

around the bear so that the three of them tottered together for a long trembling moment, bear, dog, man—and where was the boy? where had he gone now in the moment of his greatest need? where had he gone?—the knife twisting against the bear's spine so that he fell forward, pulled by the weight of the man and the weight of the dog, crashing down into the damp thawed riverside earth, the cane splashing out all around him in a dry brittle hiss.

He did not look for the boy now but he thought he was near. And then he smelled something else: the chestnut-colored man. It was a kind of call. A kind of acceptance that was also a kind of repudiation, not of inheritance or of dominion but of life itself, and he knew then that it was the boy after all, that in repudiating it he had claimed it as it truly was, as it had ever been, not owned or even kept in trust and when the bear stood again it was only to scent him upon the air one last time, the boy and the chestnut-colored man who had taught him not how to be a hunter or even how to be a bear but how to be the forest itself, for that was what it amounted to, a lesson the bear himself had never learned although it was there, had always been there, for all the winters of his life—

and then the boy was there upon the bank but also not upon the bank, for they were somewhere else, the scent upon the wind not even the boy's scent now but the scent of the chestnut-colored man and something else, something far away and so sweet that the bear shivered from its pull, a scent of bright green leaves and a trembling too, a trembling of motion, another bear, many bears, something else, then he knew it was the chestnut-colored man somehow, the man and the dog too, the blue dog he had gutted, and he could feel the boy's eyes upon him, could scent that too upon a cold wind that seemed to rise and rise within him until it was like the tornado that had torn through the forest so many years before, but this was not the same but something else, there was no scent separate from himself now, it had all become as one, and when he rose it was into a fur, a motion, a blaze of yellow light, the dog, the man, the bear, there had been an icefield somewhere in his dreams, he could sense that now, but it was the opposite, the antithesis of everything he knew or might have known, that freedom, that white endlessness that was a kind of blindness, and then truncating down, for it was not the boy after all, for it had never been the boy and it

had never been that long hard field of ice, implacable, endless, stretching on forever, but instead a kind of siphoning inward, the edges of the forest becoming clear and bright and all the creatures of its shadowed and pungent depths rolling forward toward a centerpoint that he still could not see, although he was rising toward it now, rising upon no wind but his own, the edges pulling inward so that the whole of the forest drew in upon itself, the thick brambles, the boggy lowlands, and then he saw it at last: the field of wildflowers in the center of which rose the huge ancient shape of the sweetgum, not in December cold but in the full riot of summer, its leaves shaking, trembling, shivering with motion, because there was no forest now and soon there was no field but only the tree, its souls held upon branches dancing with motion, some last final repudiation of dominion, of ownership, even of death and so even of life, the bear's last thoughts flashing out toward the boy one final time, the hot scent of his body upon the riverbank, dominionless upon the upraised branches of the tree of souls, as it had been in the beginning and as it was, now, at the end. And to think: he had never been a bear at all.

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*Summer Sky*, 2008

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