and without those elements restored to that place, his voice also remained outside it, outside himself.

After the main village was destroyed, his other brothers—the ones who had remained after the others had left—simply disappeared forever. He did not even know how many sisters he had had. When he found Elsbeth's bonnet, his own family had been gone for over half his life.

The other men thought Elsbeth had run away, or the forest had claimed her. It was not so very strange. But Clee searched with a certain quiet resolve uncommon for someone his age. He tried, with his skills, to track her, but she could not be tracked. Maybe at one time she could have been, but no longer. He circled and recircled where he had found the bonnet. When the men set up camp, far away from where she had disappeared, he nevertheless scouted a wide perimeter, watching out. The other men regarded him warily but did not interrupt him, did not mock him, understanding, in a way, his sickness. He never stopped looking for Elsbeth—not really—but he forgot what she looked like. There was something about the color of her eyes, and the shape of her nose. But the rest of her, for him, had faded. He would know her when he saw her, he thought, to comfort and encourage himself.

Out of this brief obsession Clee and Talmadge's relationship solidified. When the men passed through with the horses, Talmadge and Clee sat on the porch in the evening, looking out over the land and with a view of the field below where the other men camped, their fires like distant stars. Clee and Talmadge smoked tobacco, and Talmadge did not speak much. Sometimes one or both of them would come away from the evening—and who was the first to move? had they slept?—with the impression that leagues had been discussed between them. Talmadge knew little of Clee's past, and Clee had forgotten Talmadge's sister's shape, her face, but the young men appeared regularly in each other's dreams, where it was as if their chests were unstoppered, and they walked together and sometimes turned and faced each other directly, and spoke volumes.

By the time Talmadge was forty years old the orchards had grown to almost twenty-five acres. It was an expansion of what he had originally

planned with his mother, and then his sister. On the hill above the creek was the cabin and three acres of apricot trees, and around the side of the cabin, surrounding the shed, a half acre of plum trees. In the field across the creek, before the canyon mouth, nearly a quarter mile away, were nine acres of apples; and inside were twelve acres.

The men helped him groom and harvest the orchards in season, and he in turn lied to the authorities who infrequently came through asking about the men and their business. Horse stealing, emphasized the authorities; but Talmadge feigned supreme innocence. What the men did or did not do within the realm of legality was not his concern: he provided a place for them to stay, and they in turn helped with the chores, the scale of which would overwhelm him otherwise. When the bulk of the fruit became too much for him to manage at harvesttime, he sent a portion with the men, who sold it at auctions and fairs, and he split the profit with them.

The land claim was officially one hundred and sixty acres under the Homestead Act of 1862; he purchased the land as soon as he was able, on his eighteenth birthday. Over the years he bought the lots around it as well so that he owned over four hundred acres of land. He left this other land uncultivated, was satisfied to keep it as forest.

He did not articulate it as such, but he thought of the land as holding his sister—her living form, or her remains. He would keep it for her, then, untouched. All that space would conjure her, if not her physical form, then an apparition: she might visit him in dreams, and tell him what had gone wrong, why she had left him. Where did she exist if not on the earth—was there such a place?—and did he want to know about it, if it existed? What was a place if not earthbound? His mind balked. He was giving her earth, to feed her in that place that was without it. An endless gift, a gesture that seemed right: and it need never be reciprocated, for it was a gift to himself as well, to be surrounded by land, by silence, and always—but how could this be, after so much time?—by the hope that she might step out of the trees, a woman now, but strangely the same, and reclaim her position in that place.

Three days after he saw the girls in town, he was braced aloft in an apricot tree on the homestead and saw them come out of the upper forest. He quit the shears and watched them. It was morning. They paused at the treeline and then came down through the pasture, their dark hair like flags riding the grass. At the edge of the yard they hesitated, discussing between themselves—what?—glancing repeatedly at the cabin, the outlying land.

He climbed out of the tree, the shears clamped in his armpit. When he walked out of the orchard, the taller girl—the one with the braid over her shoulder—turned to him, and froze. The other girl—her hair also dark, but fuzzy, tangled, unkempt—had been chattering to the other, but ceased abruptly when she saw him approaching. Both stood watching him, their eyes swarming the shears. He halted twenty yards from them.

You-all lost? he called. They looked away at the trees. The shorter one—younger one, he decided—held her mouth open and panted slightly. Their faces were filthy. Even from where he stood, he saw their arms discolored with dirt.

He crossed the yard and went into the cabin. He laid the shears on the table and took his time stoking the ashes in the woodstove. When he went outside again, they had come closer, but feinted back when he came out onto the porch. He took the buckets near the door and went down to the creek and gathered water. Returning to the cabin, mounting the rise in the orchard, he saw that the lawn was empty. Then he saw them; he tried not to fix them directly, where they lay now in the border between the lawn and the outer grass, peering out, thinking themselves hidden.

In the cabin he rebuilt the fire, and made thick cakes out of meal and creek water, and fried them over the stove. Lost himself in the task.

When he came to, he thought: Why was he making so many? And then he reminded himself: the girls had come to eat with him. He set the cakes on the table along with an uncapped jar of milk. He hesitated. Finally he left the cabin, shears in hand, and walked to the apple orchard, a deeper section up the creek, leaving them to themselves.

Late afternoon, when he returned to the cabin, there was no sign of them. The food had been eaten. The plates were clean. They had even eaten the crud on the griddletop, the charred remains of the mealcakes. The bowl on the table was empty of fruit. He stood for a moment, then checked the cold pantry. They had taken his eggs and milk. Backing out, he checked the cupboard by the stove. They had taken his cornmeal, and salt. He waited a moment, then went out onto the porch and looked across the lawn, at the trees. They were not there any longer, he thought; they had gone. He looked at the trees. Dusk settled within the branches, touched the ground.

Inside, he took off his boots, and slept.

The following day at dawn he hitched the wagon to the mule and loaded a small supply of apples and apricots. Before stepping into the wagon, he carefully counted his money. He fit the soiled bills into his leather wallet and gazed at the trees sharpening in the blue light.

Before he reached town the sun was high and rinsing the standing wheatfields, quiet but for their resplendent shushing. The heat warmed his face but was not oppressive, and blew a clean scent down the road. A few white wisps of cloud in the sky posed silently.

He tied the wagon outside the feed and supply store and watered the mule, walked down the platform to the café. Inside, he sat at the counter and ordered fried eggs and coffee. The girl who took his order was maybe thirteen years old. He studied her from under his hat brim as she wiped down the counter, carried a stack of dirty dishes to the kitchen. He guessed the girls he had seen were about the same age. When she came back out, she set his eggs in front of him. Refilled his mug quickly. He watched her awhile longer, until she looked at him pointedly, unsmiling, and he looked away.

A little while later she came to pour him more coffee and said, My daddy's got something to say to you. She withdrew and disappeared into the kitchen. A moment later the proprietor, Weems, came out from the back.

I told you, Pa, said the girl, and floated past them down the counter.

Weems came to sit down next to Talmadge, looked after the girl. Only after a moment did he seem to recognize her.

My youngest, he said. Been working here a week and thinks she owns the place. He smiled faintly, scratched his chin. That's all my girls working here now—and the boys, all but the youngest, working next door.

Talmadge nodded absently—he was not really interested in the other man's family dynamics—and drank his coffee.

Weems half turned toward Talmadge, regarded him. I told her you only come Thursday to Sunday—

Well, said Talmadge. Need supplies.

Weems motioned for coffee, and peered past Talmadge to the lot in front of the café. The day glaring now. You bring the wagon? You planning on doing some business?

That's what I come about.

Weems nodded distractedly. With Sykes?

With Sykes. Or you.

Weems squinted outside again. But you're just in here a few days ago. You got something new? He frowned. You still got some of those Northern Spies?

Talmadge shook his head. Naw, he said. Just more of the same. And some 'cots.

Well, I don't know, said Weems after a pause. I just don't know. Couldn't give you money no way.

Talmadge nodded again, absently. What about trade?

Show me what you got, and we'll talk. I'd like to see those 'cots.

On the way out the door, Weems said, Lord, I almost forgot. I had Jinny out there keeping an eye out for you, and I almost forgot. Somebody's looking for you.

Talmadge frowned at the ground. Outside was a breath of hot air. Who's that? he said.

Don't know. Said he's from up Okanogan way. Hunting some girls.

Talmadge looked up. Some girls?

I think so. He come into town a few days ago asking around about his girls, run off or something, and Willie Angell said there were some girls matched his description who'd run off with some of your apples not just last week.

Talmadge hesitated beside the wagon. He tugged his hat brim while Weems pulled a bushel of apricots toward him for inspection.

Is that so? said Weems. Some wild girls steal your fruit?

Talmadge tugged his brim. Naw, he said. He could feel himself making a face of disgust. Nobody run off with anything.

You saw them, though? Those girls?

Talmadge didn't answer. He flicked his eyes over the man's back. Weems had leaned over to study the fruit. You going to take these 'cots or what?

All right, all right, said Weems, smiling now. He pulled the bushel forward in the wagon and hauled it up onto his shoulder and trudged with it back into the café.

Talmadge waited a moment, looking up the empty street. In the distance the range rose above the wheat, the principal ridges snowcapped even now. He looked at the dark mass of mountains, the wheat undulating below, and then followed Weems inside.

He stopped at Caroline Middey's on the way out of town. She had made venison stew. They brought the bowls to the front porch and sat and ate and looked out at the wheatfields before the house. He told her about the girls. If she was surprised to hear such a thing, she did not show it. She continued eating and narrowed her eyes a little and was silent for a long time after he had spoken. Finally she said, When was this? And he said: Two days ago. And again she was silent.

He had known her since he was a boy. As a young woman of twenty she had apprenticed with the town's original herbalist, and it was they whom Talmadge and Elsbeth approached when their mother was ill. Caroline Middey had traveled to the homestead to visit the cramped and foul-smelling miner's shack where Talmadge's mother lay under the heavy quilt, Talmadge's coat wrapped around her feet. Pale as a fish. She's going to die, said Caroline Middey to the children, who stood away in a spindly grove of apple trees. Even then, Caroline Middey was unflinching in her diagnoses. Do you understand? she said to the children. She told Talmadge and Elsbeth what to do to ease their mother's suffering, and then what to do afterward with her body. Elsbeth cried, but Talmadge had listened and tried to remember everything Caroline Middey was saying. Caroline Middey too was dry-eyed. Even then she did not

pander to children. Who has a childhood, she often said, in these parts? When one was born, death was right there waiting for you, right there in the room. And she would know this because as well as being the herbalist she was also the town's midwife. You'd better learn to recognize his—Death's—face right away, she said.

Caroline Middey had not come to the orchard when he contracted smallpox because she did not want to be infected, and she was annoyed and angry with Elsbeth for coming into town for help when she could be carrying the sickness with her. But Caroline Middey had given her a satchel of herbs and instructions and sent the girl away again. Told her not to come to town again, not even if Talmadge died. She was to stay in the orchard for a month by herself if he was to get worse or die. Caroline Middey herself stayed in her house with a quarantine sign posted in the outlying field to wait and see if she became ill. She did not, and neither, miraculously, did Elsbeth.

The year after his sister disappeared, Talmadge cut his hand badly on a fishhook and sought Caroline Middey for help when it became infected. She made him a tincture and properly bandaged his hand. He stayed that afternoon on her porch and ate supper with her, and then, since it was too late to drive back home, he stayed in the spare room with the herbs hanging from the rafters.

Caroline Middey's house was small and compact, located on the edge of town, the mountains looming in the distance. It was very quiet, with a great field out in front of it, and beyond the strip of dirt road, the river. There was a front porch, very small, room enough for two wicker chairs and a low table between them. Inside was a small parlor with a high window, and at the back the kitchen. There were two bedrooms, one very small that belonged to her, and the other, which was rectangular, and dominated by a large window. Here dried herbs hung from the ceiling; it was where the invalid or sick person stayed, or guests. The room was aired often; there was little in it to absorb personality. The window was almost always open, the bed stripped of linen except when it was being used. The kitchen was small and close, like the galley of a ship, pots and pans hanging from nails on the wall, the sticking drawers clattering with cutlery, all of it mismatched. She could strive for perfection only in

certain, few things; beyond that, it was important only to be tidy. And she was that. From the kitchen you stepped through a narrow hallway and then from there into the back garden. This garden was larger than the whole house and was rife with vegetables and herbs and flowers. It was here where she spent most of her time, in her large straw hat and gloves, with the wide gray apron covering her front, the apron strings doubled around her ample waist.

After his first visit as a young man Talmadge stopped frequently on his way out of town to see her, brought her fruit. They would eat a meal on the porch or indoors, depending on the season. If he stayed so long that he would not be able to make it back to the orchard by nightfall, he would sleep in the room with the drying herbs. In the morning he would wake and there would be coffee for him. She would be outdoors working in the garden, and he would leave without saying good-bye. At one time people thought they were courting, but that was never the case. Talmadge was stuck in grief he only partially acknowledged. It was not from his mother's death, from which he would have healed, more or less, eventually; but the festering issue was Elsbeth's disappearance, which his mind could not accept, could not swallow; and so he suffered always and abstractedly, and would never, as far as Caroline Middey was concerned, be cured. Besides this, Caroline Middey felt herself too old for Talmadge, romantically speaking, and was totally uninterested in his sex. When he was twenty-two years old and contracted a venereal disease from a prostitute at a fair in Malaga, Caroline Middey prescribed medicine for him and also recommended a woman in town he should see if he was interested in further business of that sort. She had spoken of the whole affair matter-of-factly, and it was this, finally, that saved their friendship. He had thought he could never approach her again after she saw what was wrong with him. He would never have approached her in the first place if he had not thought that he was dying.

But that was many years ago now. He saw the prostitute she had recommended a few times over the years, and then she, the prostitute, moved away and he saw another woman for a while, but not for many years now. He and Caroline Middey, after the initial conversation, did not discuss such things. He did not know much of her private life, except that

at one time she had had an apprentice, a young Cayuse girl, who had died of scarlet fever when she was seventeen. The girl was the only person as far as Talmadge knew who Caroline Middey had ever lived with, besides the old herbalist when she was younger. There was an ambrotype of the Cayuse girl set in a floral wreath on a shelf above the table in the kitchen. A beautiful girl with twin braids, wearing an intricately beaded shirt. Talmadge asked about the girl once, and Caroline Middey had said the girl's Christian name was Diana. And then Caroline Middey had moved quickly out the back door to the garden. It was only then that Talmadge understood she was overcome and did not wish to speak about the girl. And so they never did.

You watch yourself, said Caroline Middey, now, on the porch. You don't know what these girls are mixed up in.

It could be their father, thought Talmadge. It could be they ran away from home—

Oh, I doubt that, said Caroline Middey, although he had not spoken. Her gaze did not change. Her face was heavily lined, her cheeks sagged. She sat hunched in the chair, glowering.

He said, after a long silence: Don't have to worry about it, anyway. They've cleared out.

They'll be back, said Caroline Middey, glancing at him now. You fed them, didn't you? They'll be back.

The next morning he made coffee and ate a bit of biscuit and bacon he'd saved from the night before. It was early yet, and cool, and he decided to chop wood.

Sometimes, in the morning, it was necessary to strain himself physically in order to clear his mind—and also his body, his body was not immune—of dreams. The acidic aftertaste of some dreams.

There were long periods where he did not think of Elsbeth at all. Time had intervened, after all, so that grief had not killed him. At times he could imagine her fate matter-of-factly, he could distance himself from it: he had had a sister who had disappeared into the woods, and no one knew what had become of her. It had all happened so long ago; he had continued with his life, accepted her absence. This is what he told himself; and

it was partly true. But other times even his flesh was sensitive to the air, and what could have befallen her—and what she had suffered—tortured him. The litany of possibilities always hung about him, and during periods of weakness he turned to it, scrolled through it; amended some possibilities, added others.

She might have run away. She might have run away to a place she had heard about, imagined. (Had he, after all, known her mind as intimately as he thought he did?) And she hadn't told him because she didn't want to hurt him. She didn't want to be in the orchard anymore. Would he have accepted that? She might have accepted the help of a stranger, only to be taken advantage of. Robbed of the small amount of money she would have taken with her. Or maybe she was delivered, eventually, to a city, where she suffered the poverty unique to cities. Maybe she was in Seattle. In Spokane. Canada. San Francisco. Maybe she was somebody's wife. Maybe she was a mother. Perhaps her children had died—of disease, of catastrophe—or it was the death of her husband she had suffered. Maybe her husband was alive, but unkind. Maybe she was hungry. What did she think of when she tasted an apple, now? An apricot? It did not occur to him that if she was alive, she might be happy. For if she were, then she would not have excluded him for so long. It was too cruel. *Talmadge, I had to go, you would not have understood then, but I hope you understand now, and will come see me—*

Or maybe that day she had no intention of leaving him at all, and was actually hunting in the forest for herbs when a person came upon her and struck her, a heavy object to the back of the skull—practiced, sure—and then took up her body, carried it away. Talmadge did not like to dwell on the possibility that Elsbeth had been taken away, strapped to the back of a horse, to serve a dark purpose he would not even permit himself fully to imagine. How was a mind to sustain such speculation? But sometimes—some mornings, upon waking—he had a deep, calm, seemingly bottomless capacity for imagining it. The horror. What had happened to her, and what had he done? He had searched for her, but was he careful enough? Had he searched long enough? Called her name loudly enough? (But he had gone hoarse, calling her name: her name, the shape of it in his mouth, ached—he could not say her name now without a pulse of sick regret, and

actual physical pain at the back of his throat, and in his mouth.) Thinking of her in such a situation, other terrible scenarios became more palatable: she had fallen into a hole; was attacked by a bear, a cougar. Murdered quickly by some natural force, and not by the hand of a stranger.

He walked with the ax past the apricot orchard and down the slope, crossed the creek, traversed the field. (Maybe she had joined a circus.) Long cuts of evergreen lay stacked near the forest edge. (Or, obeying some impulse hitherto unknown to him, entered a religious group; it was a nun, or a friend of the church, who had gently abducted her.) He spent the morning cutting an entire half tree into sections and then stood sweating and looked over the broken length. (Maybe she had left a note that had been upset by the wind, and drifted and floated into some crack or crevice that he had yet to discover.) He left his work and walked back across the field to the creek. (But there was no note; she did not know how to read or write.) As he knelt and splashed water in his face, an image of the deer that had recently gotten into the apricot orchard entered his mind. He drank from the creek and then stood, the blood pounding in his ears, and returned to the edge of the forest where the broken tree lay. He placed each round block upon a stump and proceeded to strike the block for kindling. (Would he ever know what had happened to her?) The sound of the creek was muffled by the line of gargantuan trees at his back. (Was it a matter of patience that kept him from discovery? Or was it goodness? Had some force—God?—kept the knowledge from him, because he was not good enough?) The crack of the ax splitting wood echoed and roamed the sky.

In the afternoon he investigated the fence along the far side of the apricot orchard. The barbed wire was mangled in one section near the back that he could not see from the porch. He walked the avenues and inspected the trees. Limbs were broken where he imagined the deer reared up on their hindquarters to get at the fruit. The damage was not great, but he would have to be more careful. Some men shot deer that ravaged crops, but he was not one of them. It was vulgar, he thought, to shoot a deer in the orchard.

One badly damaged tree at the end of the row was a sapling he had planted the previous spring. He crouched down and touched the limbs.

In the shed next to the barn he kept a collection of apple, plum, and apricot saplings. They grew incrementally in clay pots. Summer afternoons he set up a table under the eave of the cabin and worked on the saplings. He manipulated their shapes to networks he envisioned, performing multiple surgeries upon the tiny twiglike limbs. Youth had provided the advantage of better sight, much needed when he had begun the craft and relied upon sight as well as coordination; but now, though sight was not gone, it was impaired, and for several years he had depended solely upon the feel and texture of the limbs between his fingers. The myriad operations and surgical implements were second nature to him now, each practice fluid and exact.

When the saplings were ready, he planted them at the end of the orchard rows. He kept constant watch over them, building wooden latticework to support them during their precarious adolescence. Some of his experiments failed, were destroyed by weather or circumstance. Others, however, flourished.

In the shed he surveyed the apricot saplings and decided upon one and took hold of the clay pot in which it was secured and carried it outside, across the grass to the orchard. He knelt and studied the broken limb and compared it to those on the healthy sapling. Finally he chose a limb on the new sapling and cut into the bark with his pocketknife. Likewise he cut two inches above the ragged limb, and fit the appendages together so they joined at complementary angles. He had chosen and cut well and was pleased. He returned to the shed and retrieved a jar of wax and twine and set to work setting a wax cast for the new limb.

He sat in the grass bent over his work like a large child. The dread of last night's dreams had all but evaporated. The two girls watched him from the edge of the field. They did not speak to each other but sat in the heat motionless. One girl clawed the ground with her fingers and brought a fistful of dirt to her mouth and ate it.

He did not see them that day. But the next day he stood in the midsection of an apple tree and saw them come meandering down the orchard rows. He continued cutting with the shears in the high branches and watched them indirectly. They stopped down the row from him and sat

in the grass. The smaller one ran her hand up and down the stalks of grass and then desisted, turned her head as if hearing a call. When he climbed down from the tree they sat up straight and held still but did not look at him. He pretended not to notice them—they seemed to prefer it that way—and momentarily considered walking around the row to avoid passing them, but walked toward them instead. They stiffened. He approached them, passed. He walked out of the orchard and they followed him across the field and through the creek, up the hill and to the shed, where he replaced the shears. When he came back out they were standing, hesitant, at the edge of the plum orchard. As he approached them, the smaller one stepped back, but the other—braid over her shoulder, sleepy-looking now—remained.

In the cabin he set to frying trout he had caught that morning. As he turned from the stove, he glanced out the door and saw that the taller one had crept forward across the grass. The smaller one stood at the edge of the lawn and looked over her shoulder as if gauging escape.

Fish, tomatoes, eggs and onions, fried bread. His face flushed. He worked with possession. When he was finished, the cabin was hot and pungent with the odor of fried fish and onions.

The long-haired one hung back from the porch. Dusk had fallen across the grass, and the other girl stood now a shadow on the edge of the lawn. He set the two plates of food on the porch. Then he turned and walked back into the cabin.

He sat at the table with a plate of fish in front of him. A minute later he got up from his chair, blew out the lantern perched on the stove mantel, walked to the door, and looked out. The girls knelt in the grass and ate with their heads together, silently.

One hundred dollars apiece, the poster said, for the capture of two girls called Jane and Della. To be returned to James Michaelson of Okanogan, Washington.

He stood looking at the poster nailed to the wall outside the feed and supply store and thought of the notice he had drawn up those years ago, the notary at the bank saying, How do you spell that—Elsbeth? And Talmadge looked up at him raw-eyed—he was seventeen years old, and his