatures waking up in the hills around us. The clouds had passed; a few stars were still shining like grains of spilt salt on a cornflower sky, and the full, white moon sat staring at the tip of the sun, as if daring it to rise. Cal was holding the bridge of his nose, like he was suffering too, but it wasn't nothing like how I felt.

It got worse as we got ready to go, and I was having to learn hard on Camel, trying to get enough air into my lungs to hold the contents of my stomach in place, when someone tapped me on the shoulder. I turned, bent near double, and was surprised to see the very same Indian I'd encountered the night before behind me. Cal was saying our goodbyes to a couple of the officers, with still no word from the General, but he paused his chatter and looked my way, wary. Soldiers was eyeing us up too, bristling, but this fella seemed not to notice. He smelled like leather and wood smoke and his black eyes was still round as the moon that seemed to hang in them, to have remade itself in miniature beneath his gaze. He stroked Camel's ears while Cal eyeballed him and pulled Jim away. Then he slipped something from his sleeve into the tight coils of my bed roll, strapped to Camel's rear.

'For you.' I bent over even more, heaving, and he lowered me to my knees, laced his arms around my stomach and pulled upwards. I was sick right there in the middle of the quad, surrounded by soldiers. Two officers came striding towards me, arms out. Holding his hands up, the Indian left me and walked away, heading back towards the encampment, but the officers still pushed him along, rough and short-tempered. He fell, knees scraping into the dirt, got up and ran off without looking back.

'John?' Cal took a step towards me but stopped when he saw the General thundering towards us, his horse's hooves kicking up clouds of fine yellow dust behind him as he ran it on. He past the Indian, giving him only a glance before he skidded to a stop and made to help me up. That seemed to spur Cal into moving. He muscled over and dragged me up, pulling me onto Camel when I struggled.

'What was that?' he whispered as he pushed my feet into my stirrups.

'Nothing.'

'You're a terrible liar, John, don't bother. You know him? What did he want?'

'Say goodbye.' I was trying to focus, but my eyes seemed to be wanting to go off in separate directions. Cal got sat on Jim, staring down at Grierson, whose hair and eyes was wild from riding. I leaned on Camel's neck and tried to ignore the dizziness that still swam through my head.

'General. Thanks again,' Cal said shortly. He tipped his hat at Grierson, then waved it at the crowd around us. 'See you later boys.'

'Watch yourselves out there,' Grierson said, casting a pitying eye over me.

‘Much obliged General. Apologies, I ain’t used to fine drink,’ I said, feebly, though I knew full well it warn’t the whisky that had made me feel rotten. Grierson slapped Jim’s rump and Cal looked like he might shoot him for it, but he held his tongue and we ran, out past the quad and the barracks and the tents, back into the plains, the openness that seemed to have waited for us, and now circled round us fully once more when all signs of the fort were gone.

I started to get the twitches come over me. Retching up my coffee had made me feel a little less afflicted, but my head still felt like someone was hammering a cartwheel band round it, and the pain deepened with every step Camel took. It was too early and too cool to have a sweat on but my hands slipped on my reins, and I could feel water pricking my forehead under my hat brim. I tried to focus on the way ahead, but the view seemed to quiver and stretch before my eyes as I moved toward it, the colors fading, toothless; the mottled green of prairie grass and the spread of small flowers all stewed in front of me. The red dirt and rocks around us had gone brown, the color of gut blood, rusty and dull.

‘They lost Satanta,’ Cal said, when we had ridden a mile or two. ‘I knew it.’

‘Huh?’ I said, more a noise than a word, my teeth as clenched as the rest of me.

‘They lost Satanta,’ he said, matter of fact. ‘Grierson doesn’t know where he is any more than we do. Why you think they was riding around like they’d got a fire up their asses this morning?’

‘How come you know that?’

‘Well, it’s a guess, but I’d put money on him not being in that camp. Big old chief roaming around where he shouldn’t be, he’ll know this land like the back of his hand. He must have been the one that tried to steal the horses, and tapped up Long Paul Short, though why he left him alive is anyone’s guess. I wouldn’t be surprised if we see the Chief out here soon enough.’

‘I don’t reckon even you would want meet him, and whoever else he got with him. Not like you can stand any other Indians anyhow, and you know what they do out on raids.’

‘I’d like to look him in the eye,’ Cal said, leaving his intent hanging in the air.

‘Don’t you think we’ve got enough trouble set behind us, and ahead of us for good measure, without you trying to pick some up right now?’ I snapped at him. The ride down to the Red River

would be a day's hard going, and we needed to keep up a good pace, however much I wanted to back the hell up and return to the fort, where I felt something like safe.

I was desperate to open the bundle that was burning a hole in my bed roll, but I didn't want Cal to see me do it and he kept walking behind me, watching me, no matter how many times I slowed. I tried to settle myself into the familiar thud of horse's hooves once again, the dull sound of weight on grass. A little space in my mind let me imagine stopping, going backwards, Camel's legs reversing and taking me back through the fort, back past Elgin, moving through the last few days til they shrank in my mind, til they disappeared and I found myself waking up near Abilene, rubbing the dirt from my sleepy eyes, my thoughts reaching no further than my first cup of coffee; but my body kept pushing Camel on south.

Eventually I managed to convince Cal I warn't going to keel over or spill my guts again, and he took up his usual position up front. I reached behind me to dig in my roll. The package was no bigger than my palm and in the same sort of tattered envelope as the first one I'd been given. Keeping one eye on Cal, I started to unfold it. It smelled damp but felt dry and worn in my hands. I tore it open, and a twist of hair rolled in to my lap and nearly blew away. Coppery, curled, and knotted together with a run of gray weaved through the braid. Now I warn't sure if I felt sick from whatever had ailed me that morning or from what was sat in my palm. The white sun seemed to get brighter, and my face felt like it was cooking under a mask of light. I held the braid up, and the wind toyed with its edges, stirred them like they was life in them yet. They was something else in the envelope too. A picture, a frameless tintype, chewed about the edges. I slid it from the envelope, the enamel so thin it felt like it might crumble between my fingers. It was faded, grainy, a small boy stood on his own staring off at something just behind the camera. He was blond, bright faced, sturdy as a brick outhouse. Unmistakably Cal. He looked like he was no more than two years old, stood in front of what looked to be a canvas tent. Round his chubby little neck was a string of pointed teeth, jagged and shining against the soft baby skin of his throat.

'What have you got there, John?' Cal had turned round in his saddle, and was eyeing me suspiciously. I put the picture and the hair back in the envelope in silence and slid it into my shirt. My body seemed to leach the warmth coming off my horse, and I felt like a pot boiling over, heat

coursing upwards through me and out my pounding head. I stared at him, studying his face, trying to picture him in a necklace.

‘Are they gators in Texas?’ I asked him, and he shook his head at me wordlessly like I was still delirious. The horses carried themselves on stride by stride, the moment all four feet left the ground like you was floating above the plain, no longer connected to the earth. Sweat soaked into my rein leather and my pants legs, and I could near hear it pour out of me, out of Camel, his hooves ticking down time we didn’t have. My lungs felt like they was made of saguaro cactus, sweat and spines and rubbery flesh, but I manged to keep going and stay upright. Cal watched me, steely-eyed, circling me slowly throughout the day like a vulture ready to drop on newly peeled flesh.

We covered the last leg of the day’s journey and rolled up to the Red River when the light was fading, and the edge was falling off the heat. An abrupt, narrow dogleg in its course meant it had become a main crossing point on the cattle trail and split the Territory off from the big old state of Texas. The station, set up as a rest stop for men and beasts alike, was over on the south side of the bend out of view. There was no-one crossing a herd then, but the smell of cow wafted over and hit you soon as you got near the water, a strong, shitty smell that hustled itself up into your nose and stuck there. They was a deep, musky smell about buffalo, I remembered, something in they shaggy fur that lasted in the pelt, even after it had been dragged off the animal’s flesh, that was calming somehow. Cows, though, they was all snot and leaky asses; I’d always thought they was prettier as leather. The river itself was muddy looking, more a bloody brown than red, and a thick froth licked the edges of the bank. Still, Cal looked happier than he had in days.

‘Isn’t that something, John? Just over that water there, Texas. I haven’t been back here since I took Colbert’s ferry across this river years ago. Colbert’s was out east of here, past the big mess of lakes this river makes further on. Cost me twenty-five cents, and I had to help load the wagon that wanted to cross along with me.’

I didn't feel like listening to his reminiscing. The smell was sneaking its way into my throat and threatening to pull the contents of my stomach back up again, though I didn't reckon I'd got anything left in there to come out.

'Well I ain't going all the way along this dirt bath to find it. We'll cross here.'

We walked along the bank til we found some signs of life. All around was the tell-tale dregs of what the station was used for. Cow horn, and blood and a mess of flattened, muddy ground, churned up by the weight of the creatures that ran over it, what grass was left drowning in kicked up, sodden dirt. If you didn't know better, you might think the war was still raging, the land was so stewed. We passed the carcass of a calf, half-butchered, parts of its flesh cut rough from its ribs and rump without the skin being fully peeled back. Its eyes hadn't yet been scooped out by a crow's beak, and it looked up at us, rotting legs stretching forward like a child that begs to be lifted by its momma. Something had chewed on its neck; the skin was torn from the throat and flies drifted in and out of its wounds.

The first ferry we came across looked shaky, a small flat boat made of ill-fitted boards barely big enough for us all to climb onto. They looked to be a more bonafide pulley operation further up, but it was over the other side when Cal and me turned up and no-one manned it. The water was calm, moving steady but not churning as it was known to do.

Cal walked over to the ferryman, who was sat on his tie post, chewing tobacco with his mouth open, as if he didn't care none if he got any business or not. He had something of cow about him, I thought, chewing like that. He was big, but his bulk had fallen to fat and his guts hung over his pants waist like grain siding around in an underfilled sack. He had a slack mouth, and his mean little eyes hovered over our saddle bags and guns too long for my liking. Cal approached him with his arm outstretched in greeting, but the ferryman kept his hands to himself and looked Cal up and down like the Texan had gone daffy.

'Dollar a piece,' he said, the words falling out his mouth like the brown stream he spat at our feet.

'Who needs thieves when there's men like you around,' Cal said, taken aback. He withdrew his arm, looking down at the ferryman like he might pick him up and throw him in the river instead. The man shrugged and went on chewing.

'Suit yourselves.'

‘Pay the man, Cal, the horses are tired and I don’t fancy getting wet today,’ I said, and started to tug them over to the bank while Cal dug in his pockets. He gave the ferryman half his fee – half to be given when safely across – and I loaded the two very fretful horses aboard the shabby vessel. Already restless from a few days travel, they reared and shrieked and stuck their legs out rigid at the water’s edge and I had to tie their eyes over with handkerchiefs to get them to walk forward onto the water. When we were aboard, the weight of three men and two horses pushed the cloudy froth through the gaps in the boards and over the raft’s edge, covering our feet with scum.

The ferry tipped and ducked its way across the width of the water, propelled by the ferryman’s soft, baggy arms that didn’t show an inch of muscle but got us moving so sharp it caught me off guard. Cal looked green, and he kept his eyes firmly on the shore line. The horses stood rigid, legs splayed, the flesh on their rumps twitching under the skin. I could see sand and whorls of dust, the same sun-cooked red as the surrounding fields, in the water, held in the stolid flow of the river.

We were half way across when Camel began to shake. His withers rippled like they’d got a pulse of their own and his nostrils flared. I held his head tight and rubbed his nose, and it worked a moment or two, but then his legs started going. His breath turned into a lurching rattle and sweat poured down his fur. The handkerchief fell from his eyes and his hooves danced around on the creaking boards beneath. The raft man told me to get him under control and I let go of his bridle a second to retie his blindfold, but the moment I let him loose he reared and stomped back down so hard the raft nose-dived and sent more waves slopping over the front of the raft towards our ankles.

He would have gone again, and tipped us all over if I hadn’t have grabbed his harness with both hands and dragged his head down with all my weight. Cal was hanging on to Jim for dear life, knuckles white on his bridle, his eyes closed. Jim stood stock still, save for his knees, which shook like the bones beneath the thin, creased skin was dancing to a tune only they could hear. It was then that I saw her again. On the north bank, stood stock still by the dead calf, was the woman I’d seen in Elgin. She was in black this time, and getting smaller and smaller as we scudded over the water, but I was sure it was her. The edges of her were heat-softened and indistinct, red dust collecting round her legs like she’d taken a stroll through a slaughter-yard. The same black mask sat under a shifting mass of black hair and she had a rifle in her hand that she was raising, aiming at us as I stared slack-

mouthed over the water. I ducked just as we hit the bank, and Camel dragged me up its side by my arm, him too quick for me to let go. When I'd pulled him to a halt, desperately trying to bring him back round to the water, there was no sign of her except the shroud of flies, disturbed by her presence, that floated like a small rain cloud above the calf before slowly returning to blanket the corpse once again.

Cal had taken on the palor of an American green snake, and he looked at me through eyes so narrow and dark I thought he might strike me. Eventually he recovered enough presence of mind to dig in his pockets and pay the ferryman the other dollar, but the man still eyed the Texan like we'd short-changed him. He spit another plume of tobacco swill into the river and set off in silence. I was still clinging to Camel's head; his legs had stopped jangling but his eyes were so big they looked like they might just burst out their sockets.

'What the fuck is wrong with you, John? You refuse to speak for the last two days and now you're cowering at the sight of dead cows. Maybe this trip is too much for you. Maybe we should stop.' He threw me a rag from his pack to wipe down Camel, the shine on him now coming from a drench of fear-tinged sweat rather than the polish he'd been given at Sill. I pushed the cloth over his neck and legs, having to wring it out after each limb, my eyes constantly sliding back over to the other side of the river.

'Naw, don't start that, I know what you're doing,' I said through gritted teeth. 'You just want to linger here I'll bet. Besides, you looked pretty qualmy out there too, can't say I knew you got seasick.' Cal was untying Jim's blindfold and stroking his forehead. He still looked pale.

'Seasick ain't anything to do with it, John. If that horse of yours can't behave himself, we'd be better off letting the Kiowa take him. We should have sold him to the army; I'll bet they're always in need of jerky and pelts.'

'Cheer the fuck up, you back in Texas ain't you?' I threw the sweat-stained rag at him and it hit him square in the side of his face then slid to the floor, leaving behind a reddish stain on the flat squares of his cheeks. He left it where it sat, a damp crumple in the dirt. 'Besides, if we let anybody take him they'd be climbing over themselves to give him back within the hour.'

As we followed the road down from the ferry it got clearer and wider. It was surrounded by the familiar bare grass of those dry southern parts, mangled and coated again in that red dust that blew over the ground and got in your nose, your eyes, your ears, so that you found it coming out of you days later.

‘The whole of Texas like this?’ I asked. Cal misunderstood my turning my nose up for interest and started up remembering just how much of a Texan he was. It seemed I was forgiven, as he fell into big talk about the big state, the size, the sky, the food, the manners, this, that. I looked about, trying to imagine beef so perfect it melted before you even had to chew, or stars so big they gave you more light than oil lamps, but all I could see was charred looking dirt and cow bones.

The camp rose up ahead, covered in the same rusty soil, but sat at least on a stretch of grass that hadn’t been destroyed by cattle. To the left was a large fenced off field with a few single-story cabins dotted round the edge. We walked down the road until it turned into a wide stretch with more houses, wooden, ugly things dried by the heat, the timber shrivelled like the flesh on a forgotten apple. A bend in the road housed a handful of buildings to the left with a saloon in the centre, opposite a general merchandise store that was shuttered up already. The smell of cows was worse now that we was past the water, like it was stuck in the land and got squeezed out with each step we took, though the stockades still warn’t visible. We stood on the corner of the road, as three cowboys hunched past us; stinking and up to they shins in dung, they walked up the steps into the saloon without even a word said between them.

‘Are all Texans kind of shabby, present company excluded?’ I asked Cal.

‘They didn’t used to be... Maybe it’s because we’re near the border, people forget themselves. Besides, they’re probably not from round here. Probably from some no-account place, Arkansas maybe.’

We took both horses down to the smith and arranged for them to be cleaned and re-shod and put up in the shelter he had next to his shop. It was a long open-sided barn, exposed to the elements, its boarders ankle deep in muck and wet straw, but it would have to do if they warn’t going to spend the night tied to a post. It was manned by a vulture-necked old drunk with two teeth left sticking out his gums like trampled fenceposts. His arthritic hands scooped up the money Cal offered him and slid it

into his pocket, his pants so threadbare you could see the outline of bowed matchstick legs underneath. I took the packs off each saddle and we carried on on foot back to the saloon.

‘If we still have our saddles in the morning, you can stick a bustle on me and call me a bed-faggot,’ Cal said, looking back over his shoulder like he couldn’t bear to leave Jim in there for a second. Iron-bellied clouds began to knit over our heads and I pulled the Texan along to keep him moving.

‘If we don’t have our saddles in the morning it might well come to that.’

The saloon was a spit and straw place, a benzinery, another one that had popped up quick to supply demand, but it had a piano and a good stock of bug juice to recommend it. A flimsy tune started up as we sat down and, as per usual, the bar dog recognised Cal and set him up with a bottle. Cal got his weight settled on a stool and poured himself three shots before he’d even said thanks. No-one else seemed interested in him though.

They was quite a few folks dotted around talking and drinking but the place had that slow, yawning feel of men too tired to do much more than stare at they drinks and pass unwanted time together. There was even an old lady, perched over in a corner nook, sipping from a china cup and reading a singles-sheet newspaper. I took a free seat at a little table by the door and patted down my pants legs, wiping my dirty hands off. Cal gestured over to me and the milksop barman brought me over a bottle of apple jack and a glass which he set down with lily white hands; he hadn’t been out there too long, clearly. I let the sweet taste of it sit in my mouth and coat my teeth and decided that drinking was the only thing that was going to settle my nerves that evening. An hour later and I was nicely soft-headed and enjoying the quiet. When the lady’s gaze landed on me I even tipped my glass. Call it mean but it was settling for folks to keep to theyselves, not to make a song and dance of Cal, even if it seemed to be bruising his pride a little. He was sat hunched over his bottle, shoulders stooped, taking furtive little looks about him. He’d be less inclined to stay if no-one was making a fuss out of him and we could be on our way as soon as his business was concluded. He was so used to being Cal Bryce Davies in company that I could tell he didn’t know what to do with himself now that only the barman was interested in him.

Another hour passed. Dark crept in and rain began to fall. Folks resolved to stay in for the night and lingered at their tables. Faces in the saloon got sleepy drunk. The bar tender had put down his towel and was leaning on his counter looking at nothing in particular, talking to Cal on and off. I could feel my eyes drooping when a small, chimey voice rang in my ear.

‘Mrs Molly Love.’ The old lady was stood in front of me, holding out one hand. In her other she held her cup and saucer, the newspaper folder in half and wedged under arm. She was pretty, in a plump, clean linen sort of way, with a round face and small, sweet eyes that near disappeared when she smiled. She couldn’t have been but five foot tall. I met her palm with mine and she sat down, wriggling into her seat like a fat partridge arranging its feathers.

‘John Farmer.’

‘So, John, what brings you to the station? You look like a drover, but I know your friend there isn’t.’

‘We’re passing through.’

‘Isn’t everyone?’ She winked at me and filled up her cup with a hipflask that she withdrew from her bosom. The soft smell of brandy and coffee mixed together and wafted over to me, making it harder to keep my eyes open.

‘Don’t tell Tom,’ she said, nodding at the barman. I reckoned he was fully aware of that hip-flask but I didn’t say as much, and she took a long sip and smacked her lips before refilling my glass for me. A shadow blocked up the open door a second, and we both looked up. It walked in, and fleshed out into a man, rain dripping from his beard and the sleeves of his slicker. He was tall and lean with a near bald, sunburnt head, reddish whiskers and pointed ears that made him look devilish some.

‘That’s Bob Hillson,’ Mrs Love said, topping up her drink again with brandy. ‘Boss cowpunch.’ She said this last phrase in a put-on Texas drawl and winked at me.

‘I don’t confess to know much about cows, Mrs Love...’

‘Molly. And who does want to know much about cows? Not me.’

‘Molly. Cal there, he wants to cut some sort of deal. We’re on our way to Louisiana, but he wanted to try his hand at beef along the way.’

‘Same as everyone else again, then. And here was I thinking he was so good with those guns of his he wouldn’t need to stoop to a place like this. Anyway, if there is a deal to be done, Bob Hillson will do it. He’s as crooked as a broken leg. You don’t think he came out his momma with ears like that? No, I heard someone cut them when he tried to cheat them out of some poker dimes.’ Hillson was looking at us as if his sliced ears was burning. He tipped his head at Mrs Love, face bunched up like he was chewing on a prickly pear, then he took up a stool next to Cal at the bar.

‘There you are,’ said Mrs Love. ‘You be careful your Mr Davies doesn’t end up with more than he bargained for, or less as the case may be.’

‘Oh, it ain’t Cal I’d be worried for. Like you said, he’s good with his pistols, and his dimes.’ She gave me a look to suggest that she warn’t impressed with either of those two things. ‘You seem like you know of Cal some... he’ll be glad to hear it. I think he’s getting sour thinking that no-one in Texas recognises him, him being from here you know.’

‘I’m afraid I do know. I met him, years ago, when he was a boy. It’s partly why I’m talking to you. I knew his mother, back near Liberty. When he was but ten years old he was bigger than you, and she was a fragile little thing. He’d pick her up by her skirt waists and swing her round until she was sick, or climb up their hayrick with her struggling and sit her up the top of it, when she had a deathly fear of heights. He’d leave up there, crying, and he’d laugh and laugh, until his Daddy came in and whooped him. Only while he was still big enough to collar the boy, mind. After your Mr Davies reached twelve, I think, even his Daddy was too small to frighten him; he ran feral. He shot one of my pigs once, right through the head. We had to butcher it, of course, and he had the gall to walk in my kitchen with his rifle out and ask if he could have a cut of the meat.’

‘You ought to tell him all this, he’d laugh about it now.’

‘I’m sure he would Mr Farmer, but best I don’t. I don’t want to bring up old memories for him, he’s done such a fine job of looking like he’s left them behind. He was a cruel child; by all accounts he lets his pistols do the laughing for him now. I don’t need him trying to remember me. You watch yourself with him.’ She swallowed what was left in her cup in one mouthful, eyes darting over the Texan, sat deep in side-eyed conversation with Hillson.

‘I know what Cal is. Probably better than he knows. He don’t mean no harm, to them that don’t deserve it.’

‘No? Well. I imagine you know him better than I, but his mamma didn’t deserve it. And I’m sure you don’t. But enough about him. It’s a shame you aren’t staying longer. I’m opening a hotel, just down the road. It’s almost finished. Though work has stalled recently; it seems men are more interested in trying to get beef-rich, trawling up and down to the Old States and back, than doing an honest day’s work building.’

‘Sounds about right, ma’am.’

Tom came over and refilled her coffee then set about mopping at the tables slowly, moving the dirt around more than wiping it away. The hip-flask was brought out again and drained into the small space left above Mrs Love’s coffee. Cal and Hillson looked about each other to see who was watching then shook hands. Hillson downed his drink and stood up to leave, giving Mrs Love one last sly look which she returned, her eyes steely. One by one folks started to trickle out of the saloon, running off quick when they got out into the rain. Cal lumbered over to us, and kissed Mrs Love’s plump little hand when she presented him with it. He had to bend hisself in half just to reach it, even when she stood.

‘Charmed,’ she said, her face stiff, watching Cal for any hint he might remember her, pursing her mouth into a stern beaky fix it didn’t have natural. ‘It really is quite lovely to meet you, but I must retire now, gentlemen. Remember what I said, Mr Farmer.’ She gave me a pat on the knee and handed me her newspaper, before bustling out the door and into the rain without even a parasol to keep her head dry. Cal and me collected our key and dragged ourselves up the saloon stairs. We had to share, on account of the other rooms having been damaged already, cracked open by wind and storms, and found ourselves in a small, windowless room with just enough space for me to stretch out on the floor; Cal took the bed and, not having the energy to pick a fight I knew I wouldn’t win, I let him. The saloon had clearly been designed with running girls in mind, but I hadn’t seen any and Tom didn’t look the type to deal with whores’ problems. They’d probably roll in on a wagon sooner or later though, to draughty rooms full of red dirt.

Cal groaned and stretched out. Surprisingly the spindly bed accommodated the length of him completely though it creaked troubling loud whenever he moved. I rolled out my fur, kicked my boots off, set our packs down by my feet and settled down in the gap left for me, preparing for an uncomfortable night. If I moved left, I hit the bed, right and I scuffed the wall. Cal turned towards me, peering up from above my feet. Sniffing his undershirt, he asked,

‘Do I smell like cow-shit?’

‘More like bullshit. Now shut the fuck up, I’m tired.’

We lay there in the dark, expecting sleep to fall upon us after another drag of a day. I’d got that all over ache that travels from your legs to the tips of your fingers when you too exhausted to rest. The rain had worsened and rolled itself into a storm; I could hear it beating down above us, parted only by angry tongues of lightning, and the deep moan of thunder that slowly dragged its way towards the station. I stared up at the ceiling, hoping it wouldn’t leak, and wondered if Mrs Love had gotten indoors alright. I couldn’t hear no other guests. I’d not even noticed anyone else come upstairs. Normally in saloons and hotels, walls the width of paper, you could hear you neighbors snoring, farting or having they throats cut into two halves, and you politely claimed ignorance of any goings on if you ran into them at breakfast, or if you didn’t for that matter. They didn’t appear to be anyone else staying there though, which seemed queer if the hotel warn’t yet complete.

‘That normal rain for Texas?’ I asked. I knew Cal warn’t asleep, cause he was silent.

‘I thought you were tired, John.’

‘You awake.’

‘Because you just woke me... what, now you’re thinking the weather is out to get you?’

I didn’t answer him.

‘You’re beat. We both are, we haven’t covered this much ground this quickly in a long time, and we aren’t getting any younger. So shut up that mouth of yours, and let your eyes follow suit.’

‘Someone is tracking us, I’m telling you. We in a bad spot. We set off to find Connie and we’re kicking our heels here getting distracted with cows. How long do you plan on keeping us here? We got to get away from whoever’s fixing they eyes on us and wrap up New Orleans quick. We still got no idea what’s waiting for us there. And Mrs Love says that Hillson ain’t to be trusted.’

‘You leave Hillson to me, I’ve got the run of him. And what do you mean, ‘wrap up New Orleans quick.’ What you are you going to do with this Connie if she’s still alive, have you thought about that? If that’s who we’re even looking for, we still don’t know that for sure. I’ve only got your word to go on.’

‘I’ve only had your word to go on for all these years, you don’t see me creating about it.’ He was right though, about me not knowing what do about Connie if we found her at least; I hadn’t got a clear thought in my head about that no more than Cal had a clear conscience.

‘I’m sure. I got left something again. Another envelope. It was full of hair.’

‘Hair?’

‘Her hair. Connie’s hair.’ I dug the braid out from where it still sat in its packet with the picture of Cal, pressed against my guts, then groped for his hand in the dark, pushing the twist into the flesh of his palm.

‘Who gave you this?’

‘Someone at Sill.’

‘That Indian? Is that what you were messing with earlier? It’s probably the hair of some squaw they cut off to fuck with you, more bad fucking medicine, some gewgaw to get you worked up because they knew we were leaving and wanted easy pickings for one of their bands.’ He tossed it down onto my chest and I put it back into the envelope.

‘I don’t reckon on that. I spoke to him after we arrived. He warned me bout something, said we was looking for something, and it was looking for us... What you think that means?’

‘Indian speak for give me your gun and your food, before we take them from you anyway. What were you doing talking to him? You read the papers, they’re not to be trusted.’

‘Ain’t no squaw hair. It’s Connie’s, I know it.’

‘You sure know a lot about someone you haven’t paid no mind for the last ten years. And you haven’t answered my question. Have you actually thought about what’s going to happen when we’ve wrapped up New Orleans, as you say? What if she’s dead? Hell, what if she’s not? Then what? What are you going to do with her? Say ‘Goodbye, my girl, see you in another ten years?’ Besides, a lock of

hair being cut off never hurt anybody. Could be from a different girl, you know they all look the same, these dark girls, all got the same hair, the same way of dragging men into trouble no doubt.'

'It's no use talking to you, Cal Davies, you ain't never cared about anybody, not even your own mother,' I said, more to myself than to him.

'What?'

I didn't respond and lay there under that rickety roof that sounded like it was bowing under the weight of the water hammering down on it, spinning the ring I'd given Connie round my finger as if the motion might drag her closer somehow. I should have told Cal about the picture, the small, solid, thought-wracked little boy, staring out now into the dark of the envelope, who had grown into the great lump that lay next to me like a misplaced railway sleeper. But it was too dark to see in that little room, and something else kept me from bringing it up, an unease that sat just underneath that picture, under my skin, and coiled quietly round my insides; an unease that said to me if whoever was chasing us had a picture of Cal, well then, they must have known him, and Cal must have known more than he was letting on. He cut through my silence as if he could hear my developing thoughts and sought to smother them before they grew legs and got moving in earnest.

'Alright, alright, John. I didn't mean any of it. Just try to get some sleep. We'll get going soon enough in the morning, I swear.'

He rolled over and started up snoring soon enough. I couldn't sleep. The ache in my limbs had deepened, and I couldn't lie still but I didn't have enough room to toss and turn. I was still trying to corral my thoughts I hadn't figured out what New Orleans was going to mean for us, for him, for Connie and I. Ten years was more than a number, it was two completely different lives, different livings. We was different colors. These things seemed like bricks built up in a wall meant to separate us, to keep us apart. Maybe she wouldn't even want me to rescue her, if she needed rescuing at all. I'd done it once before, but that had been giving her the coins in my back-pocket. After that, she never seemed like she needed my help. I was company, not no necessity. Until they took her away, and I failed her.

The apple jack stewed in my belly and felt dangerously close to seeping up my gullet, now I was laid out on my back. I still felt delicate, and exhausted, and more sorry for myself than I'm proud of.

My eyes were lead, and I was willing sleep to come but it hovered somewhere above me, seeming to make a study over how much it could torment a man without getting near enough for him to touch it. I remembered the newspaper Mrs Love had given me. I'd brought it upstairs absent-mindedly, half-thinking I might get Cal to read it to me the next day – he was better with print than me, having been to a dame school for a spell. I'd half taught myself words from advertising and shipping crates, and from listening to conversations I was too young to be hearing. I managed to tug some matches out from Cal's bag, not even bothering to keep quiet – once Cal was out for the count he stayed that way. I lit one, stuck it between my teeth, rolled onto my belly and unfolded the paper beneath my face.

The Wichita Press. It was printed poor, probably made by some little backwater hobbyist turned city boy who knew as much about papers as Channing had pictures. The ink had bled, some words joined by little black veins that was already finger-smearred. I scanned it; news of the AT&SF, some suited and booted big gun rail man visiting Wichita, an advert for some dope called 'the female regulator' that sounded unappetising. Then something caught my eye, a little story right at the bottom, encased in its own little black border. The heat of the match kissed my lips and died, so I lit another. Bringing the corner close to my face, I let the rest of the page fold limp over my hand. *BODY SNATCHERS*, I read slow, under my breath.

... June – 1870. Yesterday, this paper reported that Cal Bryce Davies, of Liberty, Texas, shot a man of unknown origin who, our source has confirmed, went only by the name Black Jack. This man had reportedly been a menace and nuisance to the people of Elgin, Wichita for several days previous to his death before turning on Davies. The pair entered into a shoot-out that saw Black Jack succumb to his injuries instantly and Mr Davies leave the town shortly afterwards.

We have since had news that events have taken a strange turn. After being taken to Elgin's resident undertaker, a Mr. A. P. Passey, and placed on display outside the funeral parlor, the body has since gone MISSING. Mr Passey informed our reporter that he had been checking on his charge this morning when he found the coffin, which was yet to be sealed, empty. Blackjack's effects were also missing. Believed to be the work of opportunistic thieves or resurrectionists, a search has been undertaken by the townspeople, but nothing has yet been found. This paper advises those with newly deceased friends or relatives in the Wichita area to be particularly vigilant to such activity.

I folded the paper back up, turned over and saw Cal's eyelids quickly close over on the other side of the bed as the rain made another pass over our heads. I closed my own, but all I could see behind them was Blackjack's, and the smile on that face of his corpse growing and growing, his teeth the horizon, his pitted skin the lightning-cracked sky.

We rose just before dawn and got boots on, up and out. We didn't talk. I was dog tired, and sick and my guts felt like a bag of worms. I had two things troubling me now, the tintage and the paper but I was still keeping them to myself for now – I could hear the Texan's voice in my head, saying 'Don't fret on it John, it'll be thieves just like it says. Don't pay it any mind.'

The rain had died down, but its effects remained. Big pools of rust-colored water sat in the hollows and cracks of the road. The growing morning light showed up stricken banks, the short grass trying to keep its tips above the swollen mud it was submerged in. The horses was sodden, manes tangled and dripping, flanks shaking water from they fur. That barrow-tram of a liveryman was trying to rub them down when we arrived. Lucky he'd had enough sense to keep the tack under cover or Cal might have buried him in the piss-soaked hay we had to take pains not to fall into while retrieving them.

They hooves slipped as we headed to the bed ground where the cattle was kept. There warn't many folks about at such an early hour, and we passed Mrs Love's unfinished hotel, sat soaked and abandoned. It didn't yet have a roof or much of a front, just a row of small not-yet-rooms up top, empty spaces stacked next to each other like large freight boxes, with a fat lot of nothing sat below them. The wood was dark and bloated from the water it had swallowed overnight, the walls creaking under the weight of theyselves, the floor smeared with dirt left behind by the rain. There was no sign of Mrs Love. We jogged on, yawning and stretching ourselves fully awake, moving til the station was no longer visible behind us. The smell got steadily worse, so we knew we was headed in the right direction.

Soon enough, a sea of cattle appeared. Warn't no other word to describe it. Thousands upon thousands of Longhorn, covering acres and acres and acres of ground, a shifting hulk of tan and horn. We stopped and tried to take it all in. They was all different colors, white, gray, brown, dapple, the

kind rich people make fancy rugs out of, and they was huddled together so tight you couldn't tell where one ended and one began. Horns, huge, wide horns, some near eight-foot-long, stuck out at sharp angles, the points pressing into they neighbors flesh, or passing treacherously close to they eye balls. The beeves hollered, barging and fighting over space and grass. Not that you could see much ground, the numbers was so thick. It was like watching the surface of the earth shift and fall and roll. The hump in they spine near the neck made them look all front heavy, like they might trip any moment on they jangly legs, and fall knees first into the three feet of liquid shit underneath them. The rain had brought the smell back to life.

'There's got to be a hundred thousand dollars of animal here. Or there will be when they make it to those railheads,' Cal grinned.

'You don't see no cows do you, you see greenbacks.'

Hillson was waiting for us a little further down the road alongside the holding fields. We carried on down, skirting around the vast herd and eventually reached a break in the cattle and a fence that separated them from the neighboring pen. It didn't look strong enough to hold thousands of quarrelsome animals. The next field held another herd, much smaller, maybe a thousand or a little more. They was thinner and smaller than most of the other animals, and they ribs and shoulder blades stuck through they flesh like hands pushing through bread dough.

'They belonged to a cracker-head, brought them up a few days ago. He meant to take them to Ohio with only his two switch-thin young boys to help, the old coot.' Hillson spat a red-flecked stream out over his horse's shoulder.

'Where is he now?' Cal asked.

'In there with them.' Cal and me scanned the humped backs of the cows, looking for this old fella, but they warn't nobody in amongst the herd. 'They trampled him yesterday, when he was fixing to cut out the wrecklings. His boys gone a-running back to get their uncle off in Fort Worth, left the herd with me. We're not going in there just to pull his sorry ass out. You may could pay for me to have a few more men, to tend them see, and I'll split whatever I get for them in Wichita down the middle with you. Market's good right now.'

‘But they ain’t yours to sell. What about when them boys come back?’ I said. The two men ignored me.

‘Why would you do that?’ Cal asked Hillson, who was pulling at his raggedy ears like he meant to stretch them longer.

‘Because you’ll as like shoot me as not if I don’t,’ Hillson laughed, and I could see the sharp points of his canines poke out from under his top lip. He looked like a red wolf, mangy from too much fighting. Cal took a minute to look over his prospective purchases. I didn’t know what he was looking for now - how much meat was on they bones, whether one had a shittier behind then another, lord knows. I didn’t care.

‘They can’t stay here, and you’ll need someone to shift them, unless you plan on herding them between the two of you, which would be a fool’s errand if ever there was one – they’re half wild,’ Hillson said, matter of fact. As he spoke, a nearby bull swung his head at the sides of the beast next to him, and the thick horn skewered the baggy flesh that stretched between the animal’s leg and belly. Blood dripped down the horn and onto the bull’s head. He didn’t even blink while the injured beeve lowed and tried to kick his way out of the surrounding throng.

‘How will you square it?’ Cal asked.

‘The uncle? We’ll leave today, be long gone by the time they get back up here.’

‘And when they catch up with you?’

‘I’ll tell them Cal Bryce Davies has their names and counties and might find the time to come reason with them, should they want to register their grievances.’ Cal laughed.

‘How many are there?’

‘A thousand give or take, for you.’

‘How do I know they haven’t got Spanish fever? It’s rife. We shot down a half-dead bull only a couple days ago.’

‘You don’t. It’s a risk.’

‘And you’ll keep my money safe when they’re delivered.’

‘I’ll done hold it personally.’

‘See that you do. This will be our first call, Hillson, once our other business is settled.’ They spat on it and Cal flashed Hillson a smile, but it was one with an knife-gleam to it. Cal meant to be back for that money and Hillson better have it. The dust was getting up my nose already, sticking to the back of my throat. I spat, and it came out red, which turned my stomach. I wandered off, trying to find a view that didn’t have four legs or shit-caked udders. When he’d paid Hillson, Cal trotted over to me, looking pleased with hisself.

‘You ready to be off, now you’s finished up robbing the young and the dead?’ I asked him.

‘Not my problem, John. A deal’s a deal.’

‘I ain’t naive Cal, you ain’t no angel but this is crooked, even for you. You buying them cows out from under some young boys who just lost they Daddy to the very thing they trying to sell. This warn’t the foray into the cattle business you’d painted out to me. It stinks, in more ways than one. Hillson’s a swine to sell them to you.’

‘Well who stole your rudder this morning? It’s not like you to tell me how to spend my money. You don’t normally give a shit, why start now?’

‘Well, now your business is done with can we go on about mine?’

‘Soon. I said to Hillson we’d help see the cows over the river. Won’t take long, but I want to make sure my investment doesn’t drown.’

‘Naw, if I wanted to play cowboy I would have got you to buy a ranch. I ain’t rounding up no Longhorn; we’re wasting time we haven’t fucking got.’ I was so mad I could have strangled the Texan with his own rein leather.

‘Suit yourself. You go on ahead, I’ll catch you up. But I’m seeing them over that river.’

He rode off back to Hillson, who was getting his team ready to move. He’d got a handful of men and boys, ragged and sun-rough the lot of them, all on the same stocky little trail ponies laden down with ropes and pelts and cook pots. Part of me wanted to leave, and leave Cal to it; let him play cowpoke, and mess about with lassos and branding irons. He’d wanted it long enough, wanted to pick up the signs of Texas life, half-imagined memories of his childhood, and reattach them to hisself like clothes on a paper doll. Rope and spurs and roundup.

But I was still afraid to be out on the plains alone, not when I knew that woman was playing with us, was leaving me pieces of my past, of Cal's past. If she'd left me the first envelope, she must have left me this second one, though why she needed an Indian to deliver it, I couldn't figure. I needed to ask Cal why she might have had a picture of him as a babe, how she might connect to him and Connie, even though he thought I'd imagined her. He probably thought I'd imagined Connie too, the way he'd been looking at me them last few days. Again, some bad-minded little corner of my brain didn't trust him to catch me up neither. I thought he might just decide to linger at the Station, or worse, to carry on back up north with them cows, and Hillson, and pretend to hisself that his friend had gone mad and needed leaving to his ravings. I warn't going to let him slip away from what he'd promised to do, so I ran to catch him up and grudgingly said I'd help.

I was to be part of the drag, at the back of the herd. Hillson's boys rode round the outskirts of the field, shoulders hunched, the cows shrinking away from them best they could once they saw what they was doing. The cowpunches started cutting through the mass, moving like a knife through axle grease. They shot dead any cow too thin or lame to make the journey and any calves that had been abandoned by they mothers. I watched the man nearest to me as he picked them out one by one; they cried baby cries as they ran in front of his shaggy horse. He got them in the head if he could, but if they refused to face him he took out they sides and they lay rasping at the edge of the herd, dragging the air through they wet, pink noses, calling for something, teats, and the smell of they mothers, lost to them somewhere in the crowd. He shot at least ten, which seemed like a waste of flesh to me but Cal didn't bat an eyelid. Birds circled above us, black arrowheads waiting to shoot and land when they'd be left undisturbed with the bodies.

It took some whooping and hollering to get everything going, but when they'd got the herd headed in the right direction a couple of Hillson's boys took up the two flanks and I brought up the rear. The mid-morning sun was big and close in an open sky, a deep blue calm next to the red land under it. It was getting hot enough to dry out the ground, but the cattle still slipped in the bog of the ruined pasture, they thin legs failing in the mire. Horns cracked together, and it sounded like a great many tree branches being torn from they trunks all at once. The boys moved fast around on their little high-stepping horses, bringing in stray cattle, channelling them forward, pushing on the huge column of

beef. I tried to focus on my new job, and not that newspaper story and what it might mean. We had to try keep a thousand animals moving, animals I didn't trust. Even when they got going, they was breachy. The heat and dust from the quake of bodies blurred the air and a powerful new smell of hot horns and hooves was rising above the usual stink; I had to work to keep from retching.

As we moved on out of the field, towards the river, the body of the drover was finally uncovered behind us, the bones of his face broken and stoved in, a couple of teeth still showing in the ground next to his slack hole of a mouth, like little yellow seeds sown in no clear line. His clothes was torn, holes gaping open to expose grey bruised skin that was turning black. Flies played house in a gap in his side already, eating up the peculiar smell of dead thing, unmistakable and uncovered along with him. His eyes had burst, unable to watch us leave with his cows as a circle of crows began to hit the dirt one by one and started to push they beaks into his softening flesh. All about him, a vast slick of roiled, near bare earth, eaten and trampled down by thousands of mouths that never quit chewing, stomachs that warn't never full; and a fresh crop of dead babies, the mud molding itself to the shape of they sprawled little legs that stretched out to us as we left them behind.

I had to keep wiping the muck off my face. Flies came after the sweat sitting inside my collar and whined in my ears. Camel ran along surprisingly well, probably cause he knew he was outnumbered by the meat train he was escorting. We got up toward the camp and I could see the hotel on the left in the distance, still sat creaking alone as it dried out and the dirt coating its floors set in a crust that covered the downstairs. Molly Love was stood outside it now, also alone, looking up at the empty rooms that looked huge sat above her. What she'd said to me replayed over in my mind as we ran on, along with that picture of Cal as an infant. *He was a cruel child.* I knew he could be a cruel man, but I'd never seen it extend to me before.

Clouds began to form, covering over patches of the sun. A shrill wind whistled quickly past my head. Things faltered a little. I guessed that Hillson must have got near the river up front. A rider or two would go ahead and cross ready to deal with the steers, then the cattle was to be pushed on in small groups into the narrowest point where the river bent til they was all safe and over. That was the plan anyhow. The cattle slowed then stalled, tossing they heads at the riders hemming them in. Longhorn were skittish, unpredictable things, used only really because they seemed to never run out.

Wild herds still terrorised parts of Texas; looking at the stretch of meat and bone and temper in front of me I could sure believe it.

The light faded as more clouds formed above, and flies rained down on us, trying to settle on the flesh beneath them. Those few moments passed slow, like someone had pushed time through the slurry beneath our feet. I could still hear the bellowing, the coiled-up energy of thousands of bodies, on the move again after the confines of the Station, it just sounded stretched and low, like I was under water, like a hell-strong fever was passing through me, working its way out of me bit by bit. The air was cooked. Horse eyes flashed bone white next to the dirt. Leather and skin creaked and moved and I could hear every sound, one by one, like they was made inside my own head. The stink was making me want to vomit again. I was cursing Cal for making me do this, cursing the beasts in front of me, cursing them all. I wanted to hurry them up, hurry them all up, get this giant moving mass going again, but it felt like I had to wait hours, though it warn't really no more than a few seconds, for the switch to flip.

A flash of lightning seared itself into the sky. It tore a path through the cloud and threw itself to earth, chased by thunder only a second behind it that deadened the sounds winding round my mind. Heavy drops of rain began to break apart on the backs of the livestock as they hurtled forward, startled by the noise and the crackle that ran through the hair on the back of your neck. I kicked Camel on, my head suddenly clearer. Minute by minute we got closer to the river. I could make out a group of steers, a rider next to them, crashing into the water and finally, after a tense minute, rushing up the far bank in a tumble of froth and weeds. A few of Hillson's boys pushed the next lot in, swinging their hats up to shift the animals on, not that the steers needed much encouragement.

I could see Cal up front looking like a true cowboy, light leather coat bright in a mist of red heat, Jim weaving forward like he'd done this work a hundred times over. I guessed that was what Cal would have been doing if he hadn't took off them years back. Another streak of lightening forked down ahead over the river; you could even see its traces run along the spines of the cows, crackling blue along they wet fur. They got spooked and the ground shook with the force of the rush as they charged forward even quicker, skewering each other with they horns, dragging each other along, blood running into the rain that fell from they backs. Some was crushed between the bigger shoulders

of they neighbors, and pulled along, flailing legs not even on the ground, raised heads crying and struggling like they was drowning in a sea of they kin.

I could see Cal racing towards the river. The crossing had gone to hell. The river had turned fat and fast, and great sweeping barrels of water rode up over its sides. Huge rolls of spray hit the animals trying to climb up the north bank, and hissed and spat they way up the banks, louder than the cattle that were stompeding their way towards it. I pulled up, not knowing what to do but watch it happen. More cows plunged in and the water pushed them about like they warn't no more than grains of sand scooped off the bars that sat dotted near the river's edges. They heads went under and resurfaced seconds later, open mouthed and gasping. You couldn't see they legs but you knew each animal was kicking like stink underneath the murky water. More took the dive; they was little chance of halting them now, no matter how the men on this side of the river tried to slow them. It was like they couldn't help but run towards drowning, or having they skin shredded on the rocks that stuck out the banks like waiting teeth.

I ran Camel down to the very edge, kicking him on as another barb of lightning singed the grass in front of us. The horse reared and I near ate dirt, hanging from Camel's sides, my face feet from the moving wall of charging legs. I climbed back on, choking the horn as the horse skittered dangerously near the fierce points that swung from the cows at the edge of the rush. The men around me ran in quick bursts, trying to keep the cattle in line, to keep them away from the hotel and the flimsy cabins that made up the Station, away from the creeks to the east that was likely full of quicksand, but they was tiring. One man's pants was gashed open on the thigh, blood pouring out the hole down his pants leg, clotting with the dirt that coated him. The river still was roaring past, only a little way below Camel's hooves, beating on the struggling cows in the water. Another few made it over, exhausted and rasping. Hillson, already over, pushed them safely away from the edge and towards the others behind him.

Cal suddenly appeared at the back of the herd. Judging from Jim's dirty, sand-stung legs he'd been over by the creeks, helping out there. Lord knows how he made it back over. He'd got a pistol in the air. The brass gleamed even in the dull light and shone in my eyes. I tried to focus, to filter out the noise of the thousands of moving feet, the river, the shouts of the riders, everything, to just watch and

wait. The shot exploded into the air, ripping upward a second before another spit of lightning fell over us and kicked up dirt in front of him. The sound echoed round the river bank, followed by another, and another. What was left of the herd began to run even quicker, pack even tighter. Just what Cal was after. I watched them stream past, the front group sliding down the loose muddy banks, slamming their bellies into the river. They began to swim, still bunched together, towards the far side. Others followed and soon a bridge of cattle formed in the river, the steers knitted together, forming their own barrier against the foam that pounded against them. The water continued to push on, slamming into the banks and over the animals' heads, finding its way around them, through legs, over backs. The cows pushed their faces skyward and kept on kicking. Cal pulled up beside me, Jim slipping to a stop on the collapsed ground.

We watched the last stragglers plunge into the water and try to keep up with the group, followed by what remained of Hillson's boys. They tipped into the river and tried to stay close together, necks craned as far back as they could manage to stop the water forcing its way down their gullets. Hillson himself waved his hat at us from over the other side. Though the ground was damp, the stampede seemed to have pushed tiny flecks of dirt out the ground, the air a thin red shroud that hung under the ironclad clouds above. The cows' legs and bellies were coated in blood colored streaks.

'I'm about as wet as if I'd been in the water myself.' Cal shook the sodden front of his shirt and shrugged his jacket off. He didn't get a moment to breathe though. Just when we thought it was over, and the last few beeves dug their legs into the far bank and knelt their way up out the squall, one of the rider's slipped. A young fella, barely sturdier than the calves that had been shot earlier; he slipped from his horse under the weight of a huge wave and got carried off like he didn't weigh a thing. He'd still got the reins in his hands, and they jolted as they stretched out down river, the boy floundering on the end of them. The man in front saw him, and tried to reach out an arm without falling off his own ride, but the boy was already too far away.

He struggled and kicked and rolled in the froth, his horses trying to pull onward, struggling to keep upright. The drag on its head and the water that crashed over it was pushing its neck down, twisting its head side on to the river. Hillson was pacing his horse up and down, trying to figure if he could help but the boy was nearer the south bank, always out of his reach. I held my breath, willing the

boy to pull himself back towards his ride. Another big wave came barrelling along, the fastest and thickest so far, charging between the riverbanks like a runaway train. The boy lost it, was swept away in an instant, tossed and flipped like a little egg sliding around a greased pan. His face appeared then disappeared again and again, spray shooting into his gasping mouth.

Cal started off racing down the bank towards him, me close behind. He took his rope off the saddle and hurried to tie a loop on the end of it. He finally got ahead of the boy, who'd got caught in another current that seemed to play with him, spinning him round in place as if to dizzy him further. Cal yelled, and threw the rope. He hit the boy, but the kid was twisted round in the churn and the rope lashed at his back. Cal and me pulled it back in quick as we could but the boy was dragged along again, turning and ducking down the current like he was dancing with some unseen partner, one who was twisting the life out of him. Cal followed again, pulling the remainder of the rope back again in as he went.

It looked real bad. Even a strong swimmer couldn't fight once he got caught in that kind of pull, and the boy was acting like he'd never dipped a toe in before. Cal waited for the right moment then threw again. This time, by some miracle, it stuck. The loop sailed over the boy's flailing arm and he grabbed a hold like that rope was made of gold. Cal flung me the back end and we started to pull. Another huge bolt of water thundered down from past the station, a tumbling mass of leaden water and red dirt that grew as it rolled towards us. The steers and riders was near all out of the water by that point, heads down and coughing up grouts like a pack of lungers. The wave smashed past them then whomped into the floating boy like a great, teeming fist. It covered him completely, forcing him deep under.

The weight of the water pulled Cal off Jim. He landed heavy and for a second it looked like he was going to get dragged right along into the river too, sliding over the slick, clay-like ground like a huge, pale eel escaping the cold grip of the fisherman's hands. His head reached the bank, inches from the water, before he got his toes dug in and let the rope slip through his palms. He grunted in pain from the burn. I took up the strain and managed to stay on Camel, turning the horse around slowly, trying to make the tireless suck of the mud work for us. Cal struggled up somehow and pulled it back, his feet pushing into the rocky bank side. The boy re-surfaced in a gulp of froth and thick bubbles.

The river boomed on, hissing spray and lather up at us like it was willing us to give up, but inch by inch, pull by pull, Cal and me tugged the boy out.

We dragged him out the water and up the bank as if we was birthing a new born, floppy and breathless and covered in muck. Cal hauled him away from the river than collapsed down next to him, to roars from the men across the other side. I got down, propped the boy upright, and set to slapping him hard on the back to force the water out his lungs. It came out in great heaves. He shuddered and clung heavy to my arm, a bile-tinged puddle growing in front of him with each wrack of his chest. It was only then, when I finally let out the breath I'd been holding for I didn't know how long, kneeling over that trembling cowboy who warn't no more than a child, that I saw it, saw them, and felt as sick as the boy I held. Two figures, behind the roil of cows and Hillson's gang over on the far bank. They was stood among the twisted branches of a lone mesquite tree. The men hadn't seen them. Two shadows, clothes billowing into the storm like unwound burial sheets. I couldn't make out they faces at that distance, but that didn't matter none. The woman took one, lone step forward, rifle in hand, and I lost the contents of my own stomach once again and sunk to my knees in the spread of it while Cal stared open mouthed and speechless across the water.

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We got into New Orleans about three days later. I'd never ridden so fast in all my life, not before or since. I barely let Cal rest. Only when he was near falling off his horse from tiredness, or the horses themselves just couldn't pick their feet up no more, did I let them sleep, and then only for a couple hours. I don't remember sleeping at all; my body might have been resting but my mind, naw, that wouldn't quiet. It kept flashing up images of those two, up on that hill looking us over, mixed in with thoughts of my own making, thoughts of Connie; if she was hurting, if she was alone, cause who was she with if the them that had kidnapped her was out on the plains, playing games with us? Thoughts of her in pain or frightened, the worst kind of things my brain could conjure up. I took to clutching the tufts of her hair in my hand, so tight and so often it made the joints in my fingers ache and seize up around my reins. Letting go of that leather each day became tough as breaking rocks.

We'd got that boy at the river back on his feet, then left quick as we could. He was still hacking up cloudy water, tinged with red like his insides was on fire, but he soon got some color back in his cheeks. I kept my eyes on them two ghosts, ghouls, creatures - I didn't know what they was back then. I remember willing them to stay there, to just stay still so as I could try to get a grip on what they could possibly want with Cal and me. It didn't work none. They seemed to glide away, smooth as shadows moving backward over the ground, out of sight in a moment.

Hillson gave us a tip of his hat and was away, him and his boys tucking themselves around that lumbering train of cows headed toward they fates on the dinner tables of New York, Chicago and Boston. I didn't know back then if our own ends might be just as close. It had been her, the crow-haired woman, masked still and eyes like pitch. She was out in front her dress blowing in the wind like some back flag raised against us. The man, a ways behind her, he had his collar up against his face. It cast it into darkness but even with that dull sky I could see a mean, crafty flash in his eyes, like polished flint. I reckoned I knew exactly who he was too, but to say it back then would have been to see an impossibleness and declare it truth, logic, reason, which it warn't.

We followed the Red River as best we could and where the terrain would allow, knowing that keeping it close enough by would get us right down to the pickled heart of Louisiana. We pounded along the dusty top of Texas, covered in brittle summer grass, biting river flies and heat hazes that never let up, as if you was all the time running through a land you warn't sure was there, that appeared to shift and rise and fall before your eyes. We got over the top of Fort Worth, left so ragged after the war, and then round Dallas. Any other time we would have stopped for supplies and a scout about, but I got us by them quickly. I was afraid they would draw Cal in, a tempting pit he'd otherwise fall into, but he didn't speak on them none.

We crossed into Louisiana, into the wetlands, waterways and treacherous swamps waiting for you to make just one slip on they muddy edges so they could swallow you and bubble up over your head. We got below Shreveport and travelled southward, channelled between the Red and the Sabine, penned in either side by murky water. The storm clouds that had thrown themselves together in Texas never left us. We moved under an iron-gray, cracking sky that shook above our heads and spat out lightning viper-quick. All the while we was either in the dark, with not even the moon and stars to

see by, or in a daylight that warn't far off the night. Heat broiled the air til it felt like your lungs had turned into wet sponges. The wind warn't no respite and we must have sweated out as much water as sat in Lake Pontchartrain over them few days. The rivers looked like they was made of mercury. Further south, clouds of mosquitoes and flies swelled, and shining green dragonflies and fiery damselflies danced strange dances in front of our eyes. They'd disappear into the thick air and reappear somewhere new a second later, taking your eyes off your footing.

We passed creaking forests of them tall, tough cypress trees that Louisiana grows so good out on the flatlands, forests that harboured antlions with wings like a bride's veil, and little green treehoppers. We passed cuts of gnarled live oak. When I was small I always used to think they looked like old men, once big and proud but now stooped under the weight of theyselves, moss wafting out from their branches like unkempt whiskers. The swamps held more cypress, yellow green leaves glistening even in the dull light, and magnolias with waxy white petals like sallow skin on a dying man. And at night, fireflies. Glowing, little green stars suspended amongst the trees, stand-ins for the ones hidden behind that mean bank of cloud. They'd hang in the air for a moment then jet theyselves upwards, trails flashing over our skin like our veins glowed, before their lights would fade.

We followed markers over the swamps. I took us over the Atchafalaya, down by the Mississippi, trying to keep the horses from sinking, trying to keep us from getting lost in the dark on barely-there roads and trails. I didn't need no signs though. I seemed to know where to go, where to put Camel's feet, which row of trees to turn down, where to cross the waterways to avoid the sucking mud of the beds. Was like I didn't even have to think about it, like I knew what was coming, each twist and turn, each tree, each road, some so packed and dense the leaf canopy created its own night time, a new dark to reckon with. Cal followed my every move with stern concentration, a look I ain't never seen on his face before. He navigated that big horse down the most unfriendly little nooks, the most silt-ridden marshes without no complaint. His eyes hollowed out more and more each day. Ever since the Red River he had a look about him, as if something had shocked him down to his guts. Tell the truth I was glad he'd seen what I had, seen them, and that it had frightened him. I warn't alone with my thoughts now. This was unfamiliar territory for the Texan, and he jumped and goggled at the birds and bugs

and water flowers that cawed and croaked and clumped about us as we got nearer and nearer whatever was waiting for our arrival.

It had just turned dark when we finally saw the oily glow of the city's lamps on the horizon. We pulled up a moment, and I saw that the cloud had finally broke above the streets of New Orleans and the moon's greenish light had begun to fall heavily on the road ahead. We followed the moon, treading on its beam as if it was stepping stones laid out in the dark til more signs of the city reached out to us. Cal looked relieved to be getting out the swamp; he didn't like the closeness of the trees, dangling over you, the constant bubbling of water, or the creatures it harboured, pelicans with beaks like basins, bullfrogs like rocks gone soft in the wet. And the gators. Everywhere, the gators, though normally all you could see of them was they beady little eyes watching you, more carefully then you'd like.

Walking them waterways, I remembered being small, being taken out fishing in them swamps. I was whistling some tune to myself once, irritating the hell out of the fishermen who took me. I would not shut myself up, kept whistling that tune so much the notes all got mixed up and one of the fishermen grabbed me and held me out high above the water by my pants waist, telling me to shush or he'd let go. The water broke underneath my legs as a great, ugly bull gator reared his head out the water and bellowed so loud the man almost dropped me on its head. He dragged me back into the boat quick and I quit whistling straight up. The noises them things make, it's like no other thing I ever heard. It's like theys been cooking up that sound for as long as they been alive. You can feel the vibrations push against your skin. I kept having to remind Cal not to be going too near the water when we took short rests, no dangling his feet in as was his want. Down in the south-south, the water bites. The smells came to us first. Such smells as I hadn't experienced in a long, long time. Fried fish, hot and oily, boiled rice, spices, burning wood and tobacco, rich and smoky. Bodies, warm on a warmer night, each making their own distinct scent to add to the mix. Sweat, perfume, all soaked into the air that seeped out of the city, merging with the flat, ripe tang of the boggy world about it. Then the music. Notes, light and long from fiddles, the jangle of pianos, the pace of drums, born into the night

and sent out to pull on your ears. The trundle of cartwheels, the hollow clap of horses' hooves and the low pulsing hum of a city's worth of human talk, louder and louder with every step.

Cal stared as we walked. I could see the sweat beading on his skin in the night light, eyes and nostrils wide as if he was trying to inhale the place breath by breath before he got there. He pushed Jim on like he was hypnotized. That city has got its own gravity. It drags on you, pulls on your limbs so you got to keep putting one foot ahead of the other and walk into its open mouth. You don't often see the teeth til it's too late.

The green of the moon ran into the misty cloud that was draped around it like water weeds in the sky. It still shined up ahead, glowing til it almost looked like it was shaking, moving to a different beat than the flat night air of the trail, heavy with humidity and the bulbous, staring eyes of swamp life at our backs. It felt like those creatures knew was something building up, like little breaths was held in all around. The air seemed to coil and clench as we approached the city limit, like we was about to fall into a deep hole we was still teetering on the edge of; we could still be saved if only we'd think to turn back. Then all of a sudden, we was in it; the valve released, and the eyes turned away back into the darkness, figuring us goners, another pair lost in the lines that the city cast. We was absorbed into the light of the streets, and once again it began to rain.

The roads we took at first warn't familiar to me, though my memories began to show theyselves, crawling out from their resting places in the back of my head, hazy to begin with then sharper, more fully-formed, like someone running up behind you and making you start before you get to recognizing them. It took me a while to realize that the city had most likely grown a fair size in the long stint of my absence, and had sprouted new parts, claimed new soil to suck on. Most of the outlying roads were foggy and packed in close, bathed in the burnt-orange light coming from a few gas lamps and candles that made the air shimmer in the wet.

It was hot. Hotter than the swamps. Walking was like trying to pass through a never-ending wall of stifling warmth, the heat replacing the air in your lungs. You felt like you was cooking from inside and out. When I first left Louisiana, I remember being taken aback for a while at the dryness, the thin air that didn't leave no damp slick all over you and your clothes. If you was wet in Texas, or New

Mexico or any other dry, husky place out west, it mostly came from inside yourself, from sweat, or from the poker straight rain that seemed to fall in neat lines, never quite enough to refresh you none. The dry heat sucked up water, took it away from you. Not like Louisiana, and other places nearby - Florida, some parts of Mississippi - where the weather tried to soak you on a regular basis, tried to push moisture into you like it wanted you to become one of them creatures sat in the swamp, skin swollen, at home amongst the lilies and the tree roots. Rain carried on falling on the city as we wormed towards its middle. It fell, fat and quivering, exploding on the ground, on the horses, on us, bursting apart like damp dynamite. The remnants clung to our eyelashes and ran off our faces. It felt like it was washing us through the streets, pushing at our backs, hurrying us along so we got deeper and deeper in.

She came out of nowhere, darting out of the street-side shadows and almost straight under Jim's hooves. We was hurrying along, looking out for a spot to rest up. Most places said full or didn't have no stable, so I'd said we'd head to part of the riverside I thought I knew and look there. Her black hair gave me a start. It was coiled up high atop her head like a nesting rattler, so you could tell it was long. I ain't sure what bothered me more, that hair or the speed of her appearing out of the darkness. It was only when she turned to face us, Cal still heaving on Jim's reins to keep him from treading on her, that my brain told my stomach it warn't her, the one who'd been tracking us. We hadn't seen hide nor hair of her, nor her companion as we moved south. Course, that didn't mean they warn't following - anyone or anything could hide in a swamp, given half they wits - but I never got the sense we was being tailed, and I was on the lookout near every minute of every day we passed.

This woman was older, shorter and fuller figured. She wore a tight, black, silk dress done up to her chin. It was covered in little jet beads, and they dangled from her body in such numbers that in the lamp light it looked as though she was dripping with oil, it running down her frame like the spray from one of Rockefeller's gushers. I didn't like her none, and that was before she opened her mouth. Her pale skin shone greasy in the rain, making the reptile glint in her eyes seem even fiercer, and she had rouge the color of a copperhead smudged over her cheeks. Tell the truth I was surprised not to see

her tongue darting out too, to taste the air. She set that cool face of hers on us and laughed, innocent as could be.

‘Why, gentlemen, I am so sorry. I just did not see you there.’ Her voice was high and girlish, more manners than truth. Her eyes flickered over Cal like he was the last shot of whisky in the bottle serving a table of ten.

‘That’s quite alright Madam, we were moving apace. Apologies if we startled you,’ Cal said. Normally he’d get down off his horse when talking to a lady, but I reckoned he was reluctant to get his seat wet that night. Safe under my slicker, I reckoned my own was the only dry part of me and Camel going. Cal shifted in his saddle, tipped his hat and made to move off.

‘I know you.’ The lady moved one step closer to us. ‘I know you. Where from, I wonder. I can’t place it.’ She had a look on that face like she damn well knew where from but was acting coy nonetheless, tipping her head as if she was thinking most hard on it.

‘I doubt it Ma’am, I’ve never been here before. My friend here -’ Cal started to speak, but she clapped her hands together and talked right over him.

‘Davies! Mr Cal Bryce Davies.’ She laughed, saying each of his names slow, like she enjoyed the taste of them. Them oily looking beads shivered. We was near the river, on a street lined with stunted, sorry-looking houses, paint peeling from crumbling brick like they’d got mite-itch. Only a couple of windows was picked out in candle light, the rest hidden and furtive in the dark. I hadn’t seen which door she’d come from, but none of the buildings seemed a place you’d expect to find a lady, and her fine clothes looked gaudy next to the rot around us. A black fella, all kitted out in fancy coach livery came stepping out of what looked to be a passageway between two of the unlit houses nearby, stepping into our view like she’d conjured him out of nowhere. He had a black parasol hooked over his arm, covered in the same beads as the lady’s dress, and there was something sticking out of his front, making a bulge underneath his jacket. He silently opened the umbrella over the lady’s head as she continued to smile that snaky smile our way. She made no sign she’d noticed him none. She walked towards Cal, her servant painful careful to keep that parasol over her. He was much taller than her, and most of the water that slid down it poured straight onto his legs.

‘Madame Anjou. A pleasure to make your acquaintance. Why, if I’d have known you were coming to our pretty little city here, I would have had my club roll out quite the welcome for you. No matter, we can soon see to that. We’ve heard all about your exploits. You’re known as quite *l’homme du jour* down here, admired in some highly-respected circles, Mr Davies. My friends and I just love a handsome man with a gun, if I may say.’ She offered Cal her hand, and he reluctantly dismounted. I stayed put. I wanted to keep her where I could see her.

‘Very fine of you to say so, Ma’am. I didn’t expect to be recognised in the street, particularly this side of the Sabine. This here is John Farmer.’ Cal had to shout some to be heard over the weather. The rain was steadily filling up the street. It could reach the banquettes in a matter of minutes if it got heavy enough. Mrs Anjou’s eyes flashed in my direction and her smile dropped, just for a second, before she stuck it back in place and resumed staring up at Cal.

‘We were just looking to find a room for the night. We’d be grateful if you might recommend somewhere.’ Mrs Anjou didn’t need to be asked twice. Fluttering her keen little eyes, she stepped closer still to the Texan so that she was right under his nose. She grasped his arm and squeezed.

‘Oh, I am sure we can fix you up, can’t we, Henri? Have you never heard of southern hospitality Mr Davies?’ Her voice had a slight French tinge, like lots of folks in the city, but again I reckoned it was something of a show.

‘Well, I’m from Texas Ma’am, we know a might about hospitality.’ Madame Anjou smirked and gave him a look as if to say that didn’t count for nothing, nothing at all, but before she could open her mouth again a black, one-horse cab rolled round the corner of the street. It ploughed through the flooded road, its wheels making waves as it slowed and pulled up next to us. The driver was wearing an overcoat so big that the hood completely covered his head, his face nothing more than a black void sat above long, wet drapes of dark oilcloth. Gloved hands gripped the reins, the black box of the carriage sat out square in front like it had grown out from under him, a mechanical extension of his being. The horse shook its neck and sent a hundred small jets of rain into the air.

‘Right on time,’ Madame Anjou said. ‘You’ll stay with me, naturally. Just follow my carriage and we’ll see you settled in no time. I must insist.’ And with that she whisked herself on and up into the hansom, Henri doing his best to match her little stride with his long legs. He got her set inside then

hopped onto two narrow footplates behind the driver back to hold on. The driver gave us a nod of his hooded head as he turned and whipped the horse on. We followed close behind, watching Henri's coattails fly out behind him as the cab picked up speed, the driver barely moving on his high platform seat, despite the jolts and turns the street sent up the cab wheels.

'We don't have to stay with her, Cal. We don't know her from Jack,' I said, hoping Henri couldn't hear me over the rain.

'The woman's been good enough to offer us assistance, John? We're not in a position to turn it down? She'll know the city, have connections. She might help us find that girl of yours. Besides, I'm sure wherever she's taking us will be a damn sight more comfortable than the hovels we usually end up in.' I shut up, a little sour that he was keeping Connie in mind when I was trying to find fault., but I still felt uneasy. The houses straightened up as we rolled along, got bigger, and set further back from the road. Little bent over shacks with splintered porches occupied by dark shining faces gave way to bright white wood, straight lines, brick and stone. Pillars smartened up doorways and fancy shutters kept the weather out of windows, painted in all sorts of colors, limey green, purple like water lilies, the pink of fresh melon. The thick sheets of ivy that grew up walls and gates was getting pummelled in the rain, leaves and buds sagging under the weight of it. I clapped Camel's shoulder and water sprang from his fur under my fingers.

Wherever we was heading, we was going to be apologising for looking like a pair of dripping river rats rather than two men you'd want as lodgers. The carriage rattled on down the steeped roads, the driver sure of the route. Poor Henri had to hold on for dear life. The backs of his legs got soaked with every corner the carriage took as water splashed up over the wheels. The sights and smells of the city was still full in the air but we passed very few people abroad in the night. It seemed like every street we went down was abandoned or asleep, life always in the next one along, visible only in glimpses and the hint of movement as we rolled through the city grid, a great fishing net laid out above the river, to catch whatever unsuspecting victims it could in its weaves. The lamplight was rain-streaked and formed bilious pools of its own, like them with eyes scourged with the yellow fever that still stalked certain parts of the city, over the wash of the streets. I felt like knew them roads, but

couldn't recall if I'd been down them, or what they was called. The wet light blurred the street signs as we ran past each one.

It felt like we was touring the whole of the old half-city of Lafayette, gingerbread house after gingerbread house lining the streets, looking so showy that I felt like they owners would have built them out of stacks of dollars if money was watertight. Finally, though, the cab pulled a sharp left through a pair of gleaming iron gates that opened as the driver made the turn, like they'd been waiting on us. We rolled onto a long carriage drive and the cab flew down the track, not slowing for a moment. It brushed the flowers that sat in wide beds either side of us, such flowers as I'd never set my eyes on before, like something out of the deepest jungle, and they was just the ones you could see. The rest of what looked like a vast garden was dark. The moon was full and fat in the sky, sat in a nest of sagging cloud and throwing out green light still. Mixed with the vaporous light from the cab's lanterns, it gave the flowers a sickly look, waxy petals loaded with sticky, clumped seeds in colors that seemed too bright for that place, that time of night. Water drops flew at our legs as the cab knocked stems and leaves alike as it passed them. A great, pillared house appeared up ahead, three stories high, bigger than any we'd passed so far. Its white-wash lacquer shone pearly in the dark and despite the lateness of the hour, most of its windows was alive with light like it was waiting up for our arrival.

The cab rolled to a gentle stop outside the front steps, and we'd no sooner got off our horses than Henri had hopped down and opened the parasol over Mrs Anjou's head once more. She stepped daintily down onto the drive and this time took the umbrella from him. She waved him away, and he came and gathered up our reins and led the horses off without a word. Camel's ears was back but I figured he was just tired and wet and fair sick of being both. I tried to thank Henri, but he gave me a pained look, the whites of his eyes doubling in an instant, and I found the word faltering in my mouth. The carriage pulled away with no word from the statue-like driver. Madame Anjou was already tugging at Cal's elbow, leading him towards the house. Up close it gleamed like a tooth in the damp mouth of the night, square and proud and cold looking. A porch stuck out the front of it, fanning out wide in the middle into a set of steps that led up to a big, split-middle oak door.

I held still for a second, staring up them white, polished steps. Little streams ran down them and touched the toes of my boots. I could hear the flowers dripping, the rain hitting the shutters above my head, clattering on the wood and glass. Something moved, up on the third floor. I looked up and saw what looked like an arm pull away real quick as my eyes hit the glass. All the other windows were wide and blank and still, the house seemingly aglow but otherwise empty. Cal was inside though, and the door had been left open for me. Warmth and the smell of chicken frying came down them steps to greet me, making my empty stomach complain. Much as I didn't want to, I steeled myself, and skidded up them steps, trying not to slip.

If that warn't the fanciest house I'd ever clapped eyes on. I skidded into a great entrance hall, with ivory-colored floors, dangling chandeliers and a curved staircase so smooth and shined it look like the spine of some creature of the deep that someone had built a house around. Like I said, out west they made stuff quick and they made it person-sized so nothing cost more than necessary and normal folks could just about live with it. It was why Cal was always stooping. There though, he looked like these rooms was just made for him and I felt about ten sizes too small, like I'd shrunk somehow crossing the threshold. Two servants rushed to take our wet hats and coats from us, as we was dripping all over the floor; it was so polished that we began to slide about like we was on a frozen lake, leaving grimy smears behind us where we trod.

More servants appeared, all black, all in the same get-up green velvet suits with tails, or dresses, frothy cravats spilling up over their stiff collars. They was posted round the room, had slid out in unison from behind doors and corridors to stand silent, to help, to be dismissed, I couldn't tell. They faces didn't give nothing away, cept for what must have been years of training in how act like a piece of furniture. They were still as the pillars outside, hands behind they backs. Madame Anjou declared she wanted to give us a tour of the house, and near all of them about turned and scurried back to whatever corner of the mansion they'd come from.

'Quit eyeballing everything, acting like you never lived indoors before. She'll think we're going to rob her,' Cal hissed under his breath.

‘Fat chance. Don’t look like there’s much here small enough to fit in our pockets.’ I said, carrying on looking about. The hall was so big you couldn’t see it all at once. He rolled his eyes at me.

‘Show a little gratitude. I’ll bet this is the nicest place you’ve ever stepped foot in you miserable old...’ He stopped himself before he contradicted his own advice about manners. He was right in a way, but nice ain’t how I’d describe it. Now I was without my coat I felt cold; I’d been in it for days, was like it had become a second skin and now it was peeled off I felt vulnerable. The house was overwhelming, too big, too grand. I didn’t belong in a place like that, never had any wish to neither. I looked at our host as she whispered instructions through clenched teeth to the handful of servants left in the hall who’d lined up by her after her last announcement. One by one they listened in silence then marched off, heads bowed to whatever task Madame Anjou assigned, footsteps echoing in the white cavern of the hall. Her dress still looked like an oil slick that had taken the form of a person, like she was dripping but nothing was gathering at her feet. The beads, that had seemed the thickest black in the fummy moonlight now looked like they was full of color, shifting and turning as they moved with her. Blues, purples, greens, the shades of swamp light hung about her. She had that viper look on her face again, for all she was small and more than well-rounded. We barely knew her but being in her company felt like you was stood on a bear trap, waiting for it to close. No matter what her mouth did, them eyes of hers was wide open, fixated mostly on Cal’s revolvers. Despite a rough couple days, they was still in place at his hips, still shining like the metal was yet to set. Cal caught her looking.

‘I’m sorry Ma’am, I’ll take them off if they make you uncomfortable.’ All chivalry, Cal Davies. I didn’t want to be parted from my own gun so I tried to tuck it round the back of my belt over my ass out the way. Madame Anjou snapped out of it, clapped her little hands together and told Cal that he was quite *un ange* for offering but that she felt quite safe with him there, him and his guns, and that he should keep them right where they was. She looped his arm with hers, which required him to stoop something terrible, and we set off walking round that gleaming shell of a house.

Downstairs was a spread of palace-sized rooms that broke off from the central hall like wings in a penitentiary. We even visited the kitchen, where folks was so busy I couldn’t make out they hands.

The air was steam.

‘I’ve the best cook in the city,’ she said to us out the side of her mouth, so he couldn’t hear her. ‘I’m sure you’ve a fine appetite, Mr Davies. You’ll try everything New Orleans has to offer, of course.’ The cook worked on, broiling and frying and rolling the churn-handle of an ice-cream barrel like he was rowing a boat, arms the colour of port, tendons thickened with familiar work. We left that hot, spice-scented kitchen and headed upstairs. Parlor followed parlor, bedroom followed bedroom, servant followed servant. Why a person might want so many rooms is more than I could guess at; you can only be in one at a time and far as I could see, though she jawed away to Cal about all the sharp-eyed portraits of rakish, bent-backed men and doughy women we traipsed past, the Madame didn’t seem to have no living people to call hers.

I didn’t like the portraits none, all them eyes peering down at you, like they was coveting your being alive. I ain’t got no pictures of my family to be judged by, no lingering image of someone that’s gone but recreated in paint and wood, a half-being that’s never quite the same as the living person whose likeness it seeks to recreate. Madame Anjou’s houseboys stood along the corridor, as still and glass-eyed as them pictures. One of them had skin that shone bronze in the gaslight, and for a second, I changed my mind, and wished I’d had a picture of Constance made up, a record of her face, something to look at now that my brain was failing at keeping her intact. I kicked myself at another thing I should have done, another care I should have taken. We walked on.

The biggest room lay on the second floor right in the centre of the house. A ballroom, filled with more staff that worked away in silence, cleaning, polishing, and hanging flowers all around windows twice they height. They was all in them same dark uniforms, like busy little frogs trying to shuffle around the same lily leaf. They was a few women in there too, in green matching dresses with frilly white pinnies over they thighs. Two was old, they curled hair pinned tight and greying at the ends. The dim glow from the lamps they worked by fell into the sweat on their brows and the lines on they skin like they was gilded, and they bright, careful eyes flashed up at us from their work; seeing the Madame, still roped around Cal, they adjusted they gaze straight away. Their mistresses’ footsteps rang out on the polished floor like a clock striking nothing but the need to work harder. No-one spoke. Then I saw her.

She was bent over an Oriental rug on the floor, brushing away at the branch-like strands that made up its busy pattern, a little island in a sea of bustling preparations. I could only see her hands and the top of her head, coppery in the shifting lamplight. She was working quick and sharp over the cloth, rolling the stiff brush over it, picking up dirt and loose threads like she knew where they was without even looking. My stomach near threw itself out my mouth for a moment and I took a heavy step back. She turned her head and looked up at me, eyes wide as she realised her mistress was accompanied by two unfamiliar, sorry looking men. It warn't her, wasn't Connie. She was too young. She looked from me to Cal to Madame Anjou, who unthreaded herself from the Texan and stood hovering by the girl, casting a shadow over her that seemed twice the Madame's actual size. The girl quickly turned back to her rug, and I tried to swallow my guts back down. Madame Anjou looked from me to the girl and back like a set of fangs was about to snap out her mouth, her tongue sliding over her lips.

'I'm holding a dance tomorrow,' she said, 'in celebration of the boat race that's to begin in the afternoon. I'm sure you've heard about it.'

Cal started up saying we hadn't but I cut him off.

'Steamers. River boat steamers. They race every year.'

Madame Anjou looked at me like my explanation was about as welcome as a kick to the jaw and carried on.

'Yes. Exactly. You're both invited, of course. It's a real sight.'

'Thank you for the invitation, Madame, but I'm afraid we've got some urgent business we must attend to tomorrow -'

She cut me off like she warn't ever expecting no refusal. 'Oh, there'll be plenty of time for that I'm sure. You mustn't miss the race, it's the biggest event of the season. I'll explain everything tomorrow. This way Mr Davies, there's somebody I'd like you to meet.' She attached herself to his arm once more and led him sharply out of the ballroom, leaving me traipsing behind again. The girl on the rug raised her face to me one last time as I left, tears in her eyes as I closed the door softly behind me.

From that huge ballroom the Madame took us all round the second and top floors, opening doors into quiet, unoccupied bedrooms and writing rooms and breakfast rooms and finding nothing but frustration and the lonely echo of our footsteps as the doors swung open into emptiness. Eventually, she led us right up into the tip of the house, down a dim, close little hallway in one corner where the dust hung in silvery threads in the air, undisturbed. It had an air of forget about it, and I couldn't hear the creep of servant's footsteps in the surrounding rooms and passages. She opened a door into a small, windowless dressing room, dark at the top but aglow lower down thanks to a forest of neat, thumb-sized candles littering the floor and the top of a several dainty little dressers dotted about the room. They cast firefly light onto a department store's worth of different frocks and necklaces and other pretties that filled near every corner of the stuffy little room so that it looked like some ancient tomb the Madame had just cracked open, unwitting, everything the colors of fruits and sweets and the clear skies of places way outside of the city. It was a haze of lace and shine and perfume, a real lady's room. In the middle of it, oddly amongst a small sea of old unravelled newspapers, sat a confection. She looked about eighteen, plump where it was fashionable to be so, with blonde hair curled and pinned in rings like a china doll's, blue eyes, pink cheeks, wearing a dress the color of watermelon flesh trussed up all over with little blue ribbons.

'My daughter, Clarabelle,' Mrs Anjou announced. I watched as Cal's eyes grew about ten sizes in a second. She didn't notice us at first; she was reading a scrap that looked like it had been torn from one of the papers, something she put aside in haste soon as she saw two scruffy, still sopping men stood agape in the doorway. A twitch of irritation dragged on her mother's face a moment, but the Madame forced a smile back over them fangs of hers, inch by inch. Clarabelle stood up on cat's paw feet and glided over to us.

'Clarabelle, I've been looking for you everywhere. This is Mr Davies. I'm quite sure you must recognise him from all those stories I've read to you over the years, from the papers.' The Madame cast a look over the whirl of old weekly's that lay in messy stacks around the newly bare patch of floor Clarabelle had been sat on and pursed her lips. Their dull ink and frayed, yellowing edges looked like some sort of rot had set in in the centre of the room and was starting to fan outwards towards the treasures that lay close by. Madame Anjou leaned forward and kissed her daughter's

cheek, and I swear I heard her say *I told you to burn those* in the faintest of breaths as Clarabelle dutifully presented the side of her face.

‘Stories? All tale tales, I assure you,’ Cal said, a wolfish grin spreading over his face, the edges of his teeth picked out in the light from the parlor.

‘Gentlemen.’ Clarabelle curtsied. I didn’t know folks still did that, but there she was, knees to the floor. ‘Please forgive me, you caught me quite unaware. My mother doesn’t like me reading, Mr Davies. She says all that frowning over old paper will ruin my complexion.’

Cal stepped forward to assist her ascent, though she moved like she knew how and had known for a while.

‘I sincerely doubt that’s possible, Miss... Clarabelle, what a pretty, old-fashioned name that is.’ Cal kissed the back of her hand like we was all fancy people having introductions at a debutante ball. Despite the china blue eyes, there was a look on her face as if she got Cal measured, squared and stitched up already, though her eyelashes fluttered so much you might easily have missed it, the set jaw, the half smirk that could easily pass for a shy smile. Cal sure missed it. He only knocked himself out of his stupor and mustered up the brains to say who I was after I kicked the back of his leg.

As he was talking, I started to smell something familiar. Like flowers, but they warn’t none in the room that I could see. I couldn’t tell if it was coming from Clarabelle, the parlor, or if I was imagining it, but the richness of it all, the gleam on all the furniture, the spread of the beads and jewels strewn about, even the thick, pitchy ink of the newspapers, it all began to melt together some, slowly at first, like the edges of everything was becoming loose some, until it finally it seemed like the very shape of the room was starting to shift, to bend around itself. I saw it, then, in the swirl, a pale purple candle, burning on a mount on the far wall. It was whole, only lit recent, and it was starting to give off the same smutty, peppery smoke that the one we found had. I felt hot, clammy, fresh sweat mixing with my still damp shirt. The ribbons and strings of pearls draped around the room seemed to coil like bejewelled innards, the colors of the dresses, the light that gleamed in the rich cloth getting stronger and deeper like it was trying to shine them into taking on a life of they own. I started to feel sick again.

I must have stumbled cause Cal finally prised his eyes off the little Mademoiselle and turned back to me. He stuck out a hand and caught me under my arm as Clarabelle rushed forward and got hold of my other side. She had quite a grip for someone who looked like a dolly sprung to life. The smell got stronger, til it stopped seeming like a smell and became more a taste, bitter and charred in the roof of my mouth. I could feel bile rising up my throat, could hear Madame Anjou cawing about foul weather, wet clothes. I felt like I couldn't get no air into my lungs, no matter how hard I tried. Eventually my knees went and my eyes flushed over red, then black and down I went.

I dreamed I'd been there before, that I'd walked about that hall, that kitchen, had heard my own footsteps ring out in that echoing ballroom, full of the dark faces of maids who would never get to dance in it. I felt small. I was sweating. Everybody in the city was always sweating; they fanned and powdered theyselves to pretend they didn't, to pretend they was something other than people doing as people do, white folks pretending they warn't of the same bodies as the blacks that toiled for them. I liked it. I remember my mamma sweating. It made her look like she was made of honey.

She warn't black, but then she warn't white either. I don't know what she was, officially. New Orleans' rules on color was more patchwork than most places. Her skin was rust in winter, bronze in summer and all kinds of things in-between. I don't remember her real name either; I'm not sure I ever knew it. Some of the men called her Cinnamon, or Miss Chicory, but behind closed doors she laughed at them and wondered on why men had to name everything, even things that warn't theirs, that they didn't understand none. I don't remember her face perfect either; she more a shimmer than a set of eyes, a nose, a jaw, Cal, see, he got a tintype of his Ma and Pa. When he showed it to me I remember wondering how two such dried up, hollow-faced people managed to make the blond bear cub of a boy stood in front of their legs. But there they are, one of each. Ma and Pa. He warn't wearing no necklace then.

My childhood was more a shadow box of sights, sounds, smells and work than a picture you can hold in your own hands and say one add one makes three. It warn't pretty but chillun ain't ones to judge and I didn't know no better. We lived mostly in a room off the dock near Levee; one room, two

cot beds, metal ones at first til they rusted out and we got wooden replacements hammered together by one of the men that called and kept on calling. Dockers, traders, mostly white though she'd take black if she knew no-one had seen them, and they swore not to tell. Not always rough men. She was a Louisiana beauty. Wealthy to-dos would sometimes stop her in the street, even with me dangling on her hand, and ask if they might call after her. She told them where. They'd stroll off as if they'd never set eyes on her and show up later with a bottle and a fistful of coins. I'd get shooed on out to entertain myself. Sometimes they'd bring a piece of fruit or sugared almonds for me, or at least she always gave such things to me after they'd hitched britches and left. Them men gave me a sweet tooth.

So I was raised around a collection of men, slaves and servants with skin the color of midnight, leather-necked, whiskered dock workers, peacocks in fine waistcoats and tall boots; they all came and went. Being as they'd near all been with her, and I could have been of anyone's making, the men round the dock toted me round like a stray dog no-one could bear to kick away; they carried it on when she died. No-one told me what happened. They just hoisted her out of the water where sea met jetty and took her off to the cemetery. I missed her honey hands, her smell, rum and sugar and sweat, the way she'd thumb my cheek when she found me in the street, playing on some stack of crates that needed loading, the way she threw our only blanket over me at night. Though the city was warm and close as a miner's armpit in the day, living by the water brought damp chills to our door, specially when she had to leave it open a crack as a sign for them that was looking. I'd have to make myself as small and tight as I could to fit under that cloth. I still wake up like it sometimes, whichever way I fall asleep.

That was just how I woke that night in Madame Anjou's house, though in much finer sheets than I ever had as a boy. I'd knotted them about me and woke up startled, the covers tight around my chest. I thought for a second that I might have dreamt up Madame Anjou, Clarabelle, the girl on the rug, that they was the night-made conjurings of a man who's ridden too long and slept too little, and that me and Cal had found a bar, or a dosshouse to rest up at, like normal, like I'd wanted. I felt as if I was untwisting for a moment, but then I re-saw the lights flashing, the spinning, my hurtling backwards, the world stretching out of view til it disappeared. I reached out for my gun without thinking, my hand

grasping out in the dark for it, fingers searching underneath the cover on some slim chance I still had it, but I warn't in my own clothes. I cursed and there was a faint noise outside the door to the room, out in the hall. I held my breath, ears back, but silence was all I was left with.

Even in the dark, I could see I was in some plain little room, not much fancier than any saloon lodgings. My dusty eyes slowly scanned the shape of it, picking out what little furniture it held. One door, one window, from which I could hear the rain that still beat on the house; a bed; a chair, on which sat my clothes, folded neat in a square pile; a little stand of drawers so small and measly you'd feel a fool trying to fit anything of use into them. I half expected to see one of the Madame's footmen stood against a wall, gas lamp eyes still and shining. For all the finery she trussed them up in, they might as well have been furniture, there to gather dust. I know how it is to stand like that, to be so still that you almost stop drawing breath; to be caught unawares is dangerous, so you live in exhausting ever-readiness. Half the time I reckon masters make their servants wear such stiff old collars just so that they can be keeping their heads upright, keep them from nodding off. Nor have I ever figured why it takes two score and more bodies to keep one family alive and ticking over. Madame Anjou's servants made everything run like clockwork without leaving a fingerprint behind, in case she and them like her spot a human's touch. Like Connie's old boss. I wished again I'd had the guts to take her. She didn't belong here, no more than I felt I did. We was both made for the outdoors, for the clean, hard work of surviving by turning your hand to only that to do with keeping yourself honest, fed and peaceful. I let her wheel away from me towards toiling for them that ought to know better.

I stood, in the middle of that stark little room kicking myself again for thinking I was being upright in letting her go. We was both backwards about coming forward in that regard, being dictated to by a man that didn't know me and didn't care to know her beyond what and how quick she could clean, cook and keep right. I was young, and still thought then that some folks knew better than me just cause they had a smart job or money kept in banks rather than saddlebags. I knew enough though, enough to keep myself and a runaway. That was what scared her, that word. Runaway. Runaway meant dogs, blades, being made an example of. Connie had a deathly fear of that word. Any mutterings I made about taking off, picking up and going, leaving town, was met with 'I ain't being

no runaway.’ She always called a spade a spade and said changing the name of it didn’t change the spade no ways.

Thinking of her back then, out in that yard, growing hot little radishes that she’d pop into my mouth just to see my eyes water, sweeping up the day’s dust, I couldn’t even picture her in this city. But if that note was to be believed, she was here, maybe only a street or two from me. I got the urge to look out my window, to see if I could see anything that might give me some sense of her being out there, within reach. I tried to get out of bed as quiet as I could and tiptoed towards it. The curtains was half-drawn, the floor in between them coated in moonlight. I was shivering. My undersuits was always too big on me; they hung slack like I’d once been fat and my skin hadn’t figured I warn’t no more, and I’d only got scrawnier them last weeks. I slid behind the curtains, pulling the two halves together behind me as tight as I could. They smelled damp, like mold just starting to bloom. Together they made a pocket of cold air that poured down the back of my neck.

The moon was still green, still sat fat and glistening above. It seemed real close. It looked like a single frog’s egg, suspended, as if any second it might fall and burst onto the streets below, jelying the grand houses of the district, or like some black-tailed grub might tear its way free and swim in its own juice towards the Mississippi, to get fat in the river, leaving weeds and empty membrane still clinging to the sky. The damp air outside made it look like it was moving, like there was something squirming beneath that cloudy film.

My breath on the window made a patch of fog that got wider and wider with each small drag of my lungs. The glass was thin, uneven and pooling some at the bottom. I wiped at the prickles of water but that only smeared my view, so I jammed the window up, having to force my fingertips under the bottom of the frame to get it shifting. It skiddered its way to the top of its runners and I winced with every creak. The noise of the rain pouring down in front of me got much louder and a fine spray started to soak my front. I stuck my head back out the curtains into the dark of the room. A light appeared under my door and I heard one single footstep. Someone had their ear pressed up to it, listening to me. I was tempted to run up to it, to pull it open and see who fell through, but I caught movement out the corner of my eye, and withdrew my head back into the chill of the curtains. I was

high up, up on that very top floor. I felt a lurch in my stomach, as if them high ceilings my feet was stood on shifted, pushing me higher, til it felt like me and the moon was eye to eye.

There was a small courtyard below with stable boxes sat round its perimeter, and one lamp burning lonely on the side of a closed gate at the far end that looked like it led onto the drive. The yellow glow fell upon the black ironwork and set it shining as it slid into the patterns of the metal. A head stuck out of one of the far boxes, steam falling out its nose and feathering off into the night. Camel. He was looking at something, hanging his head over his open door as far as it'd stretch. Why they'd not closed the top half in this storm was anybody's guess, but I was glad that I'd set my eyes on him and he'd come to no mischief. Rain ran down his nose. He had his ears back still but that warn't unusual for him. I clicked and jeed, quiet at first to see if he'd hear me over the rain and the other sleepy noises of the stable block. That didn't work, so I called him. He looked up at me and snorted.

A figure in a hooded black slicker appeared beneath me, stepping slowly into the yard and into my view like it had crossed through the house walls and materialized in the rain. The coach driver. He walked solemnly over to Camel, who kept on looking at me until the great, cloaked figure reached him. Two hands took his long shaggy head and held it tight and still in front of the cowled shape where a face should have been. Even from that height I could see Camel's skin ripple, water spraying off him in a fine mist. His ears shot flat back til they was arrow points against his head, and the whites of his eyes doubled in size, flashing up at me in the dark. The hood turned slowly, following the horse's line of sight.

I ducked down inside the curtains, near losing my footing. I had to hang tight onto the bottom of them to keep me from falling, my hands twisting round the damp, weighty fabric. I tipped there a second, the thick, old curtain rod above complaining at the added weight. I slowly pushed myself back up onto my haunches, knowing, or almost knowing that someone would be stood staring up at me without eyes, as intently as the moon was staring down. The cold air that had taken up home down my back made me shiver. I steeled myself and peered back out the window from my spot on the floor. Camel's head was gone, leaving just a black space hanging over his box door. The gate was opening, pushed and pulled by two servants, heads bowed against the rain. A huge black horse was rearing in

the yard, front legs pumping like the connecting rods on a locomotive, frayed breath forced through its exposed teeth into the air as its cloaked rider loosed the reins and kicked it forward. Its hooves landed with a bell-like clatter onto the stone of the yard and lurched towards the open gate, the slicker flying out over its tail like a loosened shroud.

Someone moved again outside my room. I heard a cough, one not formed in the throat proper, as if whoever was out there was trying to hold it back. Trick of being quiet around folks all them years, in saloons, hotels, ranches, fields. You learned to tell what someone might be doing, how they might be acting, even when your eyes warn't on them. You got to smelling harm before it came. The door handle started to slide round slow and steady. Not having my gun felt like one of my limbs was missing. I felt my hand dropping to my side over and over, as if after a moment I'd forget it warn't there and my brain felt I should try again. I scuttled over so I'd be behind the door as it opened, hidden at least for a moment from whoever was on the other side. It swung to, and heavy steps moved forward, like clock weights falling in a house holding its breath. The middle of the curtains was sucked outward through the window. Rain rushed through the gap onto the floor like the storm was drumming its fingers, and I watched helpless as the barrel of my own gun slid round the in-turned door and snaked into the dark of the room.

The tall, square-shouldered shape of Henri stepped out in front of me, as if he knew where I'd be hiding up. The room was close to pitch dark, but I could make out the wide cheekbones, sketched out in the night so symmetrical it was as if he'd been made on a printing press; they sat holding up luminous, sombre eyes. Without speaking he quietly shut the door, handed me my gun, and crossed over to the window. He drew the curtains back, and the night sky picked him out in soft green light, that livery of his making him look like a great fly caught buzzing against the frame. More rain spat into the room again, and he bowed his head against it and closed the window with the same painful screech it had opened with. I worried we'd wake the whole house, but we both stood, silent, when he'd drawn the curtains again, and listened. The only thing we could hear was the shallow breath of each other, the clammy air of that pokey bedroom barely skimming the surface of our lungs before we let it leave us again. The house didn't stir. He reached inside his jacket, and produced an envelope and

another candle, his head bowed. I asked him who gave them to him, who had dragged him into tormenting me, but he pressed them both into my cold hands and left me without speaking, his pained expression never once changing, like his cheeks was doing they best to keep words in his mouth he knew would prove dangerous if they escaped. I didn't even hear his footsteps as he moved down the landing and away.

Alone with that envelope, I wished he hadn't gone. It was just like the others; I could feel the thick, waxy paper, already crumpled, the warmth of Henri's body lingering in it. They was something solid inside it, something thicker than hair, or a ring, something long and thin and hard. I sat down on the bed, stealing myself to open it. I slid the top open, and it folded back like skin peeling from a burst blister. I tipped it up, and what I'd been afraid of fell out onto my open palm. A finger, blackening, cut off above the bottom knuckle. The cut was clean, the bone that poked out the end of the retracted flesh pale and blunt ended. Round the base was the imprint of a ring. Without even thinking, I retrieved mine, Connie's, where it sat in its own envelope against my chest. I slid it over the top of the finger, and though the skin had shrunken some in death, it was still near a perfect match. I put both back into the envelope, having seen enough.

They was something else in there too, another note it seemed, folded up into a small square, and a card. I tugged both carefully out onto my palm. The paper was eyelid thin, and I had to peel it back between forefinger and thumb to avoid tearing it. I couldn't see it clear in the dark, so I took it back over to the window, wanting to avoid lighting that candle. Drawing the curtains again, I let the scanty night light fall on it as it sat flat on my palm. It was scarce any easier to read but I just about managed. It warn't a note at all, in fact, but a small, tattered advertisement for a show called 'Brampton's Museum on Wheels.' Judging from the state of the flyer, it warn't a recent entertainment. Underneath the header was drawings of people, the acts you could see at this two-bit fair. In the middle was a Tall Man; he took up near the whole length of the paper, legs and arms as thin and long as the bandy old cypress trees that lined the swamps we'd passed through. Next to him was a fat woman, who was drawn real crude, no more than a circle with a face; on the other side was a fella with no legs. There was also a young, blond boy, drawn in profile with his gun out. Underneath him it said *See the*

sensational young marksman Cal Davies perform trick shots and other feats of daring and skill in our arena. He has to be seen to be believed.

I did a double take. Cal had never told me he worked at no freak show, but the drawing looked like him well enough and that was his name, right there. He'd had more time spent on his likeness than the poor fat woman, clearly; the artist had even got the look he had on his face when he had a gun in his hand down to a tee, the way he sort of grimaced, eye tooth poking out from his top lip just a fraction. The card was rougher and thicker, and featured only one face under the same heading as the little poster. It was a mean little drawing of a woman with a squat, scaly snout, sat under black eyes and a mass of black wavy hair. *The fearsome Alligator Woman, read the caption, discovered by fishermen in the swamps of Louisiana, brought to Alabama for your wonder and amazement.*

I stood, numb, petrified, in the hollowed-out space by that rheumy window. That settled it, settled my guts, my shakes, settled it all. Cal knew something; he knew something and he warn't letting on. I tried to will myself to rage, to feel the anger that my brain rightly told me I should feel, to summon up more from myself than two imprints on the advertisement where my thumbs had clamped down on it. But all there was was a strange stillness, like my insides had righted themselves after weeks of discombobulation, like a boat spat out from a storm onto calmer, clearer waters. I wanted righteousness, fury, to see my hands round Cal's throat like I'd seen his round others, alive with a violence caused by nothing more than a drifting eye, or a stacked poker deck. I wanted that so badly, but it didn't come, and in the end, all I could think about was how he could help me get to Connie, with this new clue hanging over him. I wanted anger, but I needed information. I needed to find him, to ask him what that advertisement meant. If he hadn't headed west when he'd left Texas, if he'd got involved with someone or something that was now coming back to bite him, to bite us, I needed to know, even if I had to open every damn door in this house trying to find him.

I gathered everything up and got dressed. The feel of that finger near my skin made me cringe and ache at the same time; it was part of Connie, or had been, but now sat dead and dying still, poking at me, accusing me. I shut the door to my room behind me so that no-one would easily notice my escape and set about looking for Cal. I moved round the un-lit mansion as light as I could, trying to spread

my weight so the floorboards didn't creak, my gun back in my hand. I tried the couple of small doors I came across as I padded down the hallway, but they were all locked and all I heard when I pressed my ear to them was silence. Even in his sleep, Cal was rarely silent. I reached the stairs and stuck my nose out over the bannister. The whole house seemed to loom out beneath me, stretching in its silence like it slept, but only lightly. I set on creeping downward, holding my breath so long I started up feeling dizzy again. On the next floor down, I spotted a yellow line of lamplight escaping from underneath a door at the end of the hall to my left. I froze; sure enough, footsteps, quick and feline, scampered towards me from inside that room. I darted behind the side of a dresser just deep enough to hide me as the door opened and the light reached out into the hall.

'Mr Davies?' Clarabelle's voice chimed quietly out onto the landing like the rain that had fallen through my window.

'Mr Davies, are you playing with me?' she asked again, all coy and sing song. The dresser wasn't quite flush with the wall, and I could just about spy her through the gap. She was in night clothes – frilly pale drawers that made it look as if she'd been rolling around in peaches and meringue – but her hair was still pinned, still perfect. Her face was in shadow but from the way her head moved it was clear she was searching the corridor for signs of life.

'Cal?' she asked, pouty and impatient this time. She certainly was to Cal's taste: pink, blonde, plump, and silly with it. She was the sort of girl that was like eating too many mint candies: good while you're at it, then an aching jaw to suffer later and the promise to yourself that you wouldn't get to be so greedy again. Of course, you would be. I seen them in every town and city from Louisiana to California. Cal saw them too; Cal bit. She withdrew her sugared head with an irritated little stomp and shut the door. The light dimmed to near nothing.

I got moving again, finding every door locked to me, every room silent, until I reached the ground floor. Silent streams of moonlight came from the uncovered windows high above me, reminding me I was alone, stalking about when others walk in dreams. The silence of these small hours, the blue loneliness of night, they made it feel like I was sinking to the bottom of a very deep lake. I could have been, stood in the weighty stillness of that entrance hall. Dust and nightbugs floated and span in the air under the gleaming shafts that tumbled noiselessly to the floor.

I stepped light as I could, almost sliding my way around. I tried a door, locked; another, locked again. I tried to remember from the tour where they led, but I couldn't recall, and started to wish I'd listened up. I found myself wondering what kind of person locks up the body of the house, pens it in, to exist only in the hollows and attics of its innards. I heard footsteps again, somewhere upstairs, deadened by carpet. I crept back across that gloomy hall and up the staircase, remembering a room I hadn't tried as they'd be no reason at all for Cal to be in it. The ballroom door swung inward without my barely touching it.

I half expected to see Madame Anjou's staff still at work but there wasn't a soul in front of me. In the middle of the room sat another candle, lit, burning its way towards the fine rug that girl had been cast away on earlier. I crossed the floor and snatched it up before it caught and the whole house went up. I used it to look around the room, keeping it as far from me as I could, and searched behind the drawn curtains, the garlands of flowers hung above them giving off their own heady scent that choked the vast, echoey room, but there was no-one there. The contents of the envelope Henri had given me still sat heavy against my chest. Cal's movements, Cal's faces from the past couple of days conjured themselves up in my thoughts like I suddenly had Ensign Lincoln's zoetrope for a skull. The Texan had tried to keep apart from me, to slow us down, to distract me, and when he couldn't do that he had watched me, studied me with narrow eyes as we made our way over rivers, through valleys, closer and closer to something he wanted to forget. He knew that woman, somehow. And she knew where Connie was, and was leading me to her piece by piece.

I wanted to go outside, to see if any windows were still lit. I left the ballroom, the still-warm candle in hand, and skidded back down the stairs, no longer caring if I woke people or not. I pulled open the great front door, and it swung towards me, groaning as rain fell onto the polished floor once again. There she was, that spawning moon, still sitting and watching and waiting to hatch. I ran down the porch steps and turned right down a path that ran round to the side of the house. I turned a corner and peered in the nearest window, where a sole taper was still burning. Tables, a sink, a stove. The cook was asleep on a pallet on the floor, pots and pans and molds littered about him like he'd fallen asleep between making courses. I thought about tapping on the window and waking him but something held me back. Henri was trustworthy I reckoned but I didn't know anybody else. They could all be so

fearsome afraid of their mistress they might go running to tell her I'd sneezed. I walked on, following the dirt path round the kitchen. It was dotted with stone rounds, between a foot and a stride's length apart and treading on them was like I was hopping over water not soil, the ground was so sodden. The stones pushed the mud down as I put my weight on them and it sucked up about their rims. The air was wet dirt, pollen, the cloying scent of flowers. I turned the next corner and found myself at the back of the house, at the edge of another garden just like that at the front.

I could see a few rows of strange plants and grasses set in what looked like no particular order, but that was as far as the moonlight carried. There was no way of telling how far back it went. Everything was heavy with water, petals and stems drooping under the gorge of rain they were sucking in. I couldn't tell what colors they were; the night sky rendered them all different shades, waxy and quivering in the dark. The only thing I recognized was two lines of tall palms, which ran down each side of a central path. Their serrated leaves slid against each other, a smooth, constant wave like the legs of a millipede on the move. I turned my back to them as I inspected the back of the house, but no light burned through any of the shuttered windows, no signs I could read as to where Cal might be. I heard a low snort off to my left, and remembered the stables sat round the other end of the house, then something else caught my ear.

A slow tune hummed into the dark turned to a sharp giggle, then back again. The song floated up out of the garden to meet me, forlorn, like cold stars made of sound, cut through by a whip-like laugh that came at you sudden. I started to pick my way down past the palms, sticking to the path at first, pistol up, feet light. Soon as I started up moving the singing stopped. The garden listened to me creep into its insides, my feet shaking water from fat petals and getting stuck on woody roots I couldn't see beneath me. I moved slow, waiting for the moon to show up whoever was keeping me company.

It wasn't cold but the water seeping out the ground gave me chills that traveled up from the soles of my feet, like ice crystallizing up my legs and out round the curve of my arms as I held my gun out. I half expected to see the shape of my breath appear in front of me. The warmth of the city night felt like it was retreating, leaving me alone in the spread of hungry blooms and unfurled leaves.

I heard a match scratch fire into life and there she was, stood between rows of waist level rosebushes. She lit the candle in the lantern that dangled from the fingertips of her left hand then held

it up to her still covered face, washing her in lilac-colored light, storm rain flattening her hair against her head, eyes open and still. I aimed at her, something more a noise than a word coming out my throat, but she turned from from me without acknowledging my presence and walked further into the dark, the candlelight dying into smoke, leaving her just a gray, shadowy outline I tried to follow. She moved quick, her cloak floating along behind her despite the water that clung to it, but she sang all the while, and made this strange chirrup sound, a click, the noise of baby lizards when they break free of they eggs, as if to keep me on the right trail, and we wound further into the lines of bushes. I'd catch sight of her as I turned corners, ran along beds to keep up, then lose her again, with nothing but indecipherable sounds and the pendulous notes of some old, sad song to chase. There was no more laughing.

I eventually tumbled out into the line of palms once more, and the singing died abruptly, replaced by slow, deliberate footsteps as she stepped up behind me. I turned, and looked up at her, for it was clear at that short distance she bested my height by a good few inches. Even in the dark, I could tell her face was twisted up into a grin underneath that silk. It poured out her black lacquer eyes. I couldn't think what to do cept for stop in front of her, gun firm in her direction. Her cloak shone like Madame Anjou's beads, but was smooth as a sheet of black snow. Her hand crept out of it, only this time it held a rifle rather than a lantern. I dropped the candle I'd found on the ballroom floor as I made to bring my gun around, and she watched it roll towards her and extinguish, indifferent. When she looked back up, she tipped her head, watching the space just behind me. Something heavy as lead lumped into the back of my head and I swear I heard my own skull crack as I heeled sideways, my neck lolling forward away from my spine. The sky and all its miserable clouds began to blur as I rolled to the floor and woman, mask and garden slid away like shadows from my eyes.

I woke up groaning, my eyes a bloodshot fog. I was touching something warm, and something was scratching my ears, the back of my neck. My head felt like someone had nailed a horse shoe to it. I felt hot breath pour over my face and velvet rub my hairline. Camel was above me, trying to snort some life back into my sprawled-out shape. I lay there a second, realising slowly I was in his stable

box, laid up on a generous heap of straw so as I couldn't feel the dirt beneath me. It was warm, still holding the heat of the horse. He was safe. The spook hadn't harmed him. I tugged myself up, using his bony legs for support, hoof by knee by hock. He took my weight, and let me right myself.

He was a little blurry, but it was sure good to see his face, baleful as always. He let me take it in my hands. I wanted to replace the touch of that ghoul with the print of my own fingers, put my forehead on his and tell him as such. For some foolish reason, I felt guilty I didn't have nothing for him. I warnt one for indulging nobody, my horse included, and certainly not the way Cal fussed over Jim, like Jim was a fine young lady who need primping and schooling for her first season, but right then I'd have given a hundred bucks for a handful of sugar cubes. I grabbed him a handful of hay out of his feeder. My hat was perched neat on a peg next to it.

I didn't reckon I'd dragged myself into his stall, but I couldn't figure how else I'd got there neither. I didn't even know how to get to the stable block. Warn't no good asking Camel. He'd got a mouthful of chomp and was wondering why I was making such a fuss over his gangly self.

'Good morning.' Henri's face appeared over the open stable door, wreathed in blanching morning light. He was dripping with rain still and looking at his sodden coat I reckoned he'd been out and about for a while. 'Soon as I got you in that box and lumped some of his bed about you he laid right down and set to warming you up.' I realised it was the first time I'd heard Henri speak. His voice was soft, careful, the way he moved made into sound. His broad, handsome face, the color of ripe olive, watched me as I rubbed at my eyes, willing them to get back into full focus.

'First bit of charity Camel's ever given.' I gave the horse another pat about the neck and a second pull of hay. He took it then put his head in Henri's hands, which was calloused and paler than, while I pulled at my horse's ears.

'Camel.' Henri said his name back to him, like he meant to address him proper now they'd been formally introduced, then looked at me cockeyed as if to say why on earth.

'Best not to ask. So you put me in here?'

'I found you in the garden. I went to your room to check on you; when I found it empty I went looking for you. I couldn't wake you. You were so damp that throwing a pail of water over you wouldn't have worked either. What happened? Your head is black and blue.'

I told him about the lady singing in the garden, about being beat over the head.

‘She did not hit you?’

‘No, she was picking flowers. She wears a mask.’ Henri’s fine face became draped with further worries, and he looked about himself as if she might appear in the thin daylight that crept through the doused air, sipping coffee through the silk that covered her face. I was a second away from telling him everything, about Connie and Cal and the trip, that the woman had followed us here. Something told me Henri would get it, would understand, could maybe even help, but he cut me off.

‘They are all about to sit down for breakfast now. You should get on up to your room to clean up, or Madame will be getting ideas. Go around the front of the house, through the kitchen. She likes to look out over the rear garden before eating.’

I managed to get to the breakfast table without anyone noticing my movements, cepting the girl from the rug – she was down on her hands and knees again, cleaning the front steps. She spotted me skirting round the side of the house. I mouthed morning at her, and she looked at me wide-eyed, then got hastily back to her bowl and brush. When I clocked myself half-reflected in a window, I could see why – I was caked in mud and straw and grass that ran half my up to my ass. I slid my filthy boots off and carried them upstairs tried to get the worst of the muck off and wash my sorry face before heading downstairs again for breakfast. My stomach ached. We hadn’t eaten in a day, and if I was growling then Cal was probably ready to ransack the kitchen.

He was sat with Mrs Anjou and Clarabelle at the fanciest breakfast table I reckoned I’ve ever been a guest at. I followed the sound of his voice, loud and robust in the muted confines of a house waking, to a dainty room on the middle floor, full of light and the polite ring of china cups and polished servers being used. He looked like a full-size human trying to sit in the breakfast room of a dollhouse. I walked in sheepish and mumbled an apology for my lateness, very aware of the dirt that lingered round my neck, the soil and horse grease that blackened my finger nails. Food I didn’t even recognise lay before us, heaped in bowls and on platters and plates with shining silver spoons and little forks, so small they made my hands look sizeable. They made Cal look like he was trying to stab a pig with a toothpick. Then came the best-smelling coffee, the best-tasting coffee, I reckoned man could make, so

rich I could only take two gulps before I had to put my cup down for fear it was making me giddy. Even I had to quit thinking on Madame Anjou and this sneaky house a moment while I let that sit on my tongue. Was like a night's sleep packed into a mouthful. The delicate airiness of that little parlor felt so different to the rest of the house and garden that I almost relaxed, then I noticed big showy bunches of flowers from the garden had been brought in and set in crystal vases about the room, lilac and orange and pink, decorated with dismembered palm fronds. Cut, their strong powdery perfume started to spread. I took up my coffee again and kept it close under my nose.

Cal said under his breath that my eyes was like coal smoke, asked where I'd got to this morning. He said that he'd knocked on my door before going down and got no response from within. Madame Anjou cut in.

'Yes, I had a servant call on you this morning, Mr Farmer, but he found an empty bed...' She sat looking at me across the table like a dog looking at something, trying to figure out if it should eat it or not. Luckily, I found a piece of straw stuck to my boot. I twisted it in my fingers.

'I went to check on our horses. I half worried they'd die of shock at being housed in such fine quarters as you've got here.' Madame Anjou carried on staring and I worried I was squirming on my fancy hand-carved chair.

'I apologise, I didn't think. I shouldn't be going messing about in stables before coming to sit at such a fine table. My manners ain't much better than the horses' in that regard.'

Still she stared. Cal laughed though, said warn't I right – the horses probably thought they'd died and gone to heaven, thinking on some of the poke-holes we'd stayed in over the years.

Clarabelle was staring at him the whole time in cow-eyed adorations, head in her hands, eyelashes still fluttering like a pair of flies sat in cahoots above her nose. Do tell us more Mr Davies, please eat up more of the ham, Mr Davies, wouldn't you like some eggs, Mr Davies. Cal was eating like he never seen food before. To be fair, he hadn't seen anything like the likes of that meal. Everything glistened: butter, meat, cream, milk, fruit – it all shined like the waxed floor below and the glass chandelier above; like the red silk that adorned the Madame's dress that day, an ox-blood color that jarred against the white table linen, so crisp it almost hurt my eyes to look at it; like the miniature polished forks. I remembered seeing Clarabelle that night, hanging out her door like she was waiting

for the next express to Atlanta. She hadn't looked so lamb-like then. She laughed, a tinkly little laugh that matched the tinkly little eating irons and stretched her arms out over the table towards him.

'I slept so well last night I don't think I'll ever need another wink.'

I had to stop myself blurting out 'Did you now?' soon as the words formed in my mouth. I choked them back and coffee fell from my mouth onto the alabaster table cloth. Clarabelle's face fell and she looked keen at me, the tiny piece of ham she was about to eat skewered and hanging in mid-air on her fork, momentarily forgotten. Cal kicked me under the table. I quickly averted my attention back to my coffee, swilling its creamy contents round, trying to ignore the dark stain I'd made on the finery in front of me.

'Forgive us ladies, we've been on the road so long we ain't sure which town we left our manners at.'

The Madame fixed her eyes on me again. I watched her from under my eyebrows. She drummed her fingers on the table, one, two, three, four, five, one, two. Clarabelle remembered her ham and stabbed up a piece of egg to join it. The tines pierced the quivering white and screeched along the china, the sound of the metal on the pale plate reminding me of what sat against my chest, that metal had scraped across the bone of Connie's finger when it was cut off. I could hear Clarabelle chew, though most of the food was so good you didn't need teeth to eat it, and I began to feel delicate again. The room was so quiet you could catch gulls screeching their wake-up cries outside, telling fishermen to haul ass and catch, and hear the fresh baked rolls on the table continue to crack and flake though they was a while out the oven. The cordial mask returned to Madame Anjou's face, easy as blinking.

'If you like I'll have Henri fetch you some fresh coffee to drink while you dress. I hope you gentlemen have eaten enough, I'm sure you must have been famished after the journey you've had. Please do take the rest of the morning to relax, use the house as your own. I have some last-minute preparations to complete for our little ball this evening – I'm having suits made up for you, I hope you don't mind. It's no trouble, no trouble at all. We shall all set out for the race at three. Clarabelle...'

The two women stood, and the mother flounced out the door, the daughter following sullenly behind. Then loudly, as a parting gesture, the older woman called to a servant outside and said in a tone so

haughty I could imagine her nose touching the ceiling she was clear pointing it so high, that my filthy boots were to be cleaned.

Cal and I sat at the empty and now slightly sorry looking breakfast table. It's only when all the food and finery is gone that you notice all the little stains and spills you didn't notice you produced, a smear of jam here, a heap of bread crumbs clotted with melting butter there, spreading across the white linen like sores on a pretty girl.

'What has happened to them boots of yours?' Cal asked me, him too looking at me as if I was a rat that'd just turned up in a kitchen. I looked down. They was still covered in straw and flower petals and god knows what else. I didn't reply, but watched him, wondering whether to just throw the contents of both envelopes onto his plate to confront him with his own secrets, or to see if he just chewed all up that too, the finger, the poster, as he tore off a fresh piece of baguette and gnawed it up like a bear does a fresh salmon now that the ladies had left. Henri came wordlessly into the room, followed by two more servants that set about clearing away some of the tableware. Sweat already pricked at their faces, and shadows sat under their eyes that looked like they grew with each step. Henri shuffled over to me head down, and I felt so ashamed and tired I stripped my boots off right then and walked in my socks back to my room without another word, leaving Cal to finish eating alone as they cleaned up around him.

I fell asleep. I hadn't meant to. With breakfast settling in my stomach, I'd calmed some, and I'd reckoned on speaking to Cal after I'd washed – someone had left a bowl of piping hot and crystal-clear water in my room with a cloth and soap that I made good use of, leaving the water dark brown and gritty when I was done. I laid the finger out on the bed; it was cold despite its nest of hair. I knew I couldn't keep it forever, but I couldn't throw it away neither, and sat looking at it and wondering again where she was, willing that small piece of flesh and bone to tell me somehow, to point the way. The effects of the coffee leached out of me, the frail sunlight that bothered my window not enough to keep my eyes from shutting. I was exhausted all of a sudden and slept cross-legged and bent-backed until a knock on the door told it was time to go.

I don't reckon I'd ever seen that many folks all in one place, all waiting to see the same thing now, and there was me not wanting no part of it but dragged along all the same. I was a bit of history that day, but did I care? Not a fucking dime. You could scarce move down by the river. We'd fought our way mounted through the crowds on the streets surrounding the docks; people was dawdling, talking, drinking, floating on down to the water like weeds in a tide and they was slow to part ways for the prissy little open carriage that Mrs Anjou and Clarabelle rode on up in. The number of folks, the drink and the lazy hour of late afternoon made all the poor working folks, servants, working girls, street brats and dockers easy on up, loosen their tongues, take up a swagger and not have no pushing and shoving from no fine and fancies wheeling about above them trying to cut in.

By the river, lines of people sat on the banks like crows on a roof line, heads twitching this way and that, taking it all in. The lines went back and back. They jostled and rearranged themselves, snaking round the river on both sides. We couldn't get the carriage down to the waterside, much to Madame Anjou's irritation, so the driver – not the cowled figure who hid hisself from us, but another servant, stiff and silent like the others - took it on back to the house after we'd hauled the women out of it. Henri took our horses back then returned on foot to our prime spot past Old Levee. The air stank of fuel and money. Dollars was changing hands so quick and so often you warn't sure who was supplying them all. Them that's good at sums and hindsight reckon millions were wagered over them few days. I was surprised the bank sides didn't fall and sink under the weight of all the coin pouring through pockets and fingers.

Men stood with boards and chalk, rewriting the odds every time some new rumour came from the crowds. And in the middle of it all sat two kings. Well, one at least, the Monarch of the Mississippi, the Robert E. Lee. Next to it was the Natchez. Two huge riverboat steamers, idling, waiting. Steam rose from they chimneys, and they frames groaned and shuddered, like two beasts slowly becoming aware of the presence of the other, taking it all in, working out an advantage. They shone, white teeth jutting out the mouth of the Mississippi, sat heavy in the foam and the ever forming and collapsing peaks of river water that licked their hulls and slipped against their still wheels. Neither had ever lost a race, but now they was racing each other, and despite the cheer and raucousness of them that swarmed

the docks that day, the black powdery smoke that escaped the tops of both vessels gave the impression that they was grinding their jaws under all that white paint and pretty flags.

The river was black under them giant, bone-colored ships and the clouds that tumbled and twisted over themselves in the wind couldn't settle on where they was headed. The sun was covered then made nude, over and over so that you was blinking in a yellow haze that flattened your vision, making you raise your hand to your eyes one minute, then strain to pick out details in the blunted grey that followed. It was furnace hot though, what with all them bodies breathing and sweating back to back and arm to arm. Folks was getting robbed to hell. I could see it. I had done it as a boy. You pick the busiest places, make it look like you's being jostled with the rest of them when you's really moving in such a way as to push things about so they fell out of pockets, to get little hands inside fine waistcoats. If you was real convincing you'd get your mark to be saying pardon for having bumped into you.

A little boy came kicking up dust round our party. He got unceremoniously pushed away by the Madame with the point of her parasol and fell over in front of me. I picked him up and held him by his arms. I was going to give him a quarter and tell him to cut along, so as he could stop robbing pockets and actually watch the race if he liked, but Cal beat me to it. He must have seemed enormous to this little street crab, who looked like he'd blow away quicker than spilt tobacco and was twice as hard to keep a hold of. Making sure Clarabelle was watching him, Cal bent over and held out the coin in front of the boy's face. Its dull metal reflected in the dusty whites of the kid's eyes.

'You can take it, boy; it's yours if you give up those tricks of yours today.' He winked at the kid, whose bug-leg fingers closed round the quarter one by one. He didn't run, though. Instead he studied Cal as the Texan withdrew back to his full height. He wiggled free of my grip and took out his pocket a scrunched-up piece of paper about as brown and grimy as his skin. I studied it over his shoulder. It was full of holes, held together by the ink printed on it, but just about there still was a picture of a man towering over the little folks about him. His torso was a tear, as was his legs, but his gun belt held them two gaps together. The ink was smudged; you could see little finger prints had smeared it and left little whorls, so it looked like Cal had on a real fancy coat when the original had just been dun. I took it from the boy to show Cal, but the kid snatched it back like I'd robbed him of his supper and shot off past our legs and into the crowd again. The image was a mimic of the Cal that held out his

gun in perpetuity on the poster I carried with me still, only the face was a little older, a little sharper about the edges.

‘I need to talk with you.’

‘Can’t it wait John, we’re watching the race.’

‘No - ’

The Madame was giving us them side eyes like we was showing her up, well, like I was showing her up. She beckoned Cal over, saying she meant to give him the low down on them two boats and their captains. What she really meant was she was gonna get Henri, who’d made it back sweating from the house without missing much, to do it for her. Clarabelle looped her arm through Cal’s, picked up some non-existent speck of something from his collar. He acted like he didn’t notice at first, knowing I was watching, but soon sure enough he was toting her about, pointing out things in the crowd. Henri started up explaining the race, with sharp prompts from Madame Anjou, what was what, who was who, with her repeating what he said every so often to make it seem like she was putting words in his mouth, not eating them up from out of it.

He pointed to each boat, head down, talking to his feet in that steady voice, woven through with tiredness. I got to thinking she never let him rest. Captain Canon, he took the Lee; Captain Leathers had the Natchez. These men was the hearts that sat in these floating ribcages. Leathers, he had a temper, a bit of spit to hisself. Canon, he more measured, more into thinking, to edging and seeing gains to be had, not grasping at victories he couldn’t picture. He’d cleared out his boat; anything not fixed down and absolutely necessary was on the bankside waiting to be shifted, windows, doors, people. Leathers, he was known for playing games – apparently, he liked to watch a boat go by, to give it a head start. Then, when he reckoned on it being far enough away, he’d pick up anchor and run it down, spraying it with great waves from his paddle wheel as the Natchez careered past. If it was a small boat and he could give the sailors a good soaking, well, more’s the better. He was also known to take off on a quick start. Not cheat, mind, but be more than nimble when it came to set off and manoeuvre his boat away from the moorings.

Henri pointed out a cluster of smaller boats sat hotchpotch behind the two racers at various points down the river. They were to carry passengers behind the big steamers so they could follow the action, though all I reckoned the view would be was two great big wheels churning the same brackish water over and over. The two captains near hated each other, Henri said, and couldn't resist the chance to pit their machines against each other, even though both had always denied such a race would ever happen. It was all due to go down at five. Leathers in the Natchez was the favourite, but you could hear folks chattering endlessly about which man was best, what qualities he had, previous wins, the engines, the fuel, everything down to their boots, like they actually was two pit dogs, evenly matched in bite and haunch and it could go any which way but Sunday. Just before the race was about to start, Henri quit his commentary and moved to stand behind his mistress without another word. She handed him her parasol and he held it stiff above her, his own head, bald and gleaming, exposed to the low, fierce sun that clawed through the cloud.

The heat was still heavy, paying no respect to the lateness of the afternoon. Sweat was running soaking into my hat band. Madame Anjou sat on her chair, brought down special for the occasion, like a mushroom turning, fleshy and pallid, her powdered face perched upon a bosom so hiked up by a too-tight bodice it had swallowed what little neck she had, her hoop skirt covering the chair legs while she fanned away the sweat that sat in the hollow under her sunken eyes. She waved to person after person, and occasionally made Henri run about with messages for people she spotted far off in the throng. Considering she had such mean little features, that woman could see as well as the best scout. Cal graciously offered to hold the parasol when Henri was sent off on these errands, returning each time more damp and tired and dishevelled. At first it made me laugh to see Cal stood there, Clarabelle welded to one side of him, beaded black parasol on the other, so small that it looked like a funeral bonnet someone had sat on a pole, hovering over this woman so small next to him she looked like an old dolly. Clarabelle near couldn't reach Cal's arm, and stood with her own stretching upward, dangling from him like a garland that's too meagre for the mantel it's bought for.

People was beginning to notice him. Eyes was bugging out from under caps and folks was whispering behind hands; some even pointed. I watched news of Cal's presence wash quick down the bankside, before he'd even noticed. Soon enough, the boy who Cal had sent running coin in hand

came back, pulling on the sleeve of a little fella even smaller than me. He was a shabby sort, shirt too small, pants too big, wispy hair plastered in clumps to his damp face. His head and eyes darted all about in different directions. The boy pulled him to a stop in front of us. I saw the kid was clutching not one but two quarter pieces so tight that the white of his knuckles showed under the skin. Soon as he parked his charge, he took one more look at Cal then ran off back to the river. The little man gave use all a long, slow look up and down without saying nothing and the Madame waved her hands at him, as if he was a lost dog to shoo away. He ignored her, reached inside his jacket with one hand and pulled out a little sheaf of paper and a pencil. Then he reached out his hand to Cal, head still twitching but eyes finally stalled in one place.

‘Mr Davies? Cal Davies? Teddy Ramone from *The Picayune*...’

Cal started, and disengaged himself from Clarabelle quick as he could – it took some doing, she was mighty reluctant to unclamp herself. Madame Anjou, all blousy smiles now, bustled forward to extend her fingers to this Mr Ramone of *The Picayune* before Cal could get there.

‘It certainly is. Mr Davies is staying with us; I am Madame Anjou, of Lafayette. This is my daughter, Clarabelle. You must have heard of us now.’ Clarabelle gave a curtsy so low I near thought that bodice of hers warn’t going to hold, but it stayed the course. The reporter must have worried too cause he followed Clarabelle’s chest all the way down then all the way back up again, til it was righted.

‘Delighted,’ he said, and looked like he meant it, his greasy face split by a waxing moon grin. Madame Anjou’s pleasure ran the whole width of her face, her teeth shining like pointed yellow pearls she might have stole from unsuspecting river oysters. Cal’s face twisted slightly at the corners at the way this Ramone looked at Clarabelle, but he held out his hand finally to the reporter, wiping it swiftly on the back of his pants when they’d shook. He started to speak when our host cut him off again.

‘The Anjous, *Maison des Fleurs*, on Chestnut. We’re hosting a ball tonight to toast this wonderful event. Mr Davies will be there.’

Cal again tried to speak but his words was once again dampened had barely formed a word in his mouth when she did it again. ‘You must come of course, Mr – ’ She looked him up and down this time, her smile flattening into a tin-lipped grimace before it disappeared completely; he was grubby about the edges and paunched about the waist and neck as reporters so often are, too much time spent tapping out other folks’ business on typewriters slick with finger-oil and smeared ink.

‘Ramone,’ he said, his eyes still struggling to leave Clarabelle, who was fanning herself something silly now she warn’t attached to the Texan.

‘Quite,’ said the Madame, unimpressed. ‘Well, we’d be delighted if you would could make it. Perhaps you could even report on it, for your little paper.’ She was talking like she was forcing the words out sideways and all the while he was scribbling, eyes going from Cal to Clarabelle’s chest to Cal to his paper and back again. They was damp brown marks on the sides and back of the pad from his sweaty paws. He asked Cal some more questions, each one answered by the Madame, like she’d taken up roost in Cal’s mouth. Cal was looking more and more like he was about to hit someone, the Madame or Teddy Ramone, I couldn’t decide, with every new answer he didn’t get to offer. Finally, when asked if he had a favourite to win, Cal beat her to it.

‘It would be ungracious of me not to say the favourite. Leathers to win. In fact, I’ll stake on it.’

‘Leathers.’ Ramone wrote this last word with a flourish and signed off his notes by stabbing at the paper with his pencil, still looking at Clarabelle, who was doing a poor job of pretending not to notice. ‘Very good, Mr Davies. I must head back to the ships now but I shall, of course, be in attendance later, thank you Madame for the invitation. Who’s this, if I may ask?’ He pointed his pencil at me.

‘His valet,’ said Madame Anjou. Cal laughed, and I felt like kicking that little chair right out from under her. Mr Ramone didn’t bother writing that down but nodded and turned heel before either of us could correct him. The Madame caught my eye, and I caught a glimpse of that venomous little smile just before she situated herself back under that parasol like a fat pigeon bedding down to watch the world and did not pay me further notice. Henri stood straight-backed and sweating all the while, like an untended candle, left to pool and disappear as it burns.

I had to get Cal away from them women. I crowbarred him from between them, saying I was wanting to make a bet too, on Canon just to see which out of the pair of us would come right in the end. In truth, I did want a small slice of the day, which even I could see after standing there a while was something to see indeed. Folks was so excited they was dizzy, pockets so stuffed with dollars if you pushed folks into the river they'd sink and drown before they could unburden themselves.

Madame Anjou had called after us, saying she was anxious that we'd miss seeing the start of the race, but she was looking all about her as if trying to see something deep in the crowds and she sent Henri off on some new engagement rather urgent just as we walked off, a pained look on his gleaming face. We got to a fella with a board, ready to place our bets. The odds was now even less favourable for the Lee. Even then, when I'd got Cal in front of me, alone and unwatched, I was still trying to think of how to be angry, how to conjure my rage back up and aim it right, now that the person I was aiming it at warn't no two-bit thief or bar-brawl murderer, but my friend, someone I'd put trust in. I didn't know how to tease out answers; we'd just shoot them out, or leave them lying, unneeded, in a bullet-holed body. Why had he let us fall into the Anjou's nonsense, pulling me down with him? Why had he said he'd never been past the Mississippi, when he'd shot off rounds in Alabama for the amusement of paying crowds? Who was this black-haired, rifle-toting woman who stalked him with devil-eyes, like he was a lone horse and she a whole pack of wolves. And where the fuck was Connie, in the city, in all this? I was sure he knew.

He was talking non-stop bout the race, the showiness, Clarabelle being a piece of work like he half-hated, half-loved it all, and if you asked me some he was swinging roundly toward the latter of them two realms of feeling. The city had set up home in his eyes. Once it's there it's hard to turn out, I should know. It glittered there like gold does in a pan; one small speck of something shiny in a swill of wet dirt is still enough to get a man hooked.

I should have known that's when he'd come. That was when he'd raise up his head and make hisself known. You know how an alligator reveals hisself to you, from out the mud he's veiled in, piece by piece, inch by inch, making you think you got all the time in the world to get away from them teeth, then bang he on you even though you see it coming. That's how he appeared. An eye, a

set of leather covered fingers, a thick black foreleg with a blackened hoof, stepping high and slow through the crowd. I saw him out the side of my vision, and my guts told me I'd missed something.

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Appendix: *Tarnished*, continued.

A black hat, an arm bigger than my leg, clamped round something I couldn't make out. Pieces of him flashed through the crowd at me in that reptilian, belly-crawl way of his. The haze of cooked air and the tide of the crowds made him appear near one minute and distant the next. I couldn't tell how long I watched him, how long I swallowed him getting nearer and nearer like I was drowning but kept opening my mouth just the same. The crowd seemed not to touch him, like he moved through them, around them with no struggle. They made space for him, and he took it up. Engines had started, but I couldn't recall when; it was like the noise had always been there, a heavy, rolling chant, as if them ships were saying the same thing over and over but I couldn't make out what words they spoke. Three noises sounded all at once, a boat whistle, a starter pistol, an intake of breath by thousands of people. Then quiet, just for a second, liked they'd sucked all the air out of the day and all I could do was work my mouth try not to suffocate. Cal wacked my side; the fella with the board as waiting to take my bet but I couldn't even mutter an apology as I stepped away from them.

Blackjack moved into a gap that appeared in the throng north-east down the river; the beginning of the race caused the sea of people to shift and reform in new ways, but I could see him clear enough. He turned his horse round to face us. He had a black cloth across his face, but there warn't no mistaking him now. With one gloved hand, he pulled down the cloth and lifted his hat to me, grinning. The horse was sweating and frothing at the mouth, chewing its bit like it might it snap it in two; drifts of white foam and spit fell from its face and legs like spirits surfacing from shadowed walls. He replaced his hat and took a firmer hold of the unfortunate creature that sat locked in his arms. They was cowed, and slumped forward in front of him, over that horse's prow of a neck. He slowly started to pull the hood back, the cloth sliding downward to reveal coppery hair. He let the head fall back against him and wrapped his hand round the lolling neck below it. There she was, thin, ashen, her eyes half-open but glazed and milky, unseeing.

The boats were moving. I felt them, through the rumbling bankside, ploughing they way down to us like a river stampede. I stared straight ahead at Blackjack, making a puppet out of Connie and felt anchored, like someone had chained me to the bank. Part of me wanted to throw myself under them waterwheels as they passed. I saw the shape of something next to me, Cal's form appearing, his arm

rising, straightening, aiming into the crowd. Folks nearest to us flinched and shouted at the sight of the gun, but the crowd kept on coming, and I felt my own hand reaching out to halt his aim, felt the coiled muscles in his wrist as Blackjack wound his way slowly towards us.

The stew of people around us swarmed and subsided and swarmed again, inching their way along the river to follow the steamers taking chunks out of the Mississippi. The first white prow tore past where we was stood when Connie opened her eyes. She looked right at me, before the crowd lunged towards the bank and pushed her out my vision. The Lee had charged ahead, filling the air with the smell of fresh paint sweating and the heavy reek of engine oil.

'Is that her, John? John?' Cal was shouting next to me but I just held on to his wrist like it was somehow a part of my own arm. Folks trying to keep pace near swept us along with them. I bent and twisted and pushed back against the bodies hitting me, determined to find them again, to see them eyes open again, terrified, confused but unmistakably hers.

The charging shape of one ship was soon replaced by another, as the Natchez snapped after the Lee's tail, black smoke issuing from its chimney like bilge water out the top of a great whale, white pillars stiff and sharp like huge ribs containing the life in its hidden lungs. The crowd swarmed and cheered again, and I looked desperately for them, but they were gone, leaving just a strange hole, one that hung there for a moment or two before hundreds of pairs of feet refilled it in an instant. So I ran, ran to the nearest hitched-up horse. I didn't know where he'd taken her but I knew I had to get down that bank. I'd seen her, had my eyes on her, and couldn't think of nothing but reaching her now.

That was something, trying to ride through a mass of people all heading at you, riding over them that was sat down, or lying down drunk, round horses, traps, abandoned betting boards. I didn't notice whose horse I took, what sort it was. I just needed to move. I scanned the crowd ahead of me and found them again. I could see black hooves, hitting the ground, could see his horse's thick black legs picking up, floating along above the meat of its rump as it cut through the revellers. Folks just seemed to slip out their way, melt to one side or another out they path. It took me all my strength to get that unfamiliar horse pushed through the people about me. People seemed to step or fall in front of me and the horse reared and pulled back and skittered its feet as I kicked it on in desperation.

Rough, rum-soaked shouting chased me as I moved, but I didn't take it in. A glance behind me only gave me a mass of shuffling figures and the wheels of two river queens spinning so hard it looked like two geysers had erupted in the middle of the river. Water flew everywhere, soaking through the steam of the air and the heat of engines and bodies. Breathing was like sucking on a hot, wet rag.

As I moved further away from the boats, the crowd thinned, and I could see glimpses of black coattails flying out, of thin limbs being thrown and jolted in the saddle every time hoof struck ground. Seeing space ahead of it, the horse bolted, and I was soon flying through the small groups left on the north-east bank, the horse's hind legs bunched down under its rump, forelegs flailing forward and me trying to keep my seat in a saddle I hadn't fixed.

I expected Cal to pull up next to me any second, propelling another stolen horse along to catch me, but no-one joined my stride. Blackjack raised his pistol to the air and shots rang out. I remembered I'd never heard that massive gun of his fired; he'd never let off a round in Elgin. The fiery, metal bite of it broke the evening, and the few folks left at the end of the bank screamed and tipped out of our path. A steamer horn sounded, pushing deep-made air out over the water. The constant wet rattle of the boat wheels felt like they was setting the pace for my horse, for him, like we was wind-up toys that might carry on racing down that riverbank til our mechanisms cut out and we all ground to a stop.

He changed course and I overshot. In the time it took for all my horse's legs to lift clean off the ground he cut left. How that carriage sized horse carried him and Connie so quick I didn't know. You could see the force of its limbs, oiled pistons moving up and down without need for pause or breath. I forced my horse to pull up, and it reared and swung out on a new course. I could see her, under his arms, her head craned round all it could to catch sight of me. Her mouth formed words I couldn't hear. She was trying to get herself free of him but he held her body vice-like against him. I kicked on and he looked right round at me, grinning, like he could keep this up for days.

I was catching them though, and he was feet away from me. I watched them black hooves sail, all four off the ground again and again, that black tail and his coat flying out behind them like whips cracking the air, pushing me back. I was pulling up alongside them. Any moment now, I could reach

out and touch her. My hand stretched out to her and I leaned as far forward as I dared along that horse's neck. Her arm pushed out from under his bulk to meet me, and the tips of my fingers brushed hers but grabbed nothing more. He cut clean across me, forcing me to pull up sharp. My hands dragged the reins backwards, my horse wheeling around, its lungs whistling with every step. I kicked it forward again, desperate to get moving, but I was kicking on a hopeless thing.

Blackjack turned his head away from me, then aimed his pistol back towards me. He fired, without even looking at me, and I could hear Connie shriek. The bullet hit my horse right in the middle of the head; I felt its legs give and we went down, me sliding off the saddle just before I became trapped underneath it. I dragged myself up and stood, helpless, watching, as he took her from me, out of my reach again, and left me and that dead horse alone in a street I couldn't name.

I stood in the corner of the hall in the Anjou house, watching guest after guest arrive. I was being ignored after the evening's rampaging folks giving me the squints as if I'd gone off shooting at the steamers or some other folly, rather than at a kidnapper back from the dead. Henri had found me, and we dragged that stolen horse off to one side of the road, not knowing what else to do with it. He said he would smooth over any difficulties that might come up regarding me thieving it. Madame Anjou's money talked big, he said. I suppose I should have been grateful for that but I warn't. Instead, I was stuck wearing an oversize powder blue frock jacket that had frills on the sleeves and a flouncy white shirt that drowned me. I hadn't seen hide nor hair of Cal until I'd been turfed out of my room for the ball. He was equally turned out, but they'd got him something that fit him like a second skin, white jacket with gold buttons that Clarabelle had said, over and over like she just couldn't quit with the splendour of it, set off his hair so well. He was near covered in pomade and someone that warn't me had polished his guns so that, slung about his hips, they attracted the eyes of every lady in attendance and the envy of the peacocking men, young and old enough to know better, that escorted them to this nonsense.

I'd lost count as to how many had come through them doors already. They milled and jostled, crinolines rustling and paper fans beating all the while to keep the paint from falling off they faces,

filling up the hall, the parlour, the front lawn as some strolled round the strange flowers, under the palm awnings. Lanterns had been placed down the drive and in different spots amongst the beds, so it looked like the garden was covered in little round balls of light, as if the moon had finally split open and laid a hundred gleaming eggs on the grass, a hundred glowing things.

The women were a garden themselves, in frocks of pale blues, pinks, sickly looking yellows, frills and hems and gauzy lace, floating and dripping about, the men caught in their tendrils, hopeless to do anything but flow and settle where their partners or mothers did. Only a few had escaped, or come unattached, and they smoked cigars and declined the tiny crystal glasses of wine and champagne on offer for fingers of bourbon.

The house was equally ornamented. The chandeliers were lit and cast a brilliant glow down onto them below, they twists throwing vine-like shadows along the walls and floor. Each time a door opened, and the air made the flames flicker, the vines twisted and grew out in new directions for a moment before shrinking back to their original resides. The Madame had had great planters brought in, overflowing with blooms from the garden. They gave off such a heavy scent that it made it difficult to breathe clear alongside the heat of bodies and candles; creamy white and squarely made, these warn't the noxious ones that had been delivered to me one by one.

Cal was being rolled out like a new toy; the Madame and her daughter barely left his side, the latter locked onto his arm like he'd grown a second head out his elbow. She was talking, giggling, fawning about like she'd never been near a man. Madame Anjou was loudly stating what a fine couple they looked. Cal seemed to be ignoring such proclamations, taking every chance he got to talk about his guns and the boats, and drinking whatever passed him by in them ridiculously small glasses. He was also ignoring me.

I had to hand it to her, the spread she'd put on was painful fancy. Tables of cured meats, fruit, shrimp, shrimp everywhere. They must not have been any left in the rivers to look at the craws, sauced up every which way, laying lifeless on them silver trays. You couldn't go a moment without hearing someone crack a shell apart. They was iced creams too, and flavoured ice chips. Henri had told me the chef made the best ices in the city. The colors near matched the dresses the ladies wore or the flowers that covered the hall, bright balls of sweetness that folks scooped out of crystal bowls with

tiny silver spoons. The chink of glass and the crunch of ice, the snap of shrimp flesh, all mixed in with the chatter and the string piece band that played with they noses in the air in the ballroom, songs I didn't know, notes drifting down the stairs.

I was waiting. I kept pulling at the frills of my jacket, dying to take it off in the heat of this city within a city, but I'd only get more snake-eyed looks from our host if I dared touch it. She'd not spoken to a word me since I'd ridden off. Instructions had been relayed through Henri, who'd got me back to the house and up to my room. I kept saying to myself it was the horse, dying under me, had made me falter, but I could have got off and run, bolted down them lanes he disappeared into, asked questions. Stood in that glowing cave of a hall, I felt like I was the smallest person in the city, like I warn't of no use to nobody. I didn't have Cal to back me up. It was like my right arm had gone missing, but the right arm didn't care none that it was out of place, happy to be off doing other things. I was angry, at myself again but at him too this time, and he was going to hear it.

I needed to get him away from them, from this house. We'd been hustled back, dressed up and stuck on show in such a hurry I hadn't got to asking him where he'd been, why he didn't come after me, better still go after Blackjack. I pulled at my arms at a lack of having anything else to do, no gun at my waist, wondering which poor fool the get-up had belonged to. They'd not been no taller than me but plenty bigger, which I'm sure Madame Anjou had thought of when she had it left out for me. I leaned on the side of them grand stairs watching Cal's back, bright white and turned to me, the shadows from the chandeliers, all misshapen, running the length of him. I was so intent on him I didn't notice someone come up to me, stood by me til I heard them trying to clear they throat. The girl from the rug.

She was decked out in an extra crisp and starchy version of that green frock and apron get up Madame Anjou had them wear, collar so stiff it looked like it was holding her head higher than she was comfortable with, and even then, she was trying to look down, to not look at me. She was carrying a bowl of ice cream on a small, silver tray, globes of color melting slowly at the bottom, coating the glass in swirls of sugar and fruit.

‘In case you got to be hungry, sir, while you wait.’ I made to take it from her and tried to bend down some so I could thank her face to face. She seemed tiny, even stood there next to me, and her fine hands held that tray so tight it shook. She thrust it towards me.

‘If you could take the tray sir, I’d be grateful.’ Her dress bagged out over what must have been bony shoulders, and the apron tied tight round her middle made its two halves puff out like she was being sucked into it. Between the two of us we looked like children playing dress up.

‘Cassandra,’ an arched voice whipped across the hall. Madame Anjou was watching. Cassandra looked at me square for a beat then turned on her heels and hurried toward her mistress, who packed her off to the kitchen like a cuffed puppy. I ate what she gave me, for I was hungry after that day and there was such a push round the tables, manned near silently by more servants, that I didn’t reckon I’d get a look in. The Madame had probably told them not to serve me anyways. Three glinting scoops, orange, yellow, mint, swam in the bowl, pooling into one. They was sharp and sweet and soft. I ate them so quick that before I knew it they was just a shiny film of juice and cream coating the glass. I turned about to hide my face as I turned the glass up to my mouth, felt the ice slide down over my teeth. It felt clean. I’d forgotten what cold was like already.

Making to put the bowl back on the tray something stopped me. A tiny slip of paper, damp from the bottom of the bowl, was stuck on the middle of the silver. I checked that no-one of note had their eyes on me and peeled it off, which was harder than it should have been on account of the ridiculous gloves I had on. It was an address. An address I knew right enough. My mamma’s old digs. I looked up to Cassandra watching me from across the hall, a new tray full of drinks in her hands. She nodded at me ever so slight. I was tempted to go talk to her, appearances be damned, when someone barged into her and sent the fresh drinks tumbling, tipping fizz onto the folks nearby. One of them, a real tall, pale sop of a man, more hair grease than anything else, started up hissing and stamping and grabbing at her arms. He was pumped up in a cream jacket and leather boots shined so hard they looked wet, the stars, silk sash and sword of the Confederate army draped about him. Now this man was called Tollyrun. I overheard him being introduced to Cal as one of the richest well-to-dos in a city that warn’t short of them. When he saw Clarabelle being toted about on Cal’s arm, or Cal being toted I suppose, his eyes went from small to near gone and he gave Cal the shortest shake you ever saw. Then

he took up staring snake at them and didn't quit all evening. Whenever folks tried to talk to him he'd reply out the side of his mouth and kept his face trained on the Texan and his grinning luggage.

Now Cassandra was taking the brunt of his frustration. The lady who'd jostled her arm had melted away into the rest of the sea of pearls and crawfish eyes. Tollyrun warn't hefty but he took up her space easy enough, all teeth and jabbing fingers, his oily face right up in hers. The sound of smashed crystal caused everyone pause. His nose was almost touching Cassandra's as he held her arms, the tray she clutched keeping the rest of him away. Folks got quieter, they attention drawn to this new ruckus. No-one stepped in, but Teddy Ramone, who until just before had been dribbling shrimp juice down his front and eyeballing a gaggle of ribboned-up young ladies, started up writing notes. Tollyrun twisted her arms, causing her to drop the tray which landed with a loud clang that echoed around the hall. A second later, Madame Anjou was by his side. She had her hand on his arm but warn't doing nothing to prise his fingers away from Cassandra's elbow. Cal caught my eye then, finally. I pointed over to our host and he extracted himself from Clarabelle, once again with difficulty, and went and stood behind Cassandra so the Tollyrun fella had to look up instead of down. His grip on her loosened, then fell away. She immediately set to, picking up broken shards of crystal and the glasses that had rolled away between folks' feet. No-one helped her, or made to move out her way cept Cal, who spotted one by his foot. He put it back on her tray with a flourish.

'What seems to be the problem... Tollyrun, is it?'

'Little fool spilled that entire tray over me,' Tollyrun said, pointing again at Cassandra, which didn't seem real necessary. She stood with her head bowed. The Madame had taken up the grip on her arm and stood looking from man to man with an ugly smile.

'Madame Anjou usually has the finest staff in the city. Seems the riffraff has turned up and made them all imbeciles.'

'Augustus, come now, you're both honored guests.' The Madame cooed up at the pair of them, her puffy hand still stretched round the top of Cassandra's arm, near painful thin, I could see, now that the billowing sleeve was squashed under her mistress's grip.

'Yes, come now Augustus. I don't think I'm the problem – that is what you're implying isn't it? I'd say she was near blinded by them boots of yours. We're all having a little trouble looking at them

if I'm honest. You're so greased up a little spilt champagne hasn't made a blind bit of difference.' People chuckled, which only made Tollyrun madder. He pointed a bony finger into Cal's chest.

'I was a Colonel in the war you know. If it were up to me, they'd stop uncivilised wretches like you entering the city limits. You're wearing a gun indoors for heaven's sake.' Cal pushed his arm down with slow force.

'Well I hope you weren't here when Farragut and Butler landed. If you were, I'd be embarrassed to show my face at such an esteemed gathering. They got past the city limits without much trouble, if I recall. Touch me again and I'll be seeing one of my pistols here reflected in that gleaming forehead of yours.' Madame Anjou looked like this was a show put on specially for her, her hand finally leaving Cassandra's arm to clasp its counterpart in barely hidden glee. Tollyrun ground his jaw on that before thinking better of it. He barged off through the hall, pushing past folks as he went, giving Cassandra one last vicious look, and Cal was surrounded once again by crinoline and dinner jackets. I spotted a glass she'd missed just behind Madame Anjou's feet. She was instructing Clarabelle to go after Tollyrun, to keep him sweet. Her daughter dawdled off reluctantly. As I bent down, the Madame still turned away from me, I saw her grasp Cassandra's shoulders tight.

'One more incident like that, girl, and you'll be back on the street, back to wherever that chef of mine found you. You're not half the worker your predecessor was and remember what happened to her. You've been here a month already and I see no improvement...' She trailed off and turned to find me stood behind her, glass in hand. She let the rest of what she was about to say slide away into the re-growing chatter of the ball.

'Go,' she said through clenched teeth. Not needing to be told twice, Cassandra turned heel and near ran to the kitchen, leaving me holding the glass still. Madame Anjou gave me the shortest of curtsies.

'Mr Farmer. How are you enjoying my little soiree?' she asked in a voice so sour you'd think she'd been swallowing off milk instead of champagne.

'It sure is illuminating. You know, I haven't been here, to the city, since I was a boy. Course I didn't live in a place as fine as this with servants and the like. Sounds like you get through them pretty quick now. Mind, I suppose in a house as big as this you're bound to lose a few here and there.' She

shifted her weight from one foot to the other, pressing down the lace that covered her dress. The high neck, red and fussy, made her look like a hen that had been holding onto an egg too long, and had gone pop-eyed in agitation.

‘Do try the crawfish, Mr Farmer, it must smell like home to you.’ She slid off with a nod to Tollyrun who had reappeared arm and arm with Clarabelle, and was looking slightly less bitter for it, though he was still scowling in my direction.

‘Are you being rude to our host again, John?’ Cal appeared next to me, watching his former escort on the arm of the Colonel.

‘Was good of you to help Cassandra,’ I said.

‘Who?’

‘The girl with the tray.’

‘Oh. Well, that slimy Colonel needed showing up, whatever she’d done.’

‘She hadn’t done anything. And what do you mean, ‘again’? The woman’s a ghou.’

‘A ghou who can throw a party. Anyway, where’ve you been?’ He said with mock hurt. ‘I’ve been surrounded by society women all evening. Isn’t often that I feel like prey.’

‘Quit your moaning, you could have left them whenever you liked. I’ve been hanging back waiting on you to stop jawing. You ain’t exactly made moves to get away. We need to go.’

‘Go where?’ I felt like tipping a bowl of ice over his head, cool his brain to clear.

‘To look for Connie. That was her earlier. Blackjack has her. He’s been trailing us, though I don’t know how since you put a bullet in him square. But no point questioning that now, Cassandra gave me an address.’

‘Cassandra?’ Cal was staring over at Clarabelle, who was still looped round Tollyrun’s lanky arm as he huffed and puffed at the poor souls unfortunate to be caught in his orbit. He was showing them his sword. It glinted like a metal snake tooth in the glow of the chandeliers. I was losing my patience.

‘Lord. You need to be taking your brain out your pants and putting it back into your head, Cal Davies. Listen. Connie used to work here, I’m sure of it. Madame Anjou, she’s...’

Cal cut me off.

‘John, you’re getting ahead of yourself. How do you know it was Connie? Or Blackjack? I asked you and you didn’t respond. I didn’t think you were sure.’

‘How much champagne have you had? You saw him, plain as I did. He’s still alive. You didn’t kill him. And I got this close to her,’ I said, gesturing at the distance between him and me. ‘If you’d have followed me you would have seen. If you’d have followed me we might have caught them, where were you?’

‘I didn’t have a horse.’

‘Well that didn’t stop me.’

‘There wasn’t one big enough. I didn’t want to make a scene.’

‘Since when does Cal Davies care about making a scene. You didn’t want to look a fool, more like.’

He looked like he didn’t know what to say to me for once. A servant padded over and silently refilled the empty glass I was holding, and we both watched the bubbles burst over and over until the froth settled, rather than looking at each other.

‘Blackjack is dead. I killed him. Christ Jon, there’s a picture of us with his body. You must have mistaken whoever you saw...’

‘There’s no mistaking a man like that. Or a woman like that, for that matter. They know each other, I’m sure. And they know you, somehow.’

‘I put a bullet through him. Her, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I suggest you just get on with enjoying the ball and we can look for whoever has your Connie tomorrow.’

‘What do you care about these people Cal? They ain’t us. They ain’t for us. This is all air and chatter and nothing of substance. I need your help, and you’re running away, into skirts and tiny forks.’

There was a hint of a smirk on his face then, but it fell away soon as it appeared.

‘We can’t just leave. I’m sure that if that was Connie, with Blackjack if it’s him, and I just don’t see how it could be, then we’d better go in the morning with clear heads. I’m sure Madame Anjou would give us her man to guide us.’

‘I ain’t involving her in any of this. And since when do we need a guide. Since when did we need anyone?’ He didn’t answer but I could see it in his eyes, what he’d not had before. He’d had tastes of it, sure – a damn good aim, having his picture taken, folks being grateful, impressed, starry-eyed even when talking to him, giving folks a ‘I met Cal Bryce Davies this one time’ moment, tales they could embellish and embroider for years to come. But he’d never had so much of it at once, so intense like. Ladies hanging off his every word, wanting to hang off his mouth instead, fancy ladies, not the girls that worked the top floor of dusty saloons in the middle of nowhere. Gentlemen congratulating him, wanting to be him for the night instead of their buttoned-up selves. All of them folks with their old-fashioned manners and old-fashioned money, all of them danced a waltz in his mind. He was waltzing too, away from me, away from what we’d set out to do, what we, I, needed to do. For the first time on the road, we was doing something for me – out of necessity sure, but my troubles, my problems to be fixed. Not his, nor some town or law enforcement set-up. And he stood there, like a little kid being told to quit up playing make believe and wash his hands for dinner.

‘You don’t belong here with these people.’

‘And what’s wrong with these people? Just because you were born the wrong side of the blanket, the wrong side of the river, doesn’t make these folks less. They’ve been nothing but gracious.’

‘To you.’

‘Well some of us have the sense to meet manners with manners, to act respectable when given the chance, not skulk behind doors and eye every soul up like they’re about to shoot you.’

‘They normally are.’

‘You’re being ridiculous.’

‘Oh, I ain’t the one being ridiculous, letting a heap of fancy clothes and folks with more money than sense in their heads get into mine when the one reason we came down here was to save Connie.’

He looked blank. It warn’t working. I changed tack.

‘Since when did you work the fair circuit?’

‘What?’ He took a step towards me, eyes narrowing.

‘You heard me, Cal Davies. You hiding something, I know it. You more involved in this than you let on, whether you like it or not. Who’s the Alligator Woman?’

‘Who? You’ve gone crazy John. And I must be too, to have let you drag me on this wild goose chase.’ He still wouldn’t meet my eye, casting his gaze out into the crowd in the hope some old, bejewelled matrons would come and rescue him. I grabbed his arm, and he yanked it back and stepped away from me.

‘I don’t think there is a Connie. I think she’s the ravings of a dried up old sonofabitch who wants to pretend someone loved him once. All this nonsense over a ring and a bit of hair. It isn’t natural.’

‘Natural? I’ll show you what’s natural...’ I pulled the envelope that housed the finger from inside the frills of my shirt and thrust it at him. He stared at it a second, like he didn’t want it touching him, before he took it from me and opened it.

‘What the fuck is this John? Get it away from me. He pushed it back towards me, disgust curling at the corners of his mouth.

‘That’s Connie’s finger. They’ve hurt her. Forget your ice cream and your collars and your Clarabelle. We need to go and look for her.’

‘I’m not leaving. What’s wrong with you, carrying bits of finger round with you? And you call the Madame a ghoul.’ He started to turn away from me; I grabbed his arm, and his hand instinctively went to his pistol. He looked at me like he’d strike me, right in the middle of that ball room. People started to stare. I spoke under my breath, the last of my patience finally seeping away from me like them spilt drinks.

‘I ain’t never seen you like this. But if this is you now, the new Cal Bryce Davies, gun-toting lapdog to the rich and foolish then you’ll be best off without me dragging you down. I’m off to finish something I reckon you didn’t. If I get killed, well, it’s been good knowing you.’

‘Don’t be dramatic, John, it doesn’t suit you.’

I spat at his feet and left him, not looking at who I was bumping into, the mass of revellers, soaked up to their eye balls in rum and meat and sugar, just a solid object I needed to push through to get up the stairs. I was desperate to get away from the Texan, to put on my normal clothes, to pick up my gun, and cut ties with this city once and for all, Connie’s dead flesh strangely hot in my shaking hands. I

gave him one last look back as I breached the landing and saw the Madame's serpent eyes glued to me as she went and hooked her arm back round Cal; he had already looked away.

Camel was hitched up and ready to go, nose stuck out over his door into the fine rain of the evening. It never seemed to fall, instead it just swirled about til it collided, broke into smaller drops and danced on again. I tacked him up silently and he stood ears forward listening to me, listening to my silence real intent. Noise from the house drifted over to the stables, and echoed round the stalls and brick floor, the pull of bow on string, notes that sounded ordered in the hall but were without direction outside, as lost and flighty as the rain. The other horses in the yard watched me kit out one of they own. Jim stood next door, waiting patiently for his master. I gave him a quick pull of the ears, told him to have a talk with that fool owner of his. Every couple minutes I looked up out the stalls, in case she had come back, the masked woman, and was waiting for me again, roosting in the yard like some great, terrible crow, but the it was empty save for me and the horses, who breathed soft wisps of warm air from their twitching noses out into the black drizzle of the night.

When Camel was ready, I crept back round to the house, in the hope of persuading Cal one last time to come with me. I still didn't want to go on my own, truth be told. It hadn't worked out good for me last time, out-run and shot at, and I didn't welcome the idea none. Everything and everyone was where I'd left it, guests ambling around the house and porch, the bulk of them now in the ballroom where the dancing had really got going. Finally, with no new arrivals to eye up, talk had turned to the race, and speculation about which of the ships would bite into St Louis first. I stayed close to the walls, hoping no-one would notice I warn't dressed up no more as I looked for the Texan. Not finding him in the ballroom or the hall, I crept round to a small washroom by the kitchen, where Henri was cleaning up an empty shrimp server. He was thankfully alone.

'Mr Farmer? You changed.'

'Blue warn't my color. I'm going out but before I do, do you know, was there another girl here before Cassandra? Did she get brought in to replace another?' His hands kept circling the suds in the tray, but his eyes lifted in realisation, and his face opened up like all the pieces inside it fell into place.

‘There was. The Madame is always on to me about that girl, Cass, Cassandra I mean, not touching the one she replaced. No-one could by the sounds of it. Seems Stanza was the hardest working soul I reckon the Madame ever had, did everything for her it from what I’ve been told, what I do and what Cass does combined.’ Every other sweep of the brush in his hands, he stopped and looked about himself, knowing he shouldn’t be speaking to me.

‘Then so it goes one day she just wasn’t here and me and Cass was and folks were just expected to take one girl for the other and think no more on it. But then blacks roll in and out of these houses without hello or goodbye all the time. We’re like playing cards - folks change hands and go about their day without thinking on it. You know Stanza? We were moving her, yesterday, when we found you. I don’t know that for certain, sure, but that coach driver, with the hood – he isn’t our normal driver, Baptiste – he loaded a bundle into the cab when we left the stables and it wasn’t there when we returned.’

‘Why was you out there? In the rain, down that gutter-street?’

‘The Madame was waiting.’

‘For what?’

‘For you. I was to help make it look like an accident, like she didn’t expect you.’

‘Why?’

‘I do not know, I’m sorry. We are only told to stand, and be silent, and not to go in certain rooms, certain places in the house.’

‘This girl, she was called Constanza you say?’

I had never heard Connie refer to herself as no ‘Constanza’, but I was sure they must be one and the same. A highfalutin name to suit the Madame’s highfalutin ideas. Connie worked at that house and Madame Anjou sold her down the river to some crazy sonofabitch who seemed to be bulletproof. I couldn’t figure why, if she was such a good maid, but I didn’t need no reason to go out and get her the hell away from him. I asked Henri if he’d seen Cal. He said he’d walked off with Clarabelle but hadn’t come back.

I walked out round the back of the kitchen. The chef was sat in a cloud of steam, tucking into a heaped bowl of those ices he’d served up to half the city. I watched him run a finger round the glass to

catch every last drop of flavor. He saw me and froze, giving me a look I couldn't pin as either a threat or a plea. I put a finger to my lips, he nodded and we both carried on with our private business. I wanted to call Cal's name in the garden but I wasn't sure who else would be listening. It didn't take me long to find him though. Turning the corner of the house, I caught the outlines of two people. They were lit only in moonlight and only parts of them at that. Their faces and shoulders were in darkness but I could make out clear enough that her skirt was hitched up and his pants were down around his thighs. I could see the flesh move and slide under the skin with each push. I caught the glimpse of a white jacket.

They hadn't heard me and carried on fucking in earnest against the wall of the house, limbs quivering in the green damp of the garden, breathing like there wasn't no air left in the world. Her face fell into a pool of light. Clarabelle, lit up in the pale shakings of love, and in front of her the square of his ass showing atop the bagged seat of his pants, clenching and unclenching. The dimpled spectre of a cocked thigh. She looked right at me, though I was covered in dark, and grinned, like a child who has just been given everything they've asked for, though it will spoil them in the long run.

I ran off, not caring what noise I made that might disturb their graspings. If Cal was going to throw all his eggs into fucking society ladies, that grinning little doll for one, then that was now his business and his business was no longer my own. We'd go our separate ways. I'd get out of town with Connie, no thanks to him, or we'd both wind up dead and floating down the river, which would be some thanks to him.

I walked Camel out of the yard, now watched wordlessly by two of the Madame's servants, sent out I guessed by Henri, who lurched the gate open as quiet as they could manage and bowed their heads at me before they ran back indoors. I passed the house, passed the noise of revellers and lovers and string quartets, passed the insect-leg palms all in a row like a cage closing over them night time goings-on, down that crescent shaped carriage drive. Flower heads turned to see me out, to stare out them that might have trampled their stems and cut off their petals in the dark.

I knew where I was going. I'd been moving street by street in my head since Cassandra gave me that address I knew so well, filling the gaps by dredging up old memories of pick-pocketing haunts and the poor lanes that were home to watered down rum and fish that had been sat out too long.

There was still folks about when I got into the city middle, folks who didn't have no fancy parties to go drink theyselves silly at, nowhere to get toothache from eating rainbows of ice cream. They trundled along in ones and twos, heads down, eyes up. I thought I even recognised a couple, or they recognised me, looking at me hard from under hat brims and heavy brows, bottles in hand. I walked with my gun out and clear like I did in all them small out west towns, them unknown quantities, like I had Cal at my back. But I was making my own way now, and I could feel the great gap he left following on behind me like some swollen shadow that dwarfed my own.

There warn't no moonlight now. She'd quit watching me, now I was on the move, and run on to tell Blackjack I was coming, to whisper my whereabouts to the lady in the mask. She was replaced by a great churn of cloud, that whorled like a pinwheel above me. I felt less sick than I thought I would. As I walked, my nerves began to shake less, and there became something calm about being on my own. I was afraid for Connie, but not for myself no more. That feeling, that I'd left my right arm behind, grew smaller. The arm had grown right back by the time Camel turned onto the river bank, towards the docks.

I knew where that street was and how to get there. The city had grown extra limbs while I had been away, but I knew its gridded guts and could navigate my way around them without pause. Magazine, Constance, Annunciation, all steps layed out to tip you towards the river whichever way you aimed. We reached its banks near Old Levee and walked straight, passing the cathedral, its trident of towers poking holes in the threadbare rainclouds that draped theyselves above us, the empty market, the old mint, til the river began to twist eastward with the current and the Pontchartrain Railway came to a dead stop. Lamps were burning here and there down the bankside and folks still moved along the jetties and in the open doorways of pokey little rooms, lit from within with a weak sulphury yellow. Women I passed marked me for a turn and tried to flag me down; men either stared with eyes hardened from drink or pretended they hadn't seen me none. In the night light, the river still looked thick with scum and weed, and it sucked at its muddy sides over and over in a steady wave. Boats bobbed and groaned, wood creaking and stretching in loud, drawn out knocks, like animals trying to chatter and growl over one another, none able to settle in the heavy sweat of the night. I stopped a beat, had one last look about me, I don't know why. To check Cal hadn't re-found his sense

maybe, to check I warn't being followed by no-one, but anyone who might have been eying me up had melted away, gone on to other streets and hovels, and Camel and me had only boats and gas-lit moths for company.

We walked slow through the first rough brick alley off Levee, its walls dripping, the night seeming even deeper in its tight-packed air. The top was close above my head; I held out an arm and felt damp stone crumbling away at my fingertips. The sound of Camel's hooves echoed back at us as if we was being closely followed step by step by another horse, another rider. We were in the crook of Enghien and Spain, familiar but forgotten to me for years, what was a dirty little pocket of life, corral to them that didn't fit into upright city living. Now there warn't a soul about, no bodies sat up on their door-stoops drinking, no-one out walking, no lights in any window cept one, standing alone at the far end of this little fistful of sorry places, so dim its light barely reached the collapsed sidewalk. I tied Camel to a bent rail and walked slowly over to it, him following me until the reins pulled him to a stop, him whickering all the while, the flesh on his back rippling. I shushed him, but he would not quiet. Even in the squeeze of dark, I could see well enough that the other ends of the street was open and clear, could still hear the lap of the river but still I felt hemmed in. Camel began to rear, his forelegs twisting into the air, his eyes rolling back so the whites flashed like pools of spilt milk in the rain.

A shot blasted across my path, missing the tip of my nose by a distance so small it warn't visible. Another came, inches from my feet. Camel careered away as far as his tether would allow him. I had no cover. Blackjack stood, pistol pointing my way, in the mouth of the alley, the moonlight passing across his grinning face in waves as clouds passed its own. The rain gave that long coat of his a tar-like sheen.

'If it ain't the chicken, come home to roost. Come on home John, she's calling you.'

I thought about running, but there warn't nowhere to go, he'd have me face down with a bullet in my back soon as I tried it. He shot at me again, just missing the back of my heels this time as I froze, body still but my mind flailing for a plan and cursing itself for lack of one. He warn't shooting to kill me, I figured on that much. He was just fucking with me. I aimed at him, taking a couple steps toward him as I did. He didn't flinch, but held that gun out, held that grin, and shot at me again, over my head

this time. I tried not to duck, to put one step in front of the other steady as I could. He fired two more and they went sailing past my ears one by one, either side; I could feel the air shift, smell the powder in the damp air. I fired this time, and he turned with reflexes quicker than I'd ever seen on a man, like a great black cat spinning away from nothing more than a badly aimed boot.

He started up making chicken noises at me, clucking, hopping away from me on the balls of his feet, arms up like some devil jumping forwards hoof to hoof until he stomped both feet down, stretched out and shot at me again, blowing my hat clean off. I tried again, aiming at his chest, but each time he twisted and bent his way out of trouble as he got closer.

'Where's that friend of yours, John Farmer? He given up on you? Too busy toasting the great steamboat folly to help you?'

'He ain't none of your business.'

'Wrong,' he smiled again, 'he is my only business.' He was testing me, hoping he was putting pressure on parts of me that was near to broken. I was close to him, but I didn't want to run out of shot. Stopping to reload in the middle of the street seemed foolish, even if he warn't trying to hit me. He came at me again and I heard the bullets chew into wood and brick behind me.

'Look at you, trying not to cringe. Very good. I'm surprised he's let you out of his sight, little chicken, all alone in the dark. You know this city, better than most; anything could happen.' He skipped backwards lightly; for a huge man he moved like he didn't weigh more than a feather, legs sprung like a ballet dancer. All the while bullets punctured the air around me. He was just fishing, casting lures that I didn't see no choice but to bite on. I followed him slowly down the alley, until I was almost on him, and he stopped moving and stood facing me, shoulders and legs square, his face suddenly flat. I halted a couple feet in front of him, my gun aimed at his chest. He looked his weight now, face feet above me, wearing a dead expression that troubled me as much as the grin that it replaced.

'This is getting tiresome,' he said, cocking his head at me. Then he threw his arm out, his gun swinging into the side of my head, and I felt my legs crumple beneath me.

I woke up to a pair of feet, soles dusty and coarse, dangling from a table just in front of me. I shut my eyes again as the force of the blow to my head sent me reeling, and I retched with the pain of it before managing to focus some. I was sat on a wooden floor, but one that hadn't been laid right, just unconnected boards stuck down with gaps so large they pinched as they bowed underneath me. The feet were limp and lifeless, inches from my face as I kneeled over the dirty floor. I grabbed onto the table legs that stood either side of them, careful not to touch them but afraid that if I didn't hold onto something I'd fall right back again. Blackjack's face appeared at the other end of the table as I hauled myself up. He was leaning on a wall waiting for me to rise, gun pointed half-heartedly at me like I wasn't worth bothering with. My own was tucked under his arm. It was only when I retched again and look down that I realised whose legs I'd been so unwilling to touch a second before. I fell on her, moving her legs, her arms, her hands. I felt the calloused stub where her little finger used to be. She didn't move. Her eyes were closed.

'If you've hurt her...'

'What?' he said, bored, 'you'll pretend she doesn't exist for another ten years until we cut off another finger? You can't lay claim to any chivalrous intentions now, John Farmer; you let her leave whatever godforsaken parched up town you met her in, buried your feelings so deep it's a wonder the worms haven't had them, if you ever had any at all. It's all a little too late if you ask me. If she wakes up, I'll be surprised if she even remembers you, the amount of poison my sister has fed her.'

She lay there, like the life had left her already. Scanty, scrawny candles were littered about the floor and walls and cast her in strange shades, hiding the true color of her; her skin, her hair, everything was the sickly wash of over-burned wax and old rope. I took up her hand again, fear setting in my gullet that I'd missed something, that her skin would be ice next to mine. It was cold, but clammy, there was warmth in there somewhere, however weak.

He barely even looked at her, save for removing a glove and pressing a couple fingers to her outstretched neck.

'Blowfish poison, mixed in with other delicacies from Madame Anjou's garden. Makes the body a puppet, a tool that yields to a master's command, Until the dose accumulates, that is... it can be fatal, though she is still with us, I think,' he said, shrugging. She was on a table shorter than herself. Her

legs and arms hung down to the floor like tree branches snapped into odd angles by a storm. Her neck was bent over the top end, the back of her head propped up by the ridge of a too-short chair. Her throat was thin and bruised.

‘Constanza here was under our nose for some time and we didn’t realise, didn’t realise her connection to you. We watched her for days when we found out. She’d seen him in a paper, a drawing of Davies posing like Napoleon on Marengo; at first I’d passed it off as the overblown imaginings of one of his reporter admirers. It was only later that I realised it was a copy of a tintype. I thought that she was looking at him at first; she held it so close to her face she looked like she was trying to suck up the ink. When she’s seen enough she held that paper to her chest like it was made of gold. My mother interrupted her, sent her side-stepping away like a scolded kitten. When I picked it up, Davies’ face had been smudged underneath her fingers, and there you were, Mr Farmer, scowling in the background. She knew you, I could tell.’ Blackjack replaced his glove then placed a hand over Connie’s forehead, fingers outstretched. He pulled at her lips, exposing her teeth, big in her shrunken gums.

‘You were in that house?’ He ignored my question, as if it wasn’t worth answering.

‘I wanted to make sure, so I left the paper in the kitchen when no-one was around. The cook found it, and was admiring Davies, as people are so frustratingly given to do. He asked Constanza what she thought of the Texan, and she replied that she didn’t think ought on Mr Davies, but that his associate was to be much admired, for she had known him once, but couldn’t figure why on earth he was following round a man such as Davies that made a scene of shooting folks for a living. Sensible girl. Shame we had to hurt her but there we are. She was still weak in the head enough to think highly of you, Mr Farmer.’

‘I ain’t Cal.’

‘No, you’re the fool who follows him round and cleans up the blood when he’s made a mess he can’t handle. Which is worse? How long have you been there with the brush and bucket waiting on the day it finally goes wrong for him. Besides, you know, and I know that blood stains don’t come out. Something might look clean, but blood soaks into the fibres of whatever it covers. Same with guns – if you touch powder all your life your fingers will turn black eventually. Our choices seep into

the world, and into ourselves. Cal Bryce Davies has stained himself and you, and me, and many others. But he left my sister quite ruined.'

As his hand left her skin, Connie's eyes were uncovered. They were open, white and round as oyster pearls, small veins creeping up to giant black pupils like waterweed anchoring a man under the river's surface. They closed, slowly, and shadows returned to lie across the lids. I turned her hand over in mine.

'She wasn't awake when we cut it, don't worry. Well, as far as I could tell.' I flew at him but he grabbed me by the collar and threw me hard across the room. He outsized me on such a scale that I thought this what being on the other side of Cal's fists would be like. I fell into a wall, and slid to the ground, falling into a small nest of brittle candles. A small piece of lit taper scorched my jacket before burning up, leaving a film on my shoulder. I felt the heat shrink away from the skin underneath. Blackjack marched over to me and picked me up again like I was no more than a bale of straw escaping its bindings. He set up three small chairs, two facing the third, which he took from underneath Connie's head, so her neck lolled back, falling into nothing. He sat me on one of the two and hung his coat on the third. He looked odd without it, Samson shorn of his hair, with only a thin linen shirt left hung on his yoke-like shoulders.

It was hot, damp and as close and tight as the bottom of the sea. I had sweat in my eyes and it pooled further down in the small of my back and the seat of my pants, gathering under my ass like I'd lost control of myself. I could taste it already, feel it on my lips mixed with the wet iron flavor of blood. I'd bit myself when he hit me. He tied my hands behind my back. The damp skin on my wrists stung under the rough rope. There was a smell in there, a mix of everything I'd swallowed that last week, river water, sweat, salt, fresh and old fish, the stale air of a place that don't see the door opened much, that keeps its gases inside like a misbehaving stomach. There was a weight to it, and it made me heave and clamour for breath among the damp and dirty site of my earlier life.

That place, the one I'd spent long childhood days in - there'd always been something reassuring in its emptiness, something clean. In the mess and jumble of the city it had been like a bare stretch of peace, with my mother's bed, mine and a curtain screen she could draw across in case I woke, and she

had a visitor. Someone brought her a little blanket box one day, to put our scanty spare clothes in, to sit on. We was lucky it had a wooden floor, which me and my mother swept religious.

This, this was the same room in nothing but dimensions and even they looked broken somehow, like the place had caved in on itself. It was full, of piles of old broken chairs sat in heaps, legs sticking out like snapped bones, bags of grain that looked so browned and old their contents must have been way past off, holes chewed in them so they leaked out damp little pellets that took on the look of mouse dirt. Might have been mouse dirt for all I could tell. Bits of straw were stuck in the cracks of the floor, though I couldn't make out no bales or nets. There was a drip, then another, another, falling out of time. The walls was covered in pieces of paper, pictures, newspaper stories cut out, torn out, some ripped through and stuck back together, drawings, stuck in patches and clusters that spread out, creeping across the walls like some strange mould. Even the door, which seemed to be in a different place now, and hung open slightly, knocked lightly on its frame by a river breeze, was plastered over. Some were so thin they looked like the wings of large bugs that had settled and died years ago. They were near all about Cal. A drawing of him, pistols in hand, with a big, bold-printed headline from a camp paper, *C. B. Davies – Oglala, Nebraska*. Others were from Wyoming, California, Dakota and Indian territories. Some were just short papers, printed on one sheet, the ink smudged or under-applied, the one-man work of any small town we'd been through lucky enough to have a press. They'd been collected one by one and stuck up like Blackjack had figured them for wallpaper. One was even from Cal's early days, a tiny notice – *Local youth Cal Bryce Davies wins Ysleta, Texas annual shoot*. They was also that baby picture, the same blond, sun-faced child I knew to be Cal, posed against that white canvas with its sides pulled open, teeth around his neck, eyes drifting up to someone or something above him, casting a shadow by his side.

There were candles everywhere, all shapes and sizes and states, some fully formed tapers, smooth and lit, some in bundles, tied in stacks; some were just lumps hardened to the ground, dented and crumbling like miniature mountain ranges, inches of crust that roamed along the floorboards. Some were upturned, like they'd been kicked away from their purchase. Others were lit, in different stages of melt, and wax was seeping into bigger pools and forming ugly new peaks as it re-set. The ceiling was the same upside down, wax stuck down in lumpy points above me. Some was lit, so hot wax fell

in constant fat drips, slapping the floor like someone slowly tapping out time with their fingers. It was like a cave, hot and damp, the wax slick like raw egg white or melting animal fat. It stretched out beyond him, beyond Connie, the end of the room, if there was an end anymore, sunk into an impenetrable, sooty gloom.

Stacks of old paper and tins of Casco glue covered other parts of the floor, some tipped on their sides, the last dribbles of their innards pooled round the lips of the cap and on the floor, colorless streaks shining like slug trails in the wax and dirt. Some of the empty cans stood upright in neater rows, with flowers and candles emerging from them like someone was trying to make the place look less like the dead end of a drainage canal, but somehow it made it look worse. Was like putting rouge on a dead man.

‘Home, home, sweet, sweet home... I’m sure you’ve noticed we made a few improvements.’ Blackjack span on his tiptoes, arms outstretched like the ugliest music box figurine you could imagine. I tried to shuffle my weight forward to stand but he was on me like a cat on a bird already bitten.

‘Don’t bother.’ He grasped my cheeks in his hand, pushing the flesh into my teeth, his nose nearly touching mine. My vision had cleared enough that I could really study on him up close. He was younger than I had figured, under them scars that snaked round his cheeks, younger than me, maybe even younger than Cal. His top lip still had a habit of lifting over his canines like his teeth didn’t quite fit in his mouth and he was real pale, with the fleshiness of the last years of youth lingering still, enough to hold his features together. He had curly, black hair, greased at the top of his head then falling in curls like pigs’ tails behind his ears. He had something of the pirate about him, or one of them plotting lords in little girl’s fairy tales that run off with the fair maiden just for spite, squatting here in my mother’s rooms like the ghosts of all her old visitors rolled into one.

He stood and let me go. I spat out a circle of blood and foam and it sat frothing in between the two boards by my feet.

‘Your mother let you do that?’ Blackjack said, retrieving a large enamel bowl from under Connie’s table and setting it down on the floor beside him, as he sat opposite me.

‘Who’s the other chair for?’ I asked.

‘Guess!’ He leaned on his knee, face in his palm like a bored child. But he didn’t wait for me to speak.

‘How does it feel, John Farmer, to not have him here? Where is he, wilful master to your lost puppy act? Surely, he can’t have other matters to attend to when his best friend’s life and love hang in the balance? Or has he been distracted by his usual predilections? ... Not playing? How disappointing.’

‘How are you here? He shot you.’

‘Shot me? Did he?’ he asked me in all earnestness, running his hands over his shirt as if to look for bullet wounds. ‘No, I ain’t bust no leaks lately,’ he said, putting on a voice I figured was meant to send up mine. ‘Where shall we go Cal, what shall we do Cal? Does that not get dull, John, does that not get tiring? Or do you enjoy having a brain walking about outside your body?’

‘I came down here under my own steam.’

‘Yes, and look where that got you.’ He gestured about the room.

‘You sure you ain’t waiting on someone else? Your sister perhaps?’ That shut him up a beat.

‘So, we’ve put two and two together and made four. Well, I can’t say I’m all that impressed now, the two of us look alike as hatchlings from the same clutch.

‘You’re twins?’

‘No, no, not literally anyway – she is nine months older, but only that. She wasn’t alone for long. We became twins later.’

‘She’s much better at hiding than I am, at sneaking around. She’s hiding now. Tell me, when you saw her in the garden, was she laughing? She laughs so rarely.’

‘I saw her before then.’ His eyes narrowed, then rolled.

‘Esmé, Esmé, you can’t help yourself, can you?’ Where?’

‘In Elgin, then again on the Red River, she was looking at - ’

‘Your Mr Davies, no doubt,’ he cut in. ‘Well, I can’t say I’m surprised, though she should know better. Did he see her? Well, no matter, he’ll see her soon enough no doubt. They go back, you see.’

He left that remark hanging in front of me, and picked up the bowl by his feet, wedging it tight between his legs.

‘Now, I was teasing you before. Davies did shoot me. Even I, though I hate him, am not churlish enough to deny that he is the finest marksman going, except for myself.’ He put his hand on his chest and fluttered his eyelashes like a lady caught up in false modesty. ‘But you’ll decide that later no doubt, when I actually shoot you, not just take pot shots at your extremities. So, if Cal Davies shot me, how am I stood here before you, the very picture of health?’

‘There ain’t nothing healthy about you.’

‘There-ain’t-nothing-healthy-about-you-lord, is that the best you’ve got? It’s a wonder Davies hasn’t put you out of your misery already. Shut up and I’ll show you something.’

He removed his gloves finger by finger, then rolled his shirt over his head and threw it behind him, so it landed shroud-like on Connie’s face. The fissures that marked his face carried on on downward, near covering him, neck to waist, in scabs and scales. The candlelight fell into the cracks and crevices that snaked round his arms and ribs, slid along the peaks that ran over his stomach, sharp, crusty formations that made it look like he could have just emerged from one of the dripping walls around us, or dropped from the scarred ceiling. I was surprised he could move at all. It stopped at his hands, which were big and chapped but otherwise like any other mans. He studied me, looking for a response and for a moment he looked like a statue, an old ships prow that had been docked so long it had become a nest for woodworm and barnacles. He was yellowish in the patchy half-light of the room, the waxy flicker making it seem like his scales moved on their own, like something twitched beneath the surface.

‘Pretty, ain’t it?’ He stuck the forefinger and thumb of his right hand up like he was picking up the handle of a fine china tea cup. Then he pinched a piece of peaked flesh on the wrist of his left arm. With one, long, slow pull, he peeled away the skin; it split and cracked and sprung away from the pieces left stuck in place, all the way up to his armpit. Underneath was normal flesh, pink from being gummed to that strange crust and stretched tight in its removal. He dropped the peelings into the bowl where they landed with a slap.

He did it again, took another strip from his arm, slow and deliberate. Again, it pulled his own skin with it, drawing it taut until the bond gave way and it snapped back down to sit on bone. Once more and his left arm was peeled and bare, exposed from wrist to shoulder cepting some small streaks of crust left dotted here and there, and he picked at these like they was lice, flicking them at my feet. His bare arm was bigger than one of my legs, but even it looked pale and girlish next to its boulder-like companion. He went from ships prow to one of them lop-sided crabs, the strength in all their tiny bodies going to support one oversized limb. I didn't want to stare, but I didn't know where else to look.

'Metal plate under this does the job. You can't keep it on too long mind, or your skin will start to go raw.' He tapped his chest with his now free arm; it sounded lumpy, dead. My own skin was crawling, and I was beginning to ache now from being tied to that chair. My head was hurting worse from connecting with that wall, like someone was trying to get their fingers inside my eye sockets. He took a piece of that second skin out the bowl and threw it at me. It landed in my lap and he laughed when I jumped and tried to throw it off me, to bounce it off my knees, but it only danced stubborn back and forth and fell open across the tops of my legs. I could see the hair stuck to its under-surface, tiny pieces of skin, a shine of sweat and oil. It was just paper, glue, wax.

He set about peeling the other arm, and had soon filled the bowl with his sheddings, the tops of his shoulders coming off in big curved saddles of crust that sat in the bowl like pigs' ribs. When he'd uncovered all but his chest, he started breaking up that bowl's contents, cracking and pulling the larger pieces apart like an impatient child tearing at the corners of a drawing they'd just finished.

'What's your name? You weren't born no Blackjack?' I asked, as I watched him peel himself. To my surprise, he answered me straight.

'Jacques... Anjou. Though I might as well have been Blackjack from birth. I've not been called Jacques for years. My ears don't recognise it now.'

'She's your mother?'

He sneered, not at the question I reckoned, but more at the truth of the answer.

'She hauled our sorry asses out of herself, if that's what you mean? Though that name is a fiction, as made up as that piece of skin between your legs, false as your Mr Davies' many exploits.'

‘He’s done all he says he’s done. I’ve been there to see it.’ He ignored me and carried on.

‘She had two children, Esmé and I. She sold us to a man that put us to work when we were just able to walk and talk and carry a broom.’

‘What about Clarabelle?’ I asked. He grunted. ‘Your sight must be failing you if you think she and I might be related. To look at her you’d think she were another species entirely. She is the daughter of the man our mother married after we’d been disposed of. A sugar man, he was. Rich as sin. He didn’t last long. Killed by a cane boiler, so my mother had everyone believe. But not before he built her that ridiculous house. My mother thought she was worth keeping. And now she plans to marry her off to your Texan. I have let her think that is a possibility, in exchange for her assistance in this matter, for Constanza. Perhaps it might be, if you behave, and survive, Mr Davies. Welcome.’

The barrel of Cal’s rifle had slid round the door frame. The rest of him soon followed. His light coat showed up the colors of the candles as he stepped into the gloomy cave we sat in, wax dripping from above the door onto his hair. Blackjack was already aiming that big piece of his at the Texan and picked up my gun from by his feet without looking, aiming it at me.

‘Once again, Mr Davies, we must talk about your manners. You’ve left poor Mr Farmer here waiting like the last debutante stood at a dance, suitors all taken. Sit.’ It warn’t a request, but Cal inched closer, Yellowboy pointed at Blackjack’s bare shoulders, eyes squinting at the mess that sat beneath them.

‘Come any closer and I’ll shoot my way through your friend here, I’ll make holes in his knees while you look into my eyes.’ Cal stepped forward again and without even turning to look at me Blackjack shot at my right side and took out a chair leg. The wood shattered about my calf and tiny pieces of pine dug into my skin. It was like being bitten by a fleet of horseflies. I fell onto my side, the weight of me landing on my right arm, chin and cheek grazing the floor. It hurt like hell, but the force of it knocked the back strut of the chair from its sockets. My hands were tied but I warn’t attached to the frame no more.

Cal, realising Blackjack would shoot me red and pink if he moved again, let the rifle swing lose in his hand. Blackjack took it from him, along with both his pistols. He leaned the rifle up next to Connie along with mine and dumped the pistols in the enamel bowl. Then he grabbed me by the collar

and hauled me upright, telling me to hold myself up. He directed Cal to sit down, then he tied his hand behind him and his legs to the chair. Cal started to speak, started saying Blackjack better not have hurt me, but Blackjack grabbed the sliver of skin from the floor by my feet and shoved it into Cal's mouth. Before he could cough it up enough to spit it out, Blackjack had tied a strip of rope round Cal's face, forcing it between his teeth so that skin would stay put. Cal gagged, and tried to cough the rope out, but it was tied too tight, and the only thing that escaped his mouth was drool he couldn't keep from falling.

'Mr Farmer here and I were having a conversation. Don't interrupt. He has things to learn about you and me, but you already knew that.' Cal was trying not to look at me, half-staring at Blackjack, half off behind him to where Connie lay motionless still under that shirt, like he couldn't quite figure out how he'd got there and was doing his damndest to pretend he warn't.

The rope rubbed on my sweating wrists as I tried to free my hands without looking like I was up to nothing. Cal carried on staring blankly out into the room, and Blackjack sat back down and began looking at us with an impatient look on his face, like we was running the show and keeping him waiting.

'Don't tell me you haven't worked out who I am yet Davies? You're many unappealing things but dumb isn't one of them, least it didn't use to be. You haven't changed much, to look at you. Pity, that. You might be feeling a bit confused Mr Farmer, don't worry. This fine, upstanding specimen here sat next to you is exactly who you know him to be. I was unfair before, too quick to dismiss his prodigious achievements. He has done much more than you think in his thirty-five odd years, much more, much more harm, you see. To himself and others. And I don't mean rounding up a few noose-bounds or the too-swift dispatch of town belligerents. On that score, there's not much to note.' He leaned forward and poked a rough finger into the rope stretched between Cal's teeth, pushing the waxy strip further into his mouth. A clear run of spit was forced out over Cal's chin. His eyes were wide and darted between Blackjack and me, like he was trying to get me to stop looking at him, seeing him like that, tied up and dribbling. I hadn't never seen him bound. It made him look near as small as me. He was trying to swallow, but Blackjack held his cheeks in one hand, forcing his tongue out under the rope.

‘What’s that? You want to say something?’ He hooked the skin and rope up out of Cal’s mouth a second as Cal spluttered and tried to wipe his face on his collar. He took a breath as if to speak but Black said ‘No? Ok’ and stuffed them both back into his mouth. Then he wiped his spit covered fingers on Cal’s pants leg, looking at the Texan like he was a small child with a nose that wouldn’t stop running.

‘I may have been too harsh earlier, John. I see now you’ve had to be milder for this dribbling idiot. No wonder you look so lost,’ he said to me out the side of his mouth. He took out a knife from his backside pocket and ran the blade flat side down over his palm. It was short, and rusty in patches, but it still glistened like cold water in his hands. Bored, he unpicked a few stitches on the side of Cal’s knee with its tooth-like point, then set to waving it front of his eyes.

‘I’m going to tell your friend here everything, and then we’ll see if he still looks at you with the same cow eyed devotion he’s had on his face since he got here. I’m beginning to think we didn’t need to take the mulatto. We could have just taken him, and you would have come running, if only to ensure there’s one person left alive that actually thinks you’re something. Whether you care about him is something else I’m sure we’ll reveal in time, though I must say I have my suspicions...’ He moved his chair round a little, to face me better, and made a show of getting himself comfy like I was to hear a fine story.

‘It started with her feet, a little mark on her littlest toe – much as it disgusts me, your friend Davies here knew her inside out and back to front by then, knew her skin down to the finest line on her palm. He studied every hair on her head. Course he didn’t realise he was doing it, but love makes spectators out of us all doesn’t it? We turn our dear ones over and over in our hands like they’re specimens, looking for nothing in particular, amazed with every little dull thing we find. Every blemish a mark of beauty, every scar a commendation. I’m losing you. Let me put it in terms you’d understand. He was like a child with the only toy they’d ever wanted, couldn’t see her enough. And she loved him, she loved him so much it pained her. They were like guns in inexperienced hands, shooting off at each other without warning, fighting and making up, but the damage never lasted, nothing pierced the surface. Do stop me, Davies, if I’m getting it wrong.’ He tapped Cal on the thigh with his gun.

‘We’d been with this pokey little outfit for a long time, years. The Brampton Museum On Wheels – don’t be fooled. It was no more a museum than your friend here is the Pope. The owner was a shit-heel, filth, with an eye for selling it too. He’d got a couple of acts he’d charge whatever people could scrape out of their pockets to see, stuck them in a shit-caked old tent and other shit-heels would come and shuffle around them, gawking and commenting, as they sat on little stools in the middle trying not to talk back. There was a man without legs. Sometimes Brampton would kick his stool out from under him so people watch him right it and climb back up. His arms got to be so strong, if someone would have held him up he could have throttled the life out of every last one of them. I would have helped him, if he’d asked. But he never did. People would pinch and prod, then lean back with this horror on their faces like you’d gone up and spat on them. Brampton had a couple of whores too, naturally, working round the back. You knew them well I’m sure Davies, despite your dealings with my sister... And there was a really tall fella too – made Davies here look like a tadpole next to a toad. His spine was bent and the tent was a couple of inches too short to accommodate him so he had to stoop, until we ripped a hole in the top of it for him, remember that? Course he got rained on sometimes. Horace Chevalier. He was about to be bought up by a bigger outfit when he died. Brampton’s dead too. I made sure of that. Not that you care, Davies.’ He placed his gun over his lap and started to run a stretch of skin through his fingers, like he was pricing up the quality of a bolt of cotton.

‘You see, your friend here Mr Farmer, he doesn’t like anything unusual. Lord knows how he tolerates you. You’re about as short and ugly as a man can be on the right side of normal. Unless it’s to make himself look prettier in the light of comparison. No, he doesn’t like anything out of the ordinary. I always wondered, after you’d left, why you took that job, Davies. It turned your stomach, even then. We were teenagers, Esmé and I, when he showed up,’ he said, pointing lazily at Cal. ‘A scrape older than us. You know what he did?’

‘Trick shot,’ I said.

‘Yes... but I bet he hasn’t told you about who he worked with though, why he left?’ I kept quiet. Cal kept on staring just past Blackjack’s left ear.

‘He rolls up one day, thin but about as pretty as it’s decent for a boy to be, hair positively aglowin’ in the sun. He was trying to sell a rifle, what was it? I can’t think.’ He tapped his foot in frustration,

eyes wandering aimlessly as his thoughts turned inward. Coming up empty, he pulled Cal's gag out again and let it hang on his chin.

'Sharps,' Cal said immediately, voice thick with pooled spit but without no life to it.

'That was it,' Blackjack said, settling back to his story, 'that he'd no doubt stolen from his folks. It still had his daddy's name on a brass plate on the stock. I wanted that gun so badly, but I hadn't got any money. See our mother sold us to old Brampton to be runarounds. She stuck us on a stage to Maplesville, Alabama without even a piece of bread between us. We were small for our age, not an ounce of flesh to split between us. Have you ever been to Alabama?' I shook my head.

'Don't. It's full of scrub and trash, mean, bow-legged, dirt poor trash. It withered on the vine long before the war. It's bloodless, compared to here. But most places are, you know that.'

'This city ain't nothing but a punchbowl for everything wrong about people. I always thought so. You coming from here, well that just settles it. I figured I'd got myself free of it until you kidnapped my Connie.'

'Ah, so she's your Connie, is she? I doubt she'll be feeling quite the same way if she comes to. Probably best she doesn't really, you're a sorry sight, the both of you – one covered in blood and the other in drool. I must admit that was my one doubt, in getting you down here. Would you care enough to come and get her? You let her come down here with that dried up spit-bucket of a doctor, who then sold her to my mother for a pittance. She wouldn't be here if it wasn't for you, Mr Farmer. You could have rescued her a long time ago and you could both be safe right now, living in a shack somewhere out west, pretending to ignore the people who stare at you out of the side of their eyes, pretending she isn't colored. You couldn't take him with you though,' he cocked an eye at Cal, slumped in his chair, not even attempting to speak even though Blackjack hadn't replaced his gag. 'He'd get bored and fuck her or shoot her or both before long and then you're back to square one. You're distracting me.'

'So, Brampton asks him if he's any good with that gun of his and Davies here shoots the hat from his head and the rope from his hand without a word. So, after that, he takes his turn in each show, shooting apples or tin cups off chairs and posts. He wants to shoot them off heads, but he doesn't get many willing volunteers, so he uses me instead. Soon he was shooting things out of my hands, even out of my mouth. We did this trick one day, oh did it make people gasp. We stacked as many of the

camp's mugs as we could steal on top of my head. I don't think I've ever stood so still. He shot them off, top to bottom, so quick it was like someone banging a tin drum. He got some coins thrown at him for that one. All I got was a cuff round the head from Brampton because all the cups looked like gold pans afterwards. But I didn't mind, because he started to show me how to do it, how to shoot.

Brampton kept him in enough bullets that he could let me take a couple of shots now and then. I'd go out, after his show, the gun still hot from it and the heat of his hands, and I'd try to hit branches, or he'd mark a spot on a tree trunk and I'd aim for that. One day I did, and it settled on me from there. I begged him to let me borrow it, to teach Esmé, or to teach her himself - she was desperate to learn, but he refused. He'd got other ideas for her.' Blackjack sneered and pushed the point of his knife into the flat top of Cal's knee until blood sprang out above the cloth. Cal didn't move, didn't make a sound.

'I think I hated you, even then. You'd take her, leave me to do your work. I'd aim at things and pretend they were you. Would you like to see her, Esmé? She wants to see you. I can't find an ounce of sense in it. If I were her, I'd want to wring your neck as you sit there but she wants to keep you. At first, I didn't understand, but she's brought me round. You're going to become something like our Miss Constanza over here. A pet. A slave. Whatever Esmé wants. And you will arrange for everything you own - we know about it all, your inheritance, your stocks, even that fine head of cattle you've recently acquired - to be transferred to my sister. Then she can really do what she likes with you.' Cal remained silent, and looked over Connie, prone on the table. The shirt had slid to the floor. Blackjack dug the knife further into the flesh on Cal's leg, twisting it in his palm until Cal flinched.

'And what if I don't do what you say?' he said, dragging his leg backward, which made the cut worse.

'You will. You won't even know how to resist, if she mixes the powder just right. The only other possible outcome is that she kills you; she's pretty good on the dose - how do you think I appeared so lifeless in Elgin - but things have been known to go wrong. And then, we simply steal your signature, and take it all anyway...'

'I'd sooner die.'

‘So, we agree on something. I’d rather you were dead too, but Esmé is so intent on keeping you. And let’s say that the life of this one,’ he pointed at me, ‘and Miss Costanza, if she lives, depend on you behaving.’

‘Sounds like he did you a favor, teaching you how to shoot. This is how you repay him?’ I said.

‘Oh, I don’t know about that. He certainly didn’t do himself any favors. Most foolish thing he’s ever done, perhaps, except for leaving my sister. Tell your friend here what you did Davies.’

Cal raised his eyes to meet Blackjack’s but stayed silent, his jaw so set it looked like his teeth might have fused together. Blackjack shot a round off without hesitating and the room filled with the smell of hot oil and powder. Cal flinched again. My ears rang.

‘I paid attention. When you were shooting cans off my head I paid attention. When you were showing me how to clean your gun. I learned those lessons well, some you didn’t even mean to teach me. Now, it would go better for you if you were game to learn the one I’m trying to teach you. Tell him.’

Esmé appeared from the dark stretch behind Connie, silent and wide-eyed as an owl bearing down on a rabbit. She crept up on her brother with long steps and touched the back of his head with narrow, splayed fingers. She was slim, and tall and straight-backed, and she kept her head and neck real still. Blackjack didn’t react to her touch, as if he’d grown familiar to it. She held up the oil lamp she was carrying and raised it to arm’s length. It turned her the colour of mango peel and revealed the rest of her face. She wasn’t wearing that mask anymore. Her curls framed her wild eyes, like two fires that had burned so long and hard they’d turned black at their middle, like they no longer needed fuel but would char as long as they stayed open. Her chin and neck, what I could make out above her high collar, was a mesh of fine lines and cracks and raised patches that followed the lines of her face, curving down around her jaw just as her brothers had. It had a shine to it, like it was burned or pulled tight. I wondered if they too were a deceit.

Blackjack stood and one by one pulled her sleeves back to reveal her arms. She let him, her eyes on Cal the whole time, who was watching her brother almost as intent. Her limbs was slim and strong but they had the same affliction. Then Blackjack tugged at a piece of his stomach. A strip of fake flesh

came away. He let it fall to the floor, then pulled off a piece of his cheek, exposing more smooth, sallow skin underneath. He threw this piece at Cal, and Esmé winced as it connected.

‘Hers is real.’ She put the lantern down and took up Cal’s rifle. She moved stiff, like someone had strapped boards to her limbs, but soon as she got that rifle in her hands she had it cocked and pointed at Cal in so smooth a motion that it was like watching Cal himself.

‘I told you, you made a mistake. I taught her everything you taught me. If she didn’t have this,’ - he ran a finger down her arm - ‘she’d be better than you.’ Esmé turned the gun up again, ran a hand down the barrel like she was examining nothing more troubling than a ribbon. What looked like a smile pulled the ridged skin of her jaw even tighter. She winced again and let the barrel drop, then tapped it underneath Cal’s chin, turning his face this way and that with it. Cal’s eyes moved all the time, following the gun barrel. I ain’t never seen a gun against Cal’s skin before, save for them he’d had in his hands. The thick squares of his cheeks seemed pink and easily squashed as she tilted his head, studying his face like he was a prize bull having his credentials checked. Hers remained still as the face of the moon. Blackjack carried on talking all the while, pulling strips from his face and his other arm, letting them fall into the enamel bowl bit by bit. When they were bare, he finally tore away his chest, under which I still expected to a fresh bullet wound, but nothing tainted the pale expanse of his ribcage except the same soft black hair that grew on his head.

‘Well if Davies won’t talk... Brampton would make up tales about us, say that our mother was scared by an alligator when she was pregnant, that we were egg-hatched, that he found us swimming in the Florida swamps one day, and took us in for charity. He ought to have known that nothing scares our mother save the thought of being penniless. Mr Alligator would have been turned into a set of luggage had that first tale been anywhere near true. But people like a tall story. When I figured out I could make scales with nothing more than glue, well, it was the least I could do to keep her company, to lift away some of those stares onto me. I paint this Casco on, let it set, then crack it. It makes patterns just like hers. Like Blackjack oak bark.’ He caressed his sister’s arm like it was the softest skin of a child, then tore another strip from himself, half his neck falling away between his knees. I thought of the feet, hanging in the oak crop we’d passed on the way south, and shuddered.

‘This isn’t real, but it may as well be. People were all too ready to believe we were cold blooded and fang toothed, that we might bite their throats and pull them into the show ring if they got too close. No plate under here now. I wanted to meet as equals. What a shame I didn’t think of all this earlier though, Davies? Imagine, you shooting me and me walking away unscathed every time. The shows we could have put on... I was half-tempted to propose that in Elgin instead of pick a fight, get you to pay your debt that way. Have you jettison this unimaginative lump of – no offence John, but you’re about as interesting as a bag of rocks in the circles Davies and I moved in. Still, perhaps that can still happen, depending on how well you respond.’

Esmé lowered the rifle and bent down, with difficulty it seemed, Blackjack watching her all the while. She took Cal’s face in one hand and got so close they lips was almost touching, like she meant to bite him. She opened her mouth as if to speak, and I expected her voice to rasp, to match her patchwork skin, but nothing came out cept a small, sharp sigh and her teeth clamped down tight, like he was a disappointment she’d been expecting. Her eyes still seemed to rage at him. Her brother looked slack-jawed for once at this noise coming from her, then fixed Cal with a look that seemed full of envy. She pushed Cal’s face toward me with the flat of her palm. He was so gone-looking that I reckoned he wished they’d just shoot him and have done with it.

‘Can’t you look at her?’ Blackjack laughed. ‘I though the great Cal Bryce Davies could stare anybody down. Once again, I find myself disillusioned. You haven’t even struggled to get out that chair – your little friend here put up more of a fight.’ He jabbed Cal in the knee again, this time scraping his knife blade along the cap, the Texan gritting his teeth at the ceiling as Blackjack watched him and carried on speaking. ‘He used to call me his shadow. Everybody did. They’d say I lived in his footsteps, like we were attached heel to toe. You weren’t Cal if you didn’t have Jacques chasing after you. Trouble is, when you teach your shadow a trick or two...’ He let the words drift off. ‘You made us what we are.’

‘I didn’t put you in that freak show,’ Cal said, finally snapping.

‘No, but you left us there when you didn’t have to and I can’t see that’s any better now. You turned your back on the three of us without a second thought entering that shiny head of yours.’

‘Three?’

Blackjack’s face fell like it had been recast in lead.

‘Don’t you pretend you don’t know what I mean. One thing to leave my sister because you couldn’t love a freak, quite another to leave your child.’

I must have been looking as confused as I felt, cause Blackjack cocked his head at me.

‘Yes, John Farmer, don’t tell me you thought him above such things. There’s nothing to him, beyond pomade and a talent for killing things. We ought to pity him really, Esmé still does, I think. But I’m past that.’

Cal was mumbling. Esmé held his face up again with the rifle, and he finally looked straight at her. Her face was so still and set she looked like she had turned to stone.

‘I did love you,’ he said, in a voice as quiet as the steady drip of the wax that fell around us.

‘Until she disgusted you. That’s not love.’

‘No.’

‘Yes. Don’t lie. What good will it do you now?’

‘You had a child?’ I asked, unable to stop myself.

‘No,’ said Cal, ‘They’re stringing you along. She made it up to keep me there.’

Esmé shot the rifle off. It hit the chair back just behind Cal’s ear. Shards of wood and wax landed on him, peppering him like dirty pine needles, and he cried out with pain of the sound and heat so close to his face, pressing his ear to his shoulder to stop the ringing. Blackjack laughed and placed a hand gently round his sister’s arm. She lowered the rifle once more.

‘When her belly swelled, it got much worse. Something about the baby, it sent the scales down her legs and forearms. Brampton claimed she would lay a clutch instead of birth a baby. He’d get the audience to guess how many eggs she held. I half think he believed it himself. It didn’t matter, we made him a handsome amount in each new town, enough for him to buy up a permanent place. We were his star attraction, but you were long gone by then.’

‘I don’t believe you,’ Cal said, his voice still a paper-thin whisper.

‘He was born, with difficulty. But he was quite perfect. He showed no sign of any defect. And he grew at such a rate of knots that we could only attribute it to the weed-like quality of his father, but we loved him for it. Quite perfect. We sent you his likeness when we gave your friend here this address.’

‘I thought that was me.’

‘Did it not occur to you that you might have spread yourself about on your brainless trappings westward. You probably have entire litters out there. We were all young, making the best of bad lots. Esmé didn’t even care that you left her after a while, but you denied your own son existed.’ Blackjack pulled the photo of the boy outside the tent off the wall by my head and held it in front of Cal’s face. The Texan ignored it, grimacing still at the pair that loomed above him.

‘No.’

‘Yes. You’ve lived without consequences your whole life Davies but not any longer. You are responsible for this.’

‘What happened to him?’ I asked, and the Anjou twins snapped their necks toward me in unison.

‘He is dead. He was made to accompany his mother in the tent, so that people could compare his perfection to what Brampton called its depreciated origin, passing my sister and I off as his parents. He took a chill, fevered and died. Two years old. Esmé stopped speaking.’

Since she had slid into the room, Esmé hadn’t really moved, other than to study Cal’s face. I don’t reckon she’d even blinked. She’d listened to her brother talk about her like she wasn’t even there, like it hadn’t happened to her. But soon as Blackjack closed his mouth then, was like she woke up, like his words had been a winding her tighter and tighter and his silence was the release. She leaped onto Cal with all the energy that had built up in her, tipping them both over backwards, Cal’s rifle falling to the floor behind her. She sat astride his chest, again turning his face in both her hands, frantically this time, him pulling away from her, squirming under her hands so she couldn’t get no purchase. I think she was looking for tears, and not finding none, she screamed.

A shot exploded into the wall behind us, sending more wood and paper and hot wax flying, halting the cries that shook out of Esmé as quick and as violent as they’d started. Connie stood, shaking,

smoke billowing out the end of my gun as she held it out towards Esmé. She cocked it again, but I could tell she was struggling to focus. Her eyes was still glazed, though I was so glad to see them open, to see her moving, alive, that I could have started up shouting too. Esmé fell from Cal, weeping, into a pile of long limbs and dark hair folded up on the floor. We all watched her, Cal still trying to shuffle away, still attached to the chair, as sobs wracked her frame.

Get up,' Connie said, flicking the gun between Esmé and her brother like it was a moving snake she didn't want to be holding. He voice was thick and slow, but it chimed out in that room like church bells to me. Blackjack rose, slowly, grinning.

'She's still alive John, ain't that something? Let's see if we can fix that.' He made a grab for her, pulling on the end of the gun, which swung down and shot into the ground near Esmé's shaking form. Blackjack stepped away, backing off towards his sister. Connie was trying to keep herself upright, to keep that gun on them, but it was heavy, and she was struggling; if Blackjack tried to overpower her again, I reckoned he'd manage it. He bent down and pulled his sister's hair from her face. Then he kicked Cal in the groin with the heel of his boot; the Texan lay groaning on the floor, his bound arms clenching with the pain against the ropes that bound them. As if the sound of his pain was too much somehow, on top of her own, Esmé shrieked, and flew forwards, out of her brother's arms towards Connie. I unhooked myself from the back of my chair, realising too slowly that there warn't another round left in the chamber, but Esmé dashed past Connie, knocking the end of the gun and pushing Connie over onto the table she'd been laid on earlier. Then she ran out the room, still shrieking. Blackjack hovered, just a second, looking at the three of us as if he was weighing up his chances. Giving Cal another kick in the sides, he grabbed the Yellowboy, and his own pistol, and hurtled after his sister. Connie fell to the floor and I ran to her, taking the gun from her and scooping up her face in my hands.

'Fool,' she said, but her eyes, growing clearer by the second, smiled up at me. I sat her up, scrubbing dust and wax from her face and hair, trying to rub some warmth back into her, but he pushed by hands away and pointed at Cal, prone on the floor still tied to a chair. I righted him and untied him. He rocked forward out his seat, bent double, his hands over his crotch. Eventually he stopped groaning, as I stood and waited, in between him and Connie, not knowing what to do with

either of them. I felt like a small ship in between a great wave and a rocky shore. Eventually Connie spoke.

‘What are you waiting for? Go.’

‘You been out of my sight for the last ten years. I don’t want to let you out of it again.’

Cal had managed to stand; he picked up his revolvers and made to leave.

‘Miss,’ Cal gave Connie a nod, which she didn’t respond to. ‘Come on, John.’

I stood, looking at her, collapsed on that rough floor, smaller, and older and greyer than my hazy memories, and all the more perfect, and I couldn’t bear to leave her. I went over to her, her head lolling as she tried to keep fighting off the poison Esmé had fed her. She took my hand in hers and kissed it.’

‘Don’t give me that. You’ve gone ten years without me, you can spare another hour. Don’t let them get away with it.’ It took all my willpower to turn away, pick up my gun and follow Cal out into the street, leaving her for the second time that day, coughing on the floor as she heaved out the poison that still dragged its nails along her insides. I reckon I only managed it by saying to myself, over and over in my head as I emerged outside, to the river air and the horses skittering and waiting to be loosed, that I wouldn’t ever let it happen again. If she’d have me, I was hers. Cal and New Orleans and color be damned.

It was just like running down any other sack of shit who’d sidestepped what was coming to them, cept we was doing it in the French Quarter and the silent parades of the last hour were crawling once more, people who watched eyes popping in the dark at us tearing through the streets, three sets of hooves striking the ground one after the other like a train that had picked itself up off its tracks and taken a direction no-one could account for. Bodies lined the roads as they had done down in Kansas, only this warn’t a turn and shoot. Now the steamboats was out of sight, there was after another form of entertainment. Blackjack took us round the arch of the Mississippi then north, away from the river and the weedy air that was like silk on the skin after the sweat of my old home, back towards the cooked city middle.

Camel was skittering, ears back with the noise and pace of it all, his back taut; the whites of his eyes were ship lights floating in the sea of his dark fur. I was barely in the saddle when he flung us forward after Jim whose tail was flying like streamers ahead of us, stirring the night, his big legs pumps at the service of his master.

We each rounded the end of Custom House, and Blackjack started shooting. Crowds tipped away from him like foam under the prow of a boat, us cutting through them so close as to graze them with sweat and leather. A hand, drawn in moonlight, stretched out and grazed the side of Jim's flank as he raced forward. Cal didn't look down. Blackjack's coat whorled behind him like a forked tongue while he spat out bullets that each passed inches from Cal, the Texan ducking and twisting in his saddle at the sound and smoke of them. Folks stopped hooting and started screaming. Sods of dirt chewed up by fast hooves hit bystanders, crumbling down onto legs and feet as Blackjack turned near fully in his saddle and took aim square at Cal. That black horse was a machine, dodging people, streetlamps, carts, crates and barrels; it looked like it had grown out from under its rider, like he was once of those mythical war-creatures that was man and horse combined. I don't know where he'd hidden it but I would have believed it was magic then, at that speed, as he shot riding backwards with an ease that saw his last bullet hit a lamp directly next to Cal's head. I heard the tin note of metal bounding from metal. That shot right there confirmed everything Blackjack had told me, cause there was only one person knew how to aim like that and that was Cal Davies, who was going to get killed if we didn't get Blackjack off that horse somehow.

We swung out in arches as wide as the street would allow us so that we was never in the same place for long. Our horses knew them steps, knew to keep their heads down and their feet up as they swung across the rat run of the quarter. Spitting, Blackjack turned back into his saddle as we reached another crossroads on the grid of the city. They were our best chances to hit him; if he turned he'd leave the flanks of his horse and his sides exposed, but he could go in any one of three directions. I got Camel under the wrought-iron porches and ivy draped verandas that lined the road and covered the board walks, his hooves hitting the wooden planks like the old drums of Congo Square. Cal had Jim up on the other side, folks flattening themselves against walls and doorways or flinging themselves into the mud to avoid being trampled, the contents of the bottles still clutched in drunken hands sent

up in the air to rain down upon feet and faces. Camel slipped a beat on the slick wood of the rum and shit and sugar syrup stained bar fronts we passed, the smell of liquor and heat falling out of them to the tune of glasses on bars and raised voices. The struts of canopies and porches interfered with my line of sight, making the Texan look like one them spinning boxes full of pictures that make the man inside move. He raised his gun in fits and starts like someone had drawn each separate Cal. We was reaching another junction; Cal had his arm locked forward. Up on that horse he was a like flying statue, stone brought to life.

Blackjack skimmed right, towards Burgundy. Cal fired. I flew off the end of the gangway back onto the road, near barrelling into a buggy coming from my left. The horse shied and tried to turn in its strappings, and the buggy swung into the lamp that manned the crossroads, the driver clinging to his seat with both hands as his ride became a current he found himself dragged into. Camel turned so sharp I thought we'd both go over. It was like he'd twisted himself in half. Seeing the Yellowboy lying on the road, I leaned down to grab it, the tips of my fingers raking warm dirt. Cal had Jim turned round and I threw him the rifle. 'Clipped him', I heard him say though gritted teeth, as he raised the gun, but Blackjack was too far down the Canal already, and we was too short on bullets to spit them out on long shots.

He looked back, turned his big gun on us. I felt heat scorch the side of my neck before I even heard the crack of it firing. He didn't mean to let us stand still and get an aim on him. Jim pulled forward; Camel fell in, dirt and frothed sweat hitting his chest as he followed. A band had started somewhere nearby, horns and snares setting out a different rhythm to ours, hooves and bullets, the rasp of horses' lungs. The street seemed to squeeze above me; killing things, animals, men, and them that sit in-between, that was a job for open spaces, out of the eyes of others. Here a whole city was watching as we tore it up. I didn't reckon the sets of eyes that shone in the bar light along the street was any more friendly than Blackjack had pretended to be when he showed up them few weeks ago. They quit screaming and began to cheer, despite the shooting, and held up lamps and bottles as if we were a funeral procession passing along, the band I could hear but not see playing us toward a grave. I started to feel sick again, the rock of four legs under me shifting my guts. Cal was slowing. I inched Camel out from behind him to see that Blackjack was turning, stopping, aiming at Cal again. Another

shot cleaved the air and hit a cymbal, just as the gaping brass mouths of tubas and trombones and the white eyes of drum skin danced across our path; we had to pull up sharp, and watch as the marching band, their dark solemn faces not paying us no heed, weave and sound its way over the street like a great rattler, our horses shying and shrieking at the sound and the interruption. We had to watch as Blackjack rode out of our vision to the drunken jeers and hoots of the quarter that saw out the band as it finally unhemmed us and played on into the night without dropping a beat.

We stood outside the Catholic cemetery on Basin; its small entrance looked like an accident in the dark, a loose shape made of crumbled brick, but that little mouth opened into a gullet full of thousands of the city dead and that meant lots of place to hide. Them cemeteries, they was each a maze of tombs and brick and tight corners, as if someone had set about designing one of them fancy European gardens and run to madness from a love of marble. If Blackjack was hiding in there, I fancied he'd shoot us before got past the first alley. They was normally in use, one way or another, all day long; mourners by day and bone-loving spirit botherers by night, but no drums, no whispers nor plumes of tobacco or smoke flew above the walls. A single shot, fired like a flare into the air from within the cemetery walls had sent the clutch of usual reprobates skidding out from Basin in all directions, drums and dice and dope abandoned in fear, and let us know we was on the right street.

Was like we fell off the edge of the earth; all the city racket, the beats, the almost-noise of hundreds of eyes sliding in their sockets to turn and follow you, was gone, left behind in the quarter while we teetered on the line between city life and the city dead. A slow sound started up, a thud that got louder, a lower shift of breath. Cal and I both aimed at the cemetery mouth like we was madmen out to attack a wall. Out of the darkness, Blackjack's horse appeared, stepping out of that hole like it was being formed piece by piece as it emerged, only fully taking shape in the lamplight. He walked halfway out and stood, riderless, unblinking, the sides of his enormous head lit up on either side like someone had smeared him with greasepaint. Up close he made Jim look like a knock-kneed foal and Camel look like he warn't even a horse at all, but some miniature version, a toy a child might pull on a string.

We pulled it out of the gate and tethered it to a street lamp. It followed without trouble. Behind that small gateway lay a dangerous sprawl of vaults, parapets, and levels, laid out in such a way that a man could easily get cornered or ambushed, only it warn't thieves or pimps who we had to worry on. Cal was reloading, trying to peer over the wall but its top sat above him and all there was to consider was that black hole of a gate. I pulled him away from the wall, out of earshot.

'Keep your head down,' I said. 'Walk slow, walk quiet. We got no way of knowing where he'll be. I'll take the left alley, you go right. We won't be able to see much, it'll be dark as the swamps in there; you'll have to yell if you come to trouble and I'll make my way towards you.' Cal nodded, his face hollow and tired. I stopped him a second longer.

'I'm sorry about your boy.' He peered down at me, blinking, the look on his face the one he'd get when he was set to killing something. Then he shrugged me off and ducked through the ivy-webbed wall.

I followed, turning away from him and baby-stepping along the crypts that made up the other side of the cemetery wall. It warn't as dark as I'd guessed; the stone seemed to eat up the moonlight then spit it out again, and folks had left candles burning, innocent, white wax pillars gathered round the feet of the tombs. The crypts, stacked one by one on top of each other in one long stretch, held thousands, bodies baked down in the New Orleans heat so they could fit, bony cheek to bony cheek, inside them walls like human hay bales. I felt my way along them, keeping my back close to the wall, the uneven hand-shaped bricks probably made by the same folks that now sat inside them spongy under my fingers. I looked back; Cal was out of sight. I felt a strange relief right then, a quiet, solid thought that I could just turn heel, and leave him, put all of this down and walk away from it; this, for all my failings, was his stain to clean. He'd gotten a woman pregnant and left her; men have done that before and will do it again no doubt, ugly though it is, but he picked the wrong one to railroad. He should have, if he loved her, if he didn't even, looked to her and his own. I know what my mother was, but she never once left me, or let me feel like any of what she did to feed me was a part of me, was a mark upon my me in anyway.

I almost did it, almost. I stopped walking and turned around, looking back towards the entrance, looking back to Connie, the second woman Cal had put in harm's way through his thoughtlessness.

He didn't deserve help, I knew that, even found myself saying it in my mind as I stood there, dragged in two directions. Moonlight shone on the pediments, flaring up their lime washed shades: earthy yellow like swamp gas, soot grey, a red that had once been ruby and was now rust, all bedecked with coins and trinkets, shining next to piles of dying flowers that seemed colourless in comparison. I could see a glint in the distance – Cal's pistols creeping slowly forward in that tight maze of thousands.

I could make out shapes sat up high above me, a jagged skyline that hid the city of the living behind it. Three points on a marble cross, the spikes of a wrought-iron fence much lower, the sheath-like razors of a palm, the tree grown tall from the damp and the smell of body rot that hid in the vaults and crept out when the brick that held it in began to fail. There warn't no clear line of sight; even the alleyways that cut through the cemetery were uneven. It was like the yard had grown there long ago, and people had gouged out hollows in it where they could, to pass through the ever-encroaching marble. They was all in there, negroes, slaves, whites, visitors, the victims of yellow fever, age or poverty, all currencies that bought you a home in those walls.

Underneath was water, always pushing its way up. In the quiet I reckoned I could hear it moving. There was the soft whickering of horses still, the short stamp of hooves on the ground as they waited outside this gloomy pen. Out west you know that when your feet touched dirt it won't move under you; peaks and valleys and stretches of grass so long you thought they might just spit you out in China when they ended but at least they was solid. Louisiana was afloat, a place about as secure as barrels stuck together with spit and bail twine. You live there and you live everyday with the feeling that that might be the day when it all breaks apart and goes gurgling in pieces across the Atlantic, or capsizes and submerges all who live in it to drown under a lid of stucco and weeds. I remember thinking maybe that would be for the best as I got moving again, further in, the thought of taking Connie back out west, to dry fields and honest work, the thought of Blackjack looming over that, making that impossible, like an invisible kick in the pants that got me moving again.

I turned a corner, back still as tight to the stone as I could stand. The heat of the day drained quick from the crypts, sucked up by them inside, after some last reminder of life, and it left the graves clammy as the hands of the feverish. My mother was in there, somewhere. I didn't know where.

Nobody ever showed me. They just took her and said to me *your mammy lives on Basin Street now* with not even a laugh at their own ill joke. I never went in to her. I'd been in the cemetery before – she'd fetched me up to see somebody, a friend I had no memory of, his grave a white square of stone my childish self couldn't figure as containing no past lives. But when I walked up to the gates a year after she died, when the body, the pieces of her that lingered when the skin and face and flesh was gone, was to be moved and interred with them many others that waited for that next link in their xylophone spine of skulls and kneecaps, I couldn't go in. I stood outside the ivy covered wall, picturing what was just the other side, picturing someone pulling at her bones, raising them from their quiet, making them suffer daylight and human touch one last time before being put back in the dark again, no quiet this time but the chatter of dead teeth, the never ending conversations of them that has lived and died in the city since some fool planted his foot on Louisiana soil, felt it push through kissing mud and thought, I can go no further, this will have to do. I was sick, outside that gate, sick on my shoes, and taking fright at the cold ministering hands of them just leaving they own dead, coming out the gate, I ran off and never came back.

I found myself whispering sorry in my head then, as I put one foot down quietly, after the other, scanning the scattered boxes of brick and marble in front of me, their blank sides, some toppled, some smooth and still as the eyelids of a sleeping man who has no need of a gun. Damp stone has a smell, and the bricks, formed loose from clay and sand being squeezed together and dried, they smelled like they was unforming, letting go of their shape and turning back into liquid that might pour down any moment and pool about my feet. I noiselessly asked my mother to stop that from happening, to keep them that was inside inside still, mouthing to her as I walked. Keep them bricks square. I could smell the sweet, breath-stealing scent of Blackjack and Esmé's nest again, the burnt wax and rope and herbs abroad in the air.

I reached bigger tombs, heavy squares that towered above me like the squat legs of some giant stone beast planted down as it walked, only they was engraved and carved upon, letters gouged out to name them that sat inside. I moved further in and found myself stood in front of a circular vault with archways carved out of its sides and iron rings dripped in lines down from its peak to the ground. In the archway closest to me sat a lady made of stone, candles at her feet, white flowers balanced in her

hands. Her eyes was closed. The green light made it look like her carved robes were silk and that her eyelids, behind which sat nothing but un-seeing and untouched rock, were paperish thin and like to move from sleep any second. I walked by her, treading round the vault and passed another identical marble face. At the very top of the column, I could make out a plinth with a cross, the ends picked out in moonlight. I edged round to a third arch, on the opposite side of the tomb, expecting to be met by another white, blank face. Blackjack was sat on the plinth, eyes closed, gun in hand where flowers ought to have been, feet in an exact mockery of his stone counterparts.

His eyes opened, and before I could think I was running round the vault, a flash of fire at my heels that would have hit if that vault warn't round. He laughed and I felt the heavy thud of his feet hitting the ground. I ran weaving into the denser, more packed-in grids to my left, hoping to stay out of sight. He'd meant to hit me. He warn't playing no more games. We had to stay out of his sights until as he was square in ours. I stopped behind the end of a tomb and peered back. I could see a large black shape scaling the arched vault using them rings, as he hauled hisself to the top and hung off that cross looking for me like a vulture looking for a bone to strip. He whistled, then screeched into the night, 'Come out come out, and join your dear old ma. It's as good a place to die as any, better even, we can just seal you up right here and now...'

I could see the tip of his gun flash in the dark as he slowly turned. Something about him, I wouldn't have been surprised if he would have taken flight then and come to bear down on me with that rifle instead of claws. I was sweating through my pants, and old riding scars seemed freshly raw as I crouched in the catacomb dark. I could hear my own lungs touch rib as they bagged in and out and I hoped they warn't so loud outside my body. I could hear the faint roll of the band still, more an echo than a sound, and what felt like people beyond the walls, shuffling feet and fire crackle. I stayed still as the tombs around me, until he eventually stopped circling and crowing and jumped clean off the top of the vault to the ground, stalking off, silent, in the opposite direction.

I moved on, headed what I thought was east. Blackjack had gone north. I was funnelled into another row of tall slabs, the seam of my pants eating into my skin as I walked with bent legs to keep low. Blackjack started up whistling, the high, tinny sound drifting through the stones like dirt blown

off a field. He was still nearby, though the sound didn't stay put, and seemed to circle back like he'd sent it out as scout to catch me.

A jingle of coins, a thud, a stifled, barely formed breath off to my right, quiet, but enough to stop the whistling, which cut off quicker than a hair trigger in a nervous hand. The ounce of silence was followed by the swift beat of a leather coat as it flew across the tombs, feet knocking over flower vases as they homed in on the source of the noise. I ran too. Cal must have slipped; unless he moved fast he'd be caught out. I sped down the alley, spying the entrance to my right, thinking for just a second again that I could leave, runaway and tie up this place with the ivy round the gate, so nothing could come out or in again, but my feet had taken me past it before my brain had given them other paths to consider. I came up short just as I was about to run into the eastern wall. On the floor were shavings of what looked like Blackjack's second skin, shredded and scattered like breadcrumbs that led down the length of the wall. There was no sign of Cal. I stopped to pick up a piece; it seemed near see through in the lime washed glow, the pattern inside just visible and swirled like a peeled off finger print. When I got back up, Esmé was standing a few hundred feet away, tearing up more pieces and throwing them like flower petals down about her, her face in shadow but her eyes clear and fierce as the sights on Cal's rifle.

A flash of gunfire lit up the middle of the cemetery in yellow and Esmé stepped away, behind a far wall. Cal came out of nowhere behind me, face alight with frustration. All in white he looked like a spirit flying out to come choke the life out of me.

'Was that you or him?' I asked in the lowest voice I could manage. He pointed at himself. I cocked my head down the alley. 'She's down there.' He nodded and stalked off in that direction, careful as he could manage; he wasn't used to this, the waiting and walking and waiting again, he was better at chasing things down with them never really getting time to think on it. This coiling had got him uptight. I followed, arms seized in their familiar position, elbows in, gun up, eyes roving in their sockets trying to look in all directions at once, muscles becoming brains, thinking and moving for themselves.

A shot blew up the air again, thin sulphurous light spat out momentarily as a bullet bit into Cal's left arm; he reeled and fell but got himself out the way of a volley of three more, sent like hydra's heads off the back of the last one. They hit the stone wall and sprang away in all directions. I was at Cal before I knew it, my hand pressed to the wound until his replaced mine. My fingers came away wet and burgundy. He leaned back on a tomb, his left arm hanging by his side like he didn't recognise it. Blood spidered down his sleeve, making tracks over his knuckles, and dripped from his fingertips onto the damp ground. There was no sign of Blackjack, no more footsteps in the dark. Cal's eyes sprang open and closed in pain and surprise. This was the first time he'd really been on the receiving end of his own particular medicine, first time he really understood the pain of a gun. Realisation threaded through every nerve in his body and face like he'd been set on fire. Gritting his teeth he stood back up straight. He wiped the hair from his sweat stung eyes, streaking the gold of his fringe with blood. I took the rifle off him and swapped his left pistol into the right holster, and he shooed me back and set off again after Esmé, one arm swinging like dead weight. I watched him disappear round the furthest corner before setting back toward the middle of the graveyard.

I felt like I was sweating more out than I'd ever had water in my body, but my hands felt cold and stiff round the Yellow Boy, glossy neck stretched out in front of me like it could smell something I couldn't. The rifle was heavy in my hands; the packed in air of the night gave it a weight it didn't normally have. They were close by - I could smell them, soil salted with sweat. I could also smell the blood on my hands, sticky but not drying on my damp palms. My knuckles looked like a set of dice, they sat so stiff and prominent under my taut skin, time as stretched as the moment between pulling a trigger and the man in front of you falling off his horse and ploughing head first into the dirt as his beast runs out from under him.

Pieces of skin littered the floor here too, not in no trail but in a loose fashion like seeds thrown haphazard and without hope, and Esmé warn't at the end of any turns I took. I reckoned I'd reached at the heart of the yard; the area was thick with parapets and platforms that seemed to be clustered together instead of being stacked in rows. Everywhere was corners, like the hills and ridges and horizons that had loomed over us those past weeks had constricted, and held me in a grip that had been slowly tightening, wound smaller and stronger with each step we took south. We'd gone from

sharp, sun burnt grass to the cool indifferent face of marble, but the effect was just different ends of the same coiling knot.

The whistling started up again, a siren song to drag us closer. I headed what I figured was north again, towards the end where they stuck them that didn't carry no rosaries; the tombs here were old and brown and crumbling like wet sand and coffee grits. More food for yellow fever: it warn't choosey about what you thought a little bit of bread and wine was capable of. A glance up at the moon and she looked fit to burst. Cal's blood shone on my hand and coated the stock of the rifle. I watched the skyline, certain that on top of those dark steeples and crosses, was a barrel looking out for me, insides darker than my own, cold and hard while mine were soft and churning and I didn't have no metal plate nor second skin to save them.

'Why are you still here, John Farmer?' I saw the glisten of an eye darken before a round cuffed my ear and I felt the hot soak of my own blood run down on to my neck before I felt the burn of the graze. I ducked back, rifle held out before I dared lean myself back round to scope out the range he was at. Another round sunk itself into the brick near my eye. I hid again.

'You're going to take bullets for that cut prick on legs when you could be half way out the city by now with your negress – that is, if my sister hasn't finished her off. Careless to leave her unattended once, John, but just foolish to do it again. For what now? Your friend? He wouldn't be doing the same.' His voice spat out into the space between us, sharp and fast as bullets.

'I'm here for Connie.'

'Don't fool yourself, you're playing his left hand again like you always do.'

'You and that nest mate of yours hurt a decent woman who'd done nothing in the world to you. Can't let that pass.'

'I see. Well, will she love you dead then, as that's what you'll be if you carry this on, a carcass for her to bury, instead of a sweetheart. Mind, some sweetheart you'd make; you've been under one thumb or another so long you're not really much a person, are you? You're just bits and pieces of pain set to walking. You'd be no use to her, if she's still alive. What, is Davies going to take care of you with her in tow? You're just a part of the Cal Bryce Davies sideshow; roll up, roll up, and see the lowest, bug-bitten, shit-kicking, pussy-blind zombies in all of the great fucking West. Only this isn't

the West now, this is New Orleans. Thinking you can catch a bead on me in my home now.

Optimisms fine but you can't shoot nothing with it can you? I know I clipped him. Too easy. I'm disappointed.'

'He's had worse than that.' I could hear him breathing, the wet hiss of his sneering mouth, the sound of him reloading.

'No, he hasn't. Don't lie. You forget I know all about him. And I also know a fool who can't recognise an opportunity to live when I see one. Go, leave him here. Leave him to my sister and I, and you'll not be hearing from us again. Go. You know you want to, I'll make it easy.'

'I ain't falling for that. I don't trust you as far as I could swing you, and we both know that ain't spitting distance.'

'I didn't know you were funny, John Farmer. I mean it though, if you want to walk, well I won't stand in your way.'

I took my hat off. I was going to test him.

'You sure?'

'Dead serious.'

I stuck the rifle out of my hiding spot, as if the rest of me was going to follow, but tipped my hat out, keeping the bulk of me hidden. My hat flew out my hand, chewed up in mid-air by several rounds, fired so quick the sound melted into one long bang.

'Bullshit,' I yelled at him.

'You got me. I've got a sensitive trigger finger.'

'No, you just a lying shit sack.'

'Alright, alright, if you insist upon having this nonsense out – and I strongly encourage you to reconsider and drop that rifle but something tells me that that makes too much sense right now for you – then why don't we have this out in the open, quit hiding behind these dead folks. I've been in a gun fight with your master, not much of one but still, not you though. We were just playing before.'

'He ain't my master.'

'I beg to differ.'

‘I’m keeping you away from him. He’s following your sister, see. She’s here you know, swooning about unarmed like the goddamn featherhead she is. He’s probably found her already.’

That gave him some gristle to chew on, and he held his tongue. I finally stuck my nose out again, looking for that gleaming eyeball on me, above the black, empty hole of his gun barrel. He warn’t there. I slowly emerged from my hideout, but nothing came at me. I picked up what remained of my hat and stuck it back on my head, scuffing my bloodied ear. Sweat stung the wound. Faint, a distance away, I could hear a whistle, a different sort to Blackjack’s, a quiet version of the one I’d heard out in Kansas, a call that waited for a response, more breath than sound, stifled under the tongue. He was looking for his sister. Nothing came back at first, cept the quick in-out breath of the cemetery; then, just as faint, the answer, the two notes to his one long, snaking sound. It came again, and I heard movement, the swoop of his coat as he moved toward her. I aimed to get there first. I set up running, winding my way like water between the graves, their colors like the lights you see when someone’s broken your nose, or hit you with the butt of a pistol, and sent your eyes watering.

The frogspawn moon was still low, the color of a man’s veins in hot weather. There was blood on the ground, on the stone plinths, on the pocketfuls of old nickels growing lichen over time. A closer look told me Cal had passed this way; the blood was wet and only just browning. My feet seemed ten times too large in my boots, like I was somehow soaking up the water beneath me til it puffed out my skin then squeezed itself out as sweat. Holding that rifle felt like someone had tied my limbs together. I daren’t let it drop but it seemed just as sore and trying as being tied to that chair, no step that warn’t determined by that metal arm that demanded the obedience of my other two as it facelessly reached into the dark. My fingers, cracked and split from years of dust-bite, pressed into its indifferent metal. It reminded me of pressing my thumbs up under Connie’s eyes, taking the bones and warm flesh that made up her expressions and holding them, as looks fluttered across her face like hummingbirds busy around a flower until all would calm and she’d shut her eyes and rest. Compared to that, the gun felt strange in my hands, lifeless but dangerous, like a half-dried out rattler you might pass on a trail, one that looks dead but foregoes the warning and kills your horse out of spite, working only a will to make death when it belongs less and less to life. They seemed like different hands that held that face, hands that still belonged to life. Now they just seemed to extend backward out of that still, gleaming rifle.

A shuffle somewhere behind me. I crouched behind the nearest grave again, checking the tops of the tombs around me. They were clear; nothing roosted up in their crossed and gabled peaks. Cal, stooped and slow, came creeping on up ahead of me, feet flat and near silent in the dirt. I threw a stone out at the opposite grave and thankfully he saw me instead of shooting. He staggered over and sat, leaning back against a tall tomb made of ugly, rough brick that had been put up cheap and browned in the sun. It hadn't been finished, and a large, man-size gap was left, picked out in chewed up blocks that was already turning to grit; it sat just above where Cal rested. His wound was puckered and seeping, and he looked ashy and old somehow, the fullness leached out of his cheeks as he chewed his cheeks on the pain of it. His eyes were too busy, too wide in that sinking face, trying to focus on me and the alley, and to keep from rolling back into his skull as I clamped my hand to the wound again. I removed my belt, tightening it round the top of his arm til it bit into his grey flesh and stopped the bleeding some.

I looked him up and down as he leaned back against the half-closed grave, breathing too slow. He warn't fit to be left to wander no more.

'You'll have to stay here, rest a moment, then we'll make our way out.'

'Which way is out?'

'I'll get you out.'

'But we're not finished.'

'No, but you ain't far off getting that way so best we leave.'

'We don't leave a job unfinished, especially if it's killing a man. You know that.'

'That shit don't apply right now. All of this is because of you, you know. We's been taunted and harangued and shooed south and penned into this little colosseum here because you treat everybody like theys confetti at the tickertape parade that floats about your head, til it falls to the ground and you trample it that is. You can't even see what you did. Don't talk to me about finishing no job. It's what you left unfinished is why we're here. We got to leave, if you want to live. Even then, it won't be living like you lived before.' I stood, fiddling with bullets in the dark, my hands too slick and shaky to push them into the barrel right.

'What do you mean?'

‘You had a child. Ain’t that anything to you? He died cause of you; don’t that register in some part of you?’ I was scanning the alley while he tried to keep sat upright. ‘Don’t that pain you?’

‘Children die of fever all the time.’

‘Don’t give me that. He was yours.’

‘He was theirs. He came from her. Better he died. I couldn’t raise him. I couldn’t play daddy to a freak.’

‘He was the image of you Cal. He looked fine to me.’

‘So did she at first.’ Our voices had started to climb, our words hissed through our teeth like they was too much like venom to swallow.

‘You would have made a shitty father.’ I’d meant it as an insult, but soon as I’d said it I realised how true it was, a cold, leaden fact that seemed so obvious yet so new, so fresh a thought, that it made me see him square on for the first time ever, sat there lousy and bleeding out from his own folly; a self-inflicted wound that he would never take responsibility for. I spat at his feet for the second time that night, shaking my head at him like I was his own father. ‘You’re right. He is better off.’

The blades of the palm rattled; cold sweat dripped from the tombs in time with the slowing blood that fell from Cal’s sleeve. A moth hummed past my ear, its wings beating the air around the bullet graze, making it sting again, the rub of its wings turned vibration into pain. Cal’s head lolled and fell and swung side to side as he tried to clamp his eyes open. Somewhere outside the walls, though it could have been miles away for all it mattered, a lone trumpet dropped out notes to no particular beat, but nearby I heard a smaller noise, like the distant call of a familiar bird, one that gets louder as much through memory as from movement. Again, and again it came til we was surrounded by the sound of crying.

Cal had his eyes wide open; he sat bolt straight before scrambling to get up, struggling to move his weight. Hands came out of that hole just above where he’d been sat, arms, a howling face, set rigid in dismay as Esmé grabbed onto Cal’s shoulders and wrapped her fingers about his neck. He staggered, his left arm useless and flailing, his back sagging with the weight of her, slight though she was. A knife slipped from her sleeve into her hand as she wrestled to get a grip on him. I tried to dislodge her, to pull her hands away, but they was tight and set as a ribcage about the gasping stem of his throat and

if I tried to shoot her I'd only hit him. His crashing about dragged her further on out of that grave and the pair landed hard in a flailing mass of limbs and hair.

The noise she made wasn't normal; neither laugh nor weeping, it started back down in her deepest innards and erupted from her body like a ship's horn courses through the whole of the boat, a drum that keeps on sounding once the note is stuck. It shook her whole being and his beneath her. Her nails dug into his flesh; the sheen of her scales made his hands look like soft-footed doves fluttering in vain against a creature made only of muscle, sinew and rage, an impassable rocky treacherousness made miniature on her skin. Her hair fell over him in green tinged strands of shadow. Cal dropped his pistol and pulled as best he could on it, dragging bloodied strands away from her scalp, but she held on. The shape of Blackjack appeared out from the end of the alley; in the night haze his limbs seemed to form and reform from the dark as he emerged.

'Run John,' Cal said. He dragged Esmé fully out of the grave and she hung onto him like her legs had given up working. He swung her round so that her back was to her brother; she didn't seem to notice no more where she was, just clung to him like he was made of gold. Blackjack held off; he had no clear aim at Cal that didn't go through his sister, but he yelled her name, over and over, chirped, pleaded, but she paid him no heed. He started up towards us and I ran just as bullets rang out into the alley's narrow cavern of brick. Cal had about managed to tip himself upright. Esmé's arms were wrapped round his shoulders and head, her knife grazing his scalp. He ran backwards at the half-wall of the tomb, smashing her back into it with a force that unseated her. He did it again, again, each time her grip getting weaker, her brother getting nearer and nearer as the air was rammed out of her lungs. He did it again, and the wall went, crashing inwards in a pile of lumpy rock and dust that sent them both down backwards. Cal screamed as his shoulders hit the ground, but he was up quick, clutching his neck as she lay open mouthed and eyes rolling with her feet sticking out into the dirt like a discarded dolly. He picked up his pistol and shot her three times, head to ribs, before I had taken a breath.

Her body jumped with each shot; then, in the stillness after, when her head lay broken, and her skull was open to the air, her hand uncoiled. Twists of red gold hair fell out as the last flashes of thought left her face. Blackjack took form as he ran, firing at every piece of us. I darted behind a

stone. Bullets, one after the other, came at me with such spit that it seemed like shooting the space my body had just been occupying was still sport enough for him. Chips of stone flew out from their perpetual rest and shattered to white dust over my legs as I fell. Cal's face hit the ground and I thought we were both dead in that spit of time, til I saw he still held his pistol out. I fired and hit Blackjack square in the ribs. He slowed for only a second, the sooty blast of his gun turning to empty clicks as he ran out of rounds and raised it to bring down on Cal's head as he ran. Cal was on his knees, good arm held out as steady as I'd ever seen it. He waited, until Blackjack was feet from him, then fired. Blood sheeted out of Blackjack's belly, as it should have done in Egin, as he swung his gun down on the Texan's skull and knocked him back down. He got his gun under Cal's chin and pressed down on his throat, the length of the barrel flattening Cal's neck. Blood covered the Texan's face, running from Blackjack's gut down onto him in bright red bursts. I set to beating the back of Blackjack's head and back with the Yellow Boy. Bullets are fine when you got them, worse than useless when you ain't.

There we were. Three things slowly beating the life from each other with every bit of strength they had in a soiled, cut-up pile on a grave, killing each other and killing themselves with the effort of it. Each time I raised my arms and struck, the less force it seemed to have, til I thought I might shake my arms to bone and fall into a grave like Esmé and have no more use of my limbs. He pushed me away, keeping his weight on Cal's windpipe. The lines of his teeth were filled in with blood. I picked up a brick from the rubble about his sister and hit him with that instead. There was a dull, thick, wet sound as the brick fell in two in my hands, but his grip slacked off. Cal stopped pulling at his fingers as the gun fell away from the Texan's neck, the cords that ran the length of it pulling like piano strings under the skin. Blackjack hit me in the ribs with the stock of his gun before he fell onto the side of his face, arms limp, gasping from empty lungs. Cal was gaging and heaving, turned on his side like his guts was about to come flying out his mouth. Blackjack clawed for my feet as I doubled over, cradling my fresh cracked rib. I'd heard the bone go, the pain carried itself up between my ears and rang there like a bell. Blackjack was raising his hands up my leg like he meant to climb me, his gun abandoned by my feet. The back of his head was blood soaked; it shined in his hair like oil, but his eyes were as clear as fresh water and the moon sat in them. I hadn't cracked his skull yet. He stared up at me, curious, cold, like I was just a tree that needed cutting down, a patch of field that needed burning.

Cal heaved himself up out of the dirt and grabbed onto Blackjack's ankles. He dragged himself along, elbows digging into Blackjack's spine. He laced the fingers of his good hand into Blackjack's hair, nails bloodied and ragged. He had a deep red band painted across his throat and blood ran down his face, dirtying his collar. Blood and liquid the colour of lady's rouge seeped out from underneath Blackjack, widening as Cal's weight pushed down on his middle. Cal's wounded arm swung uselessly, the skin that was roped underneath my belt pale and baggy, fingers twitching.

I stepped backwards and fell against a slab of marble. Blackjack slumped flat again, face twisted up, still looking at me with his cheek pressed into the dirt, mouth back in that grin that was half-made of pain. Cal lifted his head up by his hair, his grip clumsy under the seep of sweat and blood and rain. He brought it up as high as Blackjack's body would allow, then he brought it down onto the rocky corner of the crumbled grave. Blood and breath fell out of Blackjack's body like he was a drain being pumped, a breached levy. Still his hands reached out, fingers outstretched like lightning was being passed through his limbs. Cal did it again. He was tiring and slumped further and further down with each blow; his eyes were shut – he wasn't even looking at what he was doing now, just thrashing their bodies in one slowing rhythm. Blackjack was laughing gently, the sound only halted when his head hit dirt and stone. His nose was broken and sat at a strange angle. His eyes were blackening. He spat out teeth and they looked like graves in miniature, forgotten in a wash of soil and rainwater.

I managed to get onto my knees, leaning on the rifle, chest pressing in and out like someone had set bellows to the fire in my ribs. Blackjack's coat lay half way down his back, draped to the side like old tanner's stock, the fleshy ridges of his ribs stretching up and out from the hollow of his back, pale like pig skin leather, pressed in by Cal's knees. His skin rippled with each blow. All traces of his side show scales were gone, pulled or washed off, his skin pale, smooth, as vulnerable as anyone else's to bruises, cuts, the instant chew of a round through flesh. Cal raised his head one more time and held it there. His face was turned to me, to the moon that cast down rain upon us. Blackjack's Adam's apple lunged up as he struggled to breathe.

'This is more like it,' he said, the words formed out of foam that popped at the sides of his mouth like froth at the edge of the sea, each bubble pushing the last out of existence. His body twisted like a

creature whose neck is in the jaws of another, whose last moments will be spent punctured slowly and licked at by a probing tongue that begins to taste flesh before the last breath has left the body it holds.

Cal dropped his head and it fell mouth open back into the dirt, sunk in a pool of his own spit and teeth. I kicked his gun away from him; he'd got no ammunition, but I still didn't trust him with it. I could hear the sound of horses' hooves the tip of dirt kicked up by metal shoes. Soft breath in the dark. Cal didn't look like he could hear or see anything. His eyes fluttered open and closed and he fumbled for his other pistol, movements so slow and off-centre that he looked like he was trapped in quick sand. His hand groped around his belt until he finally touched metal.

Camel's head turned round the corner of the alley, Connie taking shape by his side, limbs growing out of the night as she got nearer. Jim followed, leading Blackjack's horse, heads bowed like a train of mourners who've arrived before the last death rattle. Cal pressed the barrel of the pistol slowly to the back of Blackjack's head. The Texan's face turned towards the sky, though I don't think he saw nothing in that instant. The moonlight washed over his face in one last wave. Blackjack's eyes met mine again.

'The boy is in - ', he said. Cal pulled the trigger, and Blackjack's skull became a marble bowl, its contents falling into the dirt, shining in the night like they held life yet. Cal collapsed and fell off Blackjack into a heap of his own, and I felt Connie's warm hand, smelling like horse, touch the sides of my filthy face, pressing my eyes shut.

We all left the cemetery that night in a quiet, slow procession. Cal was slumped over Jim's neck, bleeding silently, not even holding on with his good hand he was that bad off. Jim walked on steady and rocked him while he looked at the insides of his eyelids and warmed his face on horse hair. Killing brings with it its own sort of quiet, like the pause between a breath in and a breath out, held longer than necessary for the sake of silence. It ain't just the runners and riders who feel it. We emerged out of that hole in the wall into a hushed city. It had taken the last precarious scraps of strength we that were still living had to heave Jacques Anjou over the back of that horse of his. It stood like a memorial to its dead master, still as a grave while we pushed and pulled his dead weight over its back, Cal dragging the last of Blackjack over the saddle with his one arm before he collapsed

again. He wouldn't touch Esmé. I didn't make him. Connie and I lifted her up onto Camel; her pitted skin and her height gave her a look of weight, of a taut, hard body that had moved forcefully over the earth. We discovered though, when we grasped her wrists and ankles, that she was light as a sack of cotton bolls, bird-boned. I had to resist the urge to tie her to my saddle, lest she float away into the rain-pooled night. Jim stooped to let Cal roll onto him and off we went. I wasn't sure if I was leaning on Connie or if she was leaning on me. We nosed our way round that blood-soaked maze and stepped through the wall on to Basin, horse by horse by horse. Leaving the gate was like slipping through a bubble, the film not wanting to give until its surface brakes beyond repair; the clutching, feeble fingers of New Orleans ghosts dragged at our coattails until we were out of reach, their many arms withdrawing, impotent, resentful. My mother was among them, and I hope she held them back, and let us pass back into the streets where life lived on still.

For the first time in weeks I was cold, rattle-boned cold, and I could feel a slight wind harden around my damp limbs and prick at my bloody ear. Camel's fur dripped like leaves after a storm; blood ran down his legs. It wasn't his. We turned back into the quarter, and the glow and heat of the city took up our faces again. People were still stood, talking softly, lights and bottles aloft, waiting for us, waiting to see which of us was upright and which of us wasn't. I bet they hadn't banked on it being the mulatto and the rusty little runt, leading on them horses, hobbling along but alive. The three beasts were the ones slung over saddles like so many sacks of grain, the three sideshow stars, so big they tore each other to pieces as giants are like to do, two dead and one clinging to a life as slippery as the sweat that covered him and his horse. Connie spoke then, and finally she sounded whole, not like she was pushing her words up from down inside a red raw throat.

'John,' she said, stopping me, her hand round my wrist, the gap where one of her strong fingers used to be pressed on my skin for the first time. 'John.' She said it again, and it was the best sound anyone could ever hear, an anchor dropped into calm seas after night's longest storm, the steady hand of sunlight once lightning, and thunder have thrashed themselves out of existence. Her voice severed the night from its moorings in my mind and stopped my footsteps flat in the middle of the quarter. I turned to her and the gentle weight of hooves stopped step by step behind me. I could feel Camel's nose on my back. I looked at her face, properly, for the first in ten years, I looked at her. I dropped the

Yellow Boy in the dirt as I took my hands and placed them underneath her eyes, the skin as exact and perfect as the day I'd left it. Only one looked rested on her face right then and it stayed and met me full force. I stopped caring, in that moment, in that street, about what had already happened, and started to think truly, about what would happen next, with her and no-one else.

Cal was lowered down from Jim and carried by many sets of hands to a doctor. His arm had to be cut off. I only went to see him once. I brought his pistols to him, and sat cleaning them there, in the silence of that little room that smelled like alcohol and iron, as I had done countless times over them years we spent together. His sleeve was pinned up, a small flap of cotton where fingers, hand, elbow had been. It was hard not to see it still, that arm, so long had we counted on what he did with it, counted on it as another moving part in a world of triggers and bullets and bringing people to their knees. It seemed to rest there, on bedsheets thinned and greying from many former occupants, still by his side, as he his gaze drifted over the absence over and over in slow disbelief. My hands moved on they own, rubbing oil into metal, my eyes on him as he sat stretched out in bed, knees together, looking more like a child than I'd ever seen him appear before. He wouldn't look at Connie, next to me, though she had brought him biscuits and poured him tea; she was looking healthier by the day, a dark bronze returning to her face as the pale, ashy dust of blowfish and hardship blew away from her just as the rain storms had washed all the ill-color from the sky and the trapped heat of the city had finally boiled over and forced the lid loose on all this mess.

'I can feel it still,' he said, raising the stump that sat underneath the cotton. A small blood stain had crept out from its base and bloomed in crimson at the crease. 'I can feel my fingers move.' He waved the fingers on his right hand one by one in front of his face as if the left hand was doing the same, in a place we couldn't see. I didn't skirt around the reason for my visiting.

'Have you thought anymore about the boy?' I asked. He stared back at the space where his left hand would have been, and his eyes hardened.

'Nothing there.' We left him his guns, and his other scanty things, his money, his coat, the picture of his boy, retrieved from the Anjou house by Henri and returned to us when word of the night's troubles had got far enough in to Lafayette. Then we departed, my last word to him not a word at all,

but a small tip of the hat as you'd give to any stranger you'd pass in your normal life, someone to greet and walk on by.

Connie and I stripped the rooms by the river. We pulled down every smoke-stained piece of newspaper, every picture, scraped off every flake of wax, dragged up every frayed bit of rope, knocked into place every broken floorboard. The enamel bowl that held Blackjack's second skin was still there, like a surgeon's bowl left quietly on the side after a patient has died on the table. He had made it out of wax and glue, but it seemed more like innards, exposed, a bit of his guts that shouldn't have been taken out. We found the dented metal strip that had been sat under it in Elgin, hammered into a crude chest, three bullets cratered into it like bug bites. It had been kept upright, polished, under all the mess and mush of my old home. We had Cal's initials charred into it, and left it in that room, a relic for someone else to find; the rest we burned, then scrubbed the walls and swept the floor until the wood was raw and bare.

'You were a boy here?' Connie asked me, hands pulling at the tins of glue and wax that had furnished her prison with the Anjou twins. I nodded, pulling down another photo, revealing another piece of bare wall under that patchwork of Cal's life, and mine, tethered to his for years and there in print in my mother's rooms. She pressed her injured hand to the wall, as if she might rub life into it.

'It will cough up the rot, like I did. Pain can't stay trapped. It rises like water, falls like rain, but sooner or later it all floats away, if you let it.' She kissed me; then she threw her dead finger in the fire we had made, along with a giant stack of dried, dead flowers, rope, the candles that had suffocated me, the herbs and grinding that had sickened Connie, and Blackjack's waxy remains, and watched the lot burn together before she took a broom to the wax and the spiders that had made a lacework of the ceiling, and the flies that had died in its trappings. I watched her, marvelling, at her strength, at the way the pain and fire and blood of ten years without her, of ten years with Cal, was so easily replaced by her reassuring sturdy presence. At how I was forgiven, without words.

I kept one thing though, one tiny tintype from that heap. It was a tarnished picture of a grave, a small mound of dirt and a rock with Cal painted on it, no family name, and an old rifle tied to a

cypress branch to make a cross. The grave was only a few feet long. On the back was written Liberty, Texas.

I had Blackjack and Esmé put on ice, covered them and took them round to Chestnut, to the front gate of the Anjou house. They was sat, the two women and a hive of other society ladies, having tea in the garden, ringleted heads piled on starched busts piled on domed skirts like the confections they was attacking with them goddamn tiny spoons, lips smacking then pursing, eyes narrowing at my approach. The gates remained locked to me, though I yelled over to the Madame herself that I had brought her chillun back to her for a proper burial. She didn't speak to me, but Tollyrun met me at the gate. He was clutching a Winchester just like Cal's.

'What is the meaning of this? Get those things away from here and take yourself with them.'

'Just returning some lost property to the Madame. I take it she doesn't want to claim it. Ain't nobody wanting what's theirs right now.'

'She's got better things to do than to talk to the likes of you. I hear that Texan barbarian has lost an arm. He won't be so cock sure, now will he?' He hissed at me through the bars, barrel pointed in my general direction. Clarabelle beamed over at him from behind a stack of pastries.

'She's moved on rather quick, ain't she? Well, never mind. One armed and blindfolded Cal Davies could still shoot the fresh shit out of you. You ain't got that cocked, by the way. Want me to show you how?' I said.

He rattled it on the gate and I left, with the bodies of the Anjous in tow. I could hear faint, polite applause as the Colonel returned to his tea party, and the whispered vines of gossip starting to grow among the garden tables. I imagined Madame Anjou, eyes like knives in my back, as I drove away the reminders of her dirt-pocked past and the now dead promises of a shining frontier catch for her and her society daughter. Still, Tollyrun had money.

What I said to him was true, but I didn't need to say it no more. Cal's hands warn't going to shape my life no more. I left his pistols oiled and ready on his bed, not caring that the pair of them together offered up a shining rebuke to his old life, a reminder that he only had one hand left with which to use them. Connie and I took ourselves back west, back to solid ground. We stopped in Texas along the way, and had Blackjack and Esmé buried in Liberty, next to the young boy's grave, making two more

crosses from Blackjack's rifle and the Yellow Boy, two fresh graves. Best he's with his mother. Young boys shouldn't be alone in the world, alive or dead; no good comes of it.

Last I heard, Cal was working the shows, the one-armed sharp shooter performing feats of awe and derring-do; folks slowly got to know what had happened in New Orleans, know the whole sorry tale. I reckoned Madame Anjou sold it to the press, the papers, to whoever the hell would listen. She was always missing from the story; that part warn't ever revealed. But Cal's name was dragged through the gutter, his reputation tarnished beyond repair; I even heard someone say once that he would have been better off dying, rather than getting so big, and ending up so small. Those who'd seen him in action over the years now paid to see his pinned-up, sawn-off shoulder as much as they paid to see him shoot tin cans one by one off some young boy's head or high-step Jim round a show ring one-handed. I cut out clippings and pictures when I see him or his name in print, glad not to be there with him, to be untethered, unfollowed. I don't stick them to the walls, but I keep them nonetheless, and look at them when the mood takes me. Connie shakes her head at me and laughs, says she thought we was rid of him and his flash when we left New Orleans. I say we was – we are – and I put the clippings back in the box, the small eccentric hoardings of a man starting to get old, and happy with it. I keep that picture of his son's grave out though, to remind me of what he was. And in case he ever wants it, in case he ever shows up. In case he ever wants to know where that piece of him rests. He knows where I am. He ain't come yet.