

Gold

Ba dies in the night, prompting them to seek two silver dollars.

Sam's tapping an angry beat come morning, but Lucy, before they go, feels a need to speak. Silence weighs harder on her, pushes till she gives way.

"Sorry," she says to Ba in his bed. The sheet that tucks him is the only clean stretch in this dim and dusty shack, every surface black with coal. Ba didn't heed the mess while living and in death his mean squint goes right past it. Past Lucy. Straight to Sam. Sam the favourite, round bundle of impatience circling the doorway in too-big boots. Sam clung to Ba's every word while living and now won't meet the man's gaze. That's when it hits Lucy: Ba really is gone.

She digs a bare toe into dirt floor, rooting for words to make Sam listen. To spread benediction over years of hurt. Dust hangs ghostly in the light from the lone window. No wind to stir it.

Something prods Lucy's spine.

"Pow," Sam says. Eleven to Lucy's twelve, wood to her water as Ma liked to say, Sam is nonetheless shorter by a full foot. Looks young, deceptively soft. "Too slow. You're dead." Sam cocks fingers back on pudgy fists and blows on the muzzle of an imagined gun. The way Ba used to. Proper way to do things, Ba said, and when Lucy said Teacher Leigh said these new guns didn't clog and didn't need blowing, Ba judged the proper way was to slap her. Stars burst behind her eyes, a flint of pain sharp in her nose.

Lucy's nose never did grow back straight. She thumbs it, thinking. Proper way, Ba said, was to let it heal itself. When he looked at Lucy's face after the bloom of bruise faded, he nodded right quick. Like he'd planned it all along. *Proper that you should have something to rememory you for sassing.*

There's dirt on Sam's brown face, sure, and gunpowder rubbed on to look (Sam thinks) like Indian war paint, but beneath it all, Sam's face is unblemished.

Just this once, because Ba's fists are helpless under the blanket—and maybe she is good, is smart, thinks in some small part that riling Ba might make him rise to swing at her— Lucy does what she never does. She cocks her hands, points her fingers. Prods Sam's chin where paint gives way to baby fat. The jaw another might call delicate, if not for Sam's way of jutting it.

"Pow yourself," Lucy says. She pushes Sam like an outlaw to the door.

Sun sucks them dry. Middle of the dry season, rain by now a distant memory. Their valley is bare dirt, halved by a wriggle of creek. On this side are the miners' flimsy shacks, on the other the moneyed buildings with proper walls, glass windows. And all around, circumscribing, the endless hills seared gold; and hidden within their tall, parched grasses, ragtag camps of prospectors and Indians, knots of vaqueros and travelers and outlaws, and the mine, and more mines, and beyond, and beyond.

Sam squares small shoulders and sets out across the creek, red shirt a shout in the barrenness.

When they first arrived there was still long yellow grass in this valley, and scrub oaks on the ridge, and poppies after rain. The flood three and a half years back rooted up those oaks, drowned or chased away half the people. Yet their family stayed, set alone at the valley's far edge. Ba like one of those lightning-split trees: dead down the center, roots still gripping on.

And now that Ba's gone?

Lucy fits her bare feet to Sam's prints and keeps quiet, saving spit. The water's long gone, the world after the flood left somehow thirstier.

And long gone, Ma.