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**PART ONE**

*Herodotus  
among  
the Trees*

## A Lone Pine in Maine

The axe struck the pine tree a first blow. The sound bounced from the hillside, echoing back to the woodman. The phlegm of the cut and the scratch in his throat made no common language. The blue sky, passing clouds, and pine needles on the ground were only sun and shade and softness beneath his boots. He chopped and the tree fell, splitting and cracking and thumping to the earth. Sawyers sheared the branches and stripped the gray bark. This was in Maine, north of Augusta, near the Kennebec River.

The tree was a white pine, more than a hundred feet tall. It grew in a stand of pines in deep, cool, black sand. The rest of the trees in the swampy ground still stood, remarkably straight and without limbs until two-thirds of the way up, their summits crowned by a few upright branches that seemed from a distance to float in air. The one now on the ground, wet with moss, would become part of a house, or the beams of a church, shelves for a shop or barrels for salted fish. A piece might become the frame of a mirror before which a young woman, a candle at her side, fastened a locket around her neck. Gone were the days when the Royal Navy had scouted the forests for white pines and stamped them for future use as masts. Now Yankees turned them into floors, shingles, clapboards, pails, packing crates, the cornices and friezes of front doors, the moldings of fireplaces and the frames of paintings. At Philadelphia a bridge of white pine crossed the Schuylkill. Another pine bridge crossed the Delaware at Trenton. White pine trestles fifteen hundred and three thousand feet long connected Boston to Cambridge and Charleston. The clip-clop of horses on the spans made a hymn of praise. The Greeks had the Shield of Achilles; the Americans made their daily round of pine.

Back in the swamp, the pine now felled, the lumbermen cut it into sections about fifteen feet long, stamping each log with a mark of ownership, then used teams of oxen to drag the pieces to a clearing where the logs sat until winter, when they were trundled onto the frozen Kennebec to await the spring thaw. When the ice broke up, the timber floated down to Winslow, where representatives of different companies sorted through it. Identifying the logs with the stamp of their own firms, they assembled the wood into rafts to sell to the sawmills between Winslow and the sea.

The largest town in those miles to the ocean was Augusta. There one day in July 1837 an observer in a riverside house spied a lone pine log rolling and shining in the stream. He imagined that the log had traveled “hundreds of miles from the wild upper sources of the river, passing down, down, between lines of forest, and sometimes a rough clearing” before it floated past this cultivated spot. In his imagination, the log still carried freezing winds and summer stars stuck in the sheared boughs, whose bending and waving the sodden trunk still remembered. He watched as the log slowed with the current, where a milldam under construction impeded the river, eyeing it still as a raft of planed boards floated past, piloted by a man whose voice mingled with the broken words of the Canadians and Irishmen at work on the dam. The wind blowing through the trees on the bank made another voice, as did the flowing river, though he noticed how all the sounds diffused “a sort of quiet” across the scene.

The observer, Nathaniel Hawthorne, saw trees as secrets. With the “knotty fingers” of their roots, they held on to the mystery of themselves. From summits they gazed down, curiously aware, staring at their fellows who had fallen in some mudslide, “anticipating a like fate,” but it was no use

personifying them. He knew that the language of moral foreboding and damnation was an imperfect medium for disclosing the enigma of these strange presences. Allegory was only another planed board, a rhetorical carpentry that turned wildness into moral furniture. Anthropomorphism—the kind he used when he described the “barkless arms” of a pine that stood in death as “its own ghost”—was no better: only an approximation for the disquieting seriousness of these wooden beings.

Somewhere beyond emblems and fantasies was a secluded pool, a lonely place at which trees stared at themselves, redoubling their silence to repel the words of the writer as much as the blade of the axe. The writer, after all, was just a lumberman of a different kind—splitting the world into lengths of meaning, shaving it in the milldam of his story-works—though unlike the lumberman, he recognized that his aim was to harvest the riches of the trees before, not after, they were killed. Hawthorne envisioned writing a story of “some treasure or other thing to be buried, and a tree planted directly over the spot, so as to embrace it with its roots.”

For him, trees were brains, arbors of thought, much like his own.

## The Town the Axes Made

About twelve miles northwest of Hartford, Connecticut, in a new stone building, a nameless blacksmith held the glowing iron on the anvil, using tongs to shift and turn the metal beneath the rhythmic blows of a heavy trip-hammer. Around him dozens of other smiths worked at their own anvils, the din making a continuous sound, like piano keys depressed all at once, that rebounded off the darkened walls

of the factory on the banks of the Farmington River, where a waterwheel powered the hammers that shaped the axes.

Other men at grinding wheels honed the blades that had cooled. They wore leather aprons and pumped foot treadles, sharpening the edges before windows revealing hillsides of pine, oak, and maple. Down the street, in the fast-growing company town of Collinsville, Connecticut, elms lined the new green, making a vista toward the workers' houses and the new Congregational Church, the wooden spire of God in the town the axes made. Started by the brothers Samuel and David Collins in 1827 as a modest concern—eight men forging and tempering eight axes each a day—the company had grown vastly in a few years. By 1831 the Collins Company employed 200 men producing 200,000 axes a year, and it did the brisk trade of any company in the state.

A village blacksmith had been his own boss, employee, and purveyor, but Collinsville was changing that. Charles Morgan of Somers, Connecticut, had stamped his name on the axes he crafted, but when he came to Collinsville in 1827, lured by the higher pay, his work was claimed by the firm. Before, he had made his axes every step of the way; now, the company's division of labor meant that he did only the forging and tempering, one among several men devoted to these tasks, while grinders and polishers finished each axe. In 1830 Morgan complained of feeling sick and temporarily returned to Somers. Two years later he left Collinsville for good.

Out in the woods, a man wielding a Collins axe was likewise no longer economically independent. Back in the first decade of the nineteenth century, the settlers outside Augusta fiercely protected their liberty, disguising themselves as "white Indians" to scare off the local capitalists bent on morally improving them and turning their labor to economic



advantage. Calling themselves Liberty Men, a group of these white Indians strapped on masks “of bearskin, some sheepskin, some stuck over with hog’s bristles, etc.,” to greet a company representative, intimidating him by firing a deafening musket volley into the air. But by the 1830s improved roads had reduced the isolation that fueled their defiance. Now town and country were more connected, even as settlers continued to face the harsh conditions and extreme poverty of their remote existence. Desperate to secure a living, they relied increasingly on the “Great Proprietors” they had once opposed. By the end of the 1830s Maine was shipping more than forty million feet of lumber from the mouth of the Kennebec alone. The axe that sounded in the forest was made by many men, and the man who wielded that axe did so for lumber interests who claimed his work for their own.

What then of the solitary cut made by a man with an axe in a great wood? The splintering established only a local radius of sound. The sound seemed intent on its own vanishing, at one with the woodman’s expenditure of energy, as if some of his body, his very muscles, had traveled into the split in the tree, subsumed there like the noise itself in the woody deafness. The changing country brought a new obscurity of individual actions, a novel lexicon of the forgotten, a ritual of cutting oneself down every day—clearing oneself away, it might be said, with a full day’s work, a pact of erasure with the things you destroyed. The pounding of the trip-hammers became the same as the forest silence that swallowed all sound: no one heard a thing. At Collinsville, the grinders ingested tiny particles of stone and over time became sick and died. And the blade of each day, whetted to an edge, split the dusk from the sun.

## Hat and Tornado

In 1830 the painter Thomas Cole purchased a top hat from a shop at 128 Fulton Street in Manhattan. Cole was no gentleman born, and his artist's profession was no great sign of social prestige, but the hat gave him a certain dignity and elevation. Made of cardboard covered in brown felt with silk trim around the base, it implied the delicacy and refinement of the head it housed.

Inside that hat was his childhood in Lancashire, England, where he grew up the seventh of eight children, the only boy, of Sarah and James Cole, a woolen manufacturer. Inside it was the harsh treatment he received at school when he was little, the memories of poor food and illness, his resistance to becoming a lawyer or ironmonger, and his fondness for colors and designs; his experience, too, of coming to the United States with his whole family in 1819, when he was eighteen years old. Inside the hat were his travels on foot from Philadelphia to Steubenville, Ohio, where he went to join the rest of the Coles after he had stayed in Philadelphia to earn money as a printmaker and novice self-taught painter while they tried establishing themselves on the frontier. Inside that hat, now that a few years later he had affected the style of a gentleman, he stored his ideas for paintings to attract wealthy patrons, his plans for advancement in the world, and for improving his adopted country. He held it all there, the vision of a series of pictures warning of a country moving "from barbarism to civilization—to luxury—to the vicious state, or state of destruction—and to the state of ruin and desolation." The hat helped make the man who dreamed the dignity of his own occupation, the man of pieties and pronouncements.

But the hat also concealed the man's eccentric mystery. It hid all that lay close amid the outward trappings of his morality, hiding it even from himself. An odd idea for a painting, for example, was forming in his brain: a massive chalice brimming with a mountain lake on which tiny sailboats floated, a Brobdingnagian cup vegetally fringed at the lip and base, ever so slightly obscene, that resembled the hat housing the brain that conceived the fantastical scheme.

That brain was a font of visions more frankly erotic, like the one he described of a spring evening outside the Colosseum in Rome in 1832, on a trip to Italy a wealthy patron had funded, on which he looked up to see ivy and wildflowers festooning the moonlit ruin, making it seem "more like a work of nature than of man," and beheld there, too, not far away, a young woman. Sitting there in a reverie, the bachelor artist ignored his customary repression and spoke unprompted to this stranger, telling her in the moonlight how the Colosseum reminded him of a spent volcano whose fires had once "blazed forth with desolating power," so that "the thunder of the eruption shook the skies," but that now, "long extinguished," had left only a "crater of human passions," disturbed by birdsong in the morning and the chanting of monks at night.

The year before he returned to New York in November 1832, Cole painted a large picture of a tornado. *Tornado in an American Forest*, he called it. Gray wind snaps one tree off at the trunk and blows others almost horizontally. Two massive trees lean in the foreground, one a birch blown back by the gale, the other extending a black and bony branch into the storm, defying the putrid darkness while a bare-headed Cole struggles to stay upright at its foot. What unholy energy, what resinous storm of turpentine, blew the hat from

his head? Cole cribbed the sideways-blowing trees on their hillside from Paolo Uccello's *Deluge*, which he had seen at Santa Maria Novella in Florence, but no scripture, moral, or message underwrites his screed of passions spending themselves in pointless eruption and ravaging darkness.

## rush, *rush*, RUSH

The preacher poured forth his words. They went into the night. This was at a camp meeting, held in the “burned-over district,” the swath of Western New York State swept by revivalist religion in the 1830s. The meeting took place in the woods, in a clearing made for the purpose, and it had been going on for several days and nights continuously. On benches made of felled tree trunks set before the preacher's crude wooden platform, hundreds of men, women, and children looked toward him, their faces shining in the reflected light of twin pyres burning to either side of the rostrum.

The preacher, Jedediah Burchard, told his listeners that they were all sinners, that they should “be lifting up [their] eyes and unavailing prayers in eternal hell.” But they could still find Jesus and be saved. With dark, searching eyes Burchard peered at his psalmbook, bringing his nose nearly down to the pages to read in the flickering light. During his sermon, from Acts 10:29, “I ask therefore, for what intent ye have sent for me?,” he struck his hands together often and occasionally smote the desk on which his Bible lay or slammed down the Bible itself. A former circus acrobat, he came out from behind the desk and tiptoed about the narrow stage like a man on a tightrope. If only he had been speaking in a church, he could have stepped out into the crowd and walked across the back of the pews, as he liked to do.

His language was direct, physical. The Holy Ghost would pour down on his listeners like mountain streams in spring. It would come upon them, “rush, *rush*, RUSH,” strip them of “all the corruptions and pollutions, which they naturally possessed.” Gesturing to the “anxious seats,” the front benches seating those most in need of salvation, Burchard told them “the water—the Holy Spirit—is troubled, *troubled*, TROUBLED” and that sinners “come right forward to the *anxious seats*—they *step right into the water* and”—he slapped his hands together—“salvation comes right into their souls.” He kept speaking in these vocal trinities: “The water must be TROUBLED worse, and *worse*, and WORSE. . . . The worse the water is troubled, the better, and the higher the waves rise, *rise*, RISE.”

Many of the women rose, only to swoon and stay on the ground. A careful observer saw one of them wink, but even this girl remained down like her sisters, all drowned in the preacher’s words. Their bodies lay on the forest floor like the victims of some flood until eventually they stood up, awakened as if at the Last Judgment. Few could remember which psalm struck them down or which commanded them to rise. Salvation required no labor of thought; words came naturally. Language was as immediate as the trees looming over the fiery proceedings, as instinct with elevation as the upper boughs, as lofty yet curiously kindred as the underside of the leaves seventy feet from the ground. Little came between these souls and the clouds and the stars. Burchard made the miracles he foretold.

Around the open space where Burchard spoke were many tents, each with its own revival meeting going on. In one of those tents, a long structure separated by a foot-high bench laid lengthwise, men knelt and swooned on one side, women on the other. The air was close, filled with the smell of dust,

the smoke of whale-oil lamps, the odor of stale straw on the floor. Some “men were taking the hands of women between their hands, and patting and striking them, exhorting them.” Others were “quiet, half faint, exclaiming, groaning or weeping.” Outside, Burchard’s figures of speech kept rising, turning in the air and blending into the leafy canopy, where the illumined branches and leaves became twisting serpents and tongues and the forest seemed to speak itself.

The next day, after the meeting had concluded and the congregants had departed, the quiet clearing gave the sense of city streets the morning after an election, a place where the “walls and corners are yet covered with flaming hand-bills, witnesses and documents of the high-running excitement, which but yesterday seemed to roll like an agitated sea.” In those election places the rain washes most of the handbills away. The remaining slogans are then ripped from the walls, macerated in vats, and turned into new posters for parties unknown. Where the camp meeting had been, the trees likewise began a renewal. But they also harbored the memory of sounds that, properly speaking, left no record. Human voices echoed in their canopies until it seemed that the trees themselves had become the congregants of their own sylvan religion, taking a cue from the brimstone language of malady and affliction to sing, in counterpoint, a tune of their own.

## History without a Sound

Alexis de Tocqueville and Gustave de Beaumont rode slowly on horseback through the Michigan woods. To them, the fifty miles from Flint to Saginaw were trackless, but their two Ojibwe guides, both teenage boys, led the way. The Frenchmen wanted to see the untouched American forest and had

gone to great trouble to do so. That summer of 1831 they had crossed New York State, sailed a hundred miles on Lake Erie, and kept pressing on without finding the wilderness they sought. At the small frontier settlement of Detroit and then farther on at Flint, they encountered another obstacle: no settler understood their wish to see trees without economic gain in mind. “An American thinks nothing of hacking his way through a nearly impenetrable forest, crossing a swift river, braving a pestilential swamp, or sleeping in the damp forest if there is a chance of making a dollar,” Tocqueville wrote in his journal. “But the urge to gaze upon huge trees and commune in solitude with nature utterly surpasses his understanding.” Only when the two Frenchmen invented a story about being financial speculators did the Americans help.

In company with their guides, Tocqueville and Beaumont entered the gloomy woods en route to Saginaw. The trees were so thick that they formed “a single whole, an immense and indestructible edifice, under whose vaults reigns an eternal obscurity.” Dead trees hung suspended in air, prevented from falling to the ground by the density of the forest. No sounds—a church bell, a farmer’s axe, a barking dog—penetrated the deep silence. Tocqueville thought the forest emptier than even the ocean, since at least on the ocean a person can see the horizon. At night the party kept going, the Frenchmen having prevailed on their guides not to stop. Looking round in the cool dampness, they no longer saw trees but “forms bizarre and disproportioned, incoherent scenes, fantastic images which seemed borrowed from the sick imagination of a man in fever.” An occasional firefly was the only light.

Traveling from Detroit to Pontiac earlier that month, Tocqueville and Beaumont heard axes striking trees. They saw



trunks scorched by fire and shivered by axes all along the route. The occasional settler's cabin was an "ark of a lost civilization in an ocean of foliage"—only a hundred feet from one of these cabins the dark forest resumed. Yet the settler and his family were undaunted. The settler had started by cutting down the trees to make the cabin. Then he girdled others—making a deep cut to stop the flow of sap—which soon killed the trees and bared their branches, letting the sunlight fall to the ground where crops could be planted. While waiting for the girdled trees to die, he planted corn at their roots, since this crop did better in forest shade than in open sun. Meanwhile the settler made furniture—pieces so new that Tocqueville noticed leaves sprouting from the legs of a table. But now farther north, the travelers found no settlers and no cabins.

The woods on the way to Saginaw were so quiet and still that "a kind of religious terror grips the soul." The travelers talked less and spoke in ever-more hushed tones. Eventually they spoke only in whispers, then not at all. Pondering the relation of silence to history, Tocqueville recalled in his journal how in Sicily in 1827 he had gotten lost in a vast swamp near the ancient city of Himera. Now in Michigan four years later, he realized that the forest itself was the ancient civilization, its perennial selfsameness the way it had been for millennia. The woods marked time in so many ways—the life of an individual tree, manifest in concentric circles of growth; the couplings of skeletal pines entwined like Esmeralda and Quasimodo at the end of Victor Hugo's *Notre Dame*. The woods even foretold the future of their own past—in this up-and-coming country, they soon would vanish, "so great is the impetus that drives the white race to conquer the whole of the New World." Trying to be true to what he felt, Tocqueville needed a language that would reproduce the threatened



silence that made the leaf and root of his thought: an etymology of nature, a hush of original sensations, back in the Rousseauian midst of things.

He found the silence at a muddy hole swarming with mosquitoes at which the Ojibwe guides told him and Beaumont to slake their thirsts. A pale and darkened self-reflection, a pocket of rainwater filling the pit left by the roots of a toppled tree, the picture emerged from the ground itself, an unlikely source as silent as it sounds, with no one to sustain but the person who, bending down, drank from it on his quest. Succor to the traveler absorbed in his own being, the water gave balm to the soul at the root of things, while the Ojibwe guides sat indifferently on the fallen tree, the face of the older one painted a symmetrical red and black.

That winter near Cincinnati, Tocqueville and Beaumont's boat got caught in river ice. With no thaw in sight, they loaded their baggage onto a cart and walked through woods in half a foot of snow to Louisville, where they found the rivers still frozen. There they took a stagecoach for two days and two nights to Nashville, traveling on a road that was "nothing but a passage cut through the forest." They boarded a ferry to cross the Tennessee River amid huge chunks of ice, with Tocqueville frozen and shivering, unable to eat, and growing faint. They stopped.

They came to a one-room inn where the innkeeper kept slaves. One slave poked the fire; another dried the travelers' clothes and brought them food. Commenting on the scene, Beaumont decried the inhumanity of slavery, its effects on enslaved and enslavers alike. At this point his journal is so damaged it becomes illegible, just a mud of words. The swampy pool, the mire of mirror ice—the historian's reflection speaks the silence of what toppled and what stood, in the wood of solitude.

## The Sacred Woods of Francis Parkman

In 1831, when he was eight years old, Francis Parkman went to live at the farm of his maternal grandfather in Medford, Massachusetts. The boy was sickly and glum, and his parents thought the country air would do him some good. In Medford, six miles from the family's mansion on Bowdoin Square in Boston, he began exploring the Five-Mile Woods, also known as Middlesex Fells, a forest surrounding a large pond and surmounted by a 325-foot rise called Bear Hill. The young Parkman collected eggs and captured lizards, trapped squirrels and woodchucks, tried shooting birds with a bow and arrow. When he returned to Boston in 1835, somewhat restored in health, he switched focus and began conducting scientific experiments, but did little except poison his room with noxious fumes and occasionally scorch himself in an explosion. Returning to his initial love, he became "enamored of the woods," his "thoughts always on the forests," as he wrote many years later, describing himself in the third person. They were the stuff of "his waking and sleeping dramas, filled with vague cravings impossible to satisfy." Still a teenager, he decided he would tell the history of the American forest—not the history of the trees but of the prolonged conflict they had witnessed.

That conflict was the French and Indian War, which raged in the American Northeast for more than a hundred years and culminated in the Seven Years' War of 1756–63. To get back to that time, Parkman told his Harvard classmates in his undergraduate commencement speech of 1844, he walked through a woodland portal, a "narrow gap in the woods," "a small square space hewn out of the forest." It was true that by then not much of that old forest remained. Around him he saw "the black and smoking carcasses of the murdered

trees,” but in the woods that were left he made lost time reappear. His mind activated by the wet, dense, physical spaces he walked through—by dark woodland streams “fed by a decoction of forest leaves that oozed from the marshy shores”; by tall thin trees straining toward the light, “their rough, gaunt stems trickling with perpetual damp”; by dead trees crowding a riverbank, others partly submerged in mudbanks and shallows—he envisioned a great drama of historical actors and places. Writing in the darkness of his Boston study, where he kept the blinds closed to block the headachy sunlight that forced him to wear tinted glasses outdoors, he tried to write a few lines a day. Concluding with his most famous work, *Montcalm and Wolfe*, published in 1884, Parkman wrote history in a secluded space of dreams, an oneiric location that conjured the past in fragmentary visions. “In glimpses only, through jagged boughs and flickering leaves, did this wild primeval world reveal itself.”

Back when he was an undergraduate, Parkman spent time in Italy in hopes of bettering his delicate health. Staying at a monastery in Rome for a few days in 1844, he endured the monks who prayed for his Unitarian soul. He ridiculed a mass at St. Peter’s in which Veronica’s veil hung above ten thousand worshipful congregants—the “handkerchief on which Christ wiped his face, and which contains the impressions of his features,” he wrote to his parents, was only “one of the fooleries of Holy Week.” But Parkman’s woods were themselves a holy face, a hallucination of the real, and the physical ardors of his camping excursions deep into the American forests were the same as the ecstatically punishing rituals of the Passionist monks, whose hair shirts and simple diet afforded the young man a worthy model for his own discipline. In an era when he found that even the settlers in the woods did nothing but read the newspapers, think of

presidential politics, attend their sawmills, and hoe their potatoes—this is what he told his Harvard classmates at commencement—Parkman envisioned himself as an apostle of woodland directness. Drenching the world in its own immediacy, conjuring the forest in a stream of words, he made scenes appear in writerly visions, as if without human hands.

He described Father Isaac Jogues, a Jesuit priest captured and tortured by the Mohawks in 1642–43, who cut out a cross of bark and knelt beneath the wintry pines. Clad in furs, left to roam the inescapable woods by his captors, Jogues told his beads and read scripture. His right thumb had been cut off by a razor-sharp clamshell. His body was a welter of bruises from running the captive’s gauntlet. But he walked on the shores of a remote lake and carved the name of Jesus on trees “as a terror to the demons of the wilderness.” Parkman disdained Jesuit superstition, but the priest’s pain-wracked writings on trees were like his own. The original manuscript sources before him—Jogues’s accounts, those of other Jesuits—were at once legalistic documents and mysterious emanations from a remote place, apparitions of the dead.

As Parkman sat in his study one day, he examined the photograph of a bust of another Jesuit martyr, Jean de Brébeuf. Commissioned by the dead man’s family, the bust was made of silver with a cavity inside, a recess for his skull. Likewise, Parkman created symbols incarnate with actuality, writerly crucibles of silver and bone. He was like those first Jesuits at Montreal, the ones who carved a large cross of wood, embedded it with the relics of saints, and carried it up a steep and rugged mountain. He, too, labored on signs and wonders. He trusted his eyes, went to the sites, and found himself back in the woods, where the light was slight.

## A Shallow Pool of Amber

The trees could be seen, but they were a dream. “The solemn evergreen woods,” Margaret Fuller called them in a letter of March 4, 1839, to her friend Charles Newcomb. The silence of those trees, “colder, if not deeper than that of summer noon, gave verge enough for reverie.” She told Newcomb of the “tales the Spirits of the trees told me by the glimpses of the moon.” She was twenty-eight years old, a disciplined intellectual and an aspiring writer living in Groton, Massachusetts, who faced an unpleasant task. Her father had died of cholera in 1835 and she was finally sorting through forty years of his papers. Timothy Fuller had been a lawyer and member of the Massachusetts and US House of Representatives, and he had kept copious documents: journal themes from his college days at Harvard, law minutes, minutes of legislature debates, a vast correspondence. When suddenly stricken, he had just finished overseeing the construction of a study at the end of the family’s garden in Groton where he intended to sort through all these documents. Now the duty fell to Margaret, who was moved by what she read. “I know him hourly better and respect him more,” she wrote to a friend, thanks to “those secrets of his life which the sudden event left open in a way he never foresaw.” But the task was tedious. She had to look at each sheet separately and decide which ones to burn. The trees made an escape—into the mind, into language of another kind.

Three years earlier, she had been walking across a dull-brown field in early spring. Her stroll was languid, her mood bored. Nothing caught her fancy, nothing had a “life-like tint,” not even the trees. A few withered leaves from last year blew on the oaks. Nothing made her happy and alive. Nothing penetrated the pores of her skin. Then she saw

“a shallow pool of the clearest amber,” broken by the wind into tiny waves so that it flashed “a myriad of diamonds up at each instant.” In it she saw the redemptive power of art: “a mixture of the most *subtle force* combined with the most *winning gentleness* . . . the most *impetuous force* with the most *irresistible subtlety*.” It was dangerous, it drew her in; it invited her to drown, this respiring water that took her breath away. Yet the shallow pool was a sparkling redemption, an ecstatic solitude, revealing the world without prejudice, without morality. Fuller came to call places like the pool her “elemental manifestations,” phenomena untinged by human likeness that “seemed to press themselves into the brain.” Art was the lone gem in the empty field, coldly beckoning, a rival to love.

## Grand Central

Red sash and belt bright, a tuft of white feathers flaring from a wrap around his head, the Onondaga chief Ut-hawah was lost in his own world. Staring into space, posing for his picture, he bided different times: uncertain future, distant past, the duration of posing, a climate of times, a meteorology of days, stuck in sequence, held in steady gaze. This man of such political importance for so many years, who had brought the Iroquois into the War of 1812 on the side of the Americans, held no center now. The same year he posed for his portrait, the Onondaga and the other tribes of the Haudenosaunee (or Six Nations of the Iroquois) had signed a treaty agreeing to cede their ancestral lands in Upstate New York to the American government and were heading west to the Kansas Territory, part of the US government’s Indian Removal Policy. Rescinded by another

one four years later, the treaty still made the change in Ut-ha-wah's power clear enough. Art comes along when all is lost.

William John Wilgus, the painter of Ut-ha-wah, was a type of magician. A friend likened his brush to a wand. Just nineteen when he painted the portrait, he was renowned for his power to make painted figures look alive. In his studio in Buffalo, New York, on the second floor of a building above the Erie County Savings Bank, he made art of durable value, far more trustworthy, so it seemed to its early viewers, than the arbitrary coinage of ordinary portraits. When Wilgus later sold the painting of Ut-ha-wah in exchange for a farm in Lewis County, New York—a farm that he later sold for \$1,600 in gold—he demonstrated that his art was a kind of real estate that magically kept its value. In a time of financial uncertainty—the Erie County Savings Bank had been created in response to the Panic of 1837—true likeness was a gold standard, portable across time and space.

Back in 1833, when Wilgus was fourteen, he was sent to New York by his father to study painting with Samuel F. B. Morse. Morse, an ambitious painter, was growing disenchanted with his profession, which had brought him insufficient fame and fortune. Soon he would turn to the invention of the telegraph and the Morse Code that would make him famous—though not without acknowledging a debt to painting as the basis for his new science. Using a picture frame as part of his first telegraph apparatus, he understood that paintings were message-sending devices: that lightweight canvases could be transported, as Jennifer Roberts notes, from one place to the next, their content intact. A portrait was a temporal telegraph: retaining a likeness over the years, the message of a person perpetually legible. “Keep, then, this portrait,” a Seneca chief reputedly



told Wilgus. “Lose it not; give it not away; but put it in some safe place where it may remain forever.”

It did not matter that the times themselves were speeding up, that the railroad age just beginning when *Ut-ha-wah* posed for his portrait was gathering force. Nor did it matter that Wilgus, dying of tuberculosis at age thirty-four in 1853, did not live to see much of the new age. The new mobilities carried his name onward even as he remained stuck in time. In 1865, twelve years after his death, a second William John Wilgus was born, a nephew named after his uncle the painter. And this nephew, watching a surveyor map the family’s farm in 1876, fell in love with engineering’s “mathematical exactitude,” its “aesthetic charm,” and later became an engineer, a railroad man, and eventually the architect of the new Grand Central Terminal in New York. It was this second William John Wilgus who devised the two-level tiers of tracks still in use today, who conceived the plan of extracting “wealth from the air,” in the form of a twelve-story office building above the terminal that would eventually pay for its construction. An artist in his own right, an architect of far-flung space and time, the second William John Wilgus displayed one of his namesake’s Indian paintings in his Manhattan home. As one of the trains of the New York Central railroad line was called the Iroquois, the portrait that hung in the new William John Wilgus’s home—of a Seneca chief named Tommy Jemmy—sped through time and space.

Terminal and train, goal and journey: Wilgus’s *Ut-ha-wah*—also called *Captain Cold*, after the name the chief’s white allies gave him—projects a melancholy fixity in an unfixed world. With its subject radically still—the man posed, frozen in contemplation—the portrait seems to gird itself for a new era of thrumming speed, a time with few constants



except changing points of view. Call it a new era of artistic portability, an era of *displacement*: a time not just of Indian Removal but of objects themselves anticipating their own departure from different shores—their banishment manifest in heroically sorrowful looks of loss. The white feathers atop Ut-ha-wah’s head make a crown of transport, a plume of flight and height, less markers of a cloud come down to lift and bathe the man in puffs of deity than to suggest that his true apotheosis—the wreath he must wear—consisted in the signs of vast distance, the bird’s-eye views, that made him remote.

Back in the Onondaga lands, the woods themselves refused to stay put. In the great deforestations that began in the 1830s, planked and planed trees began traveling far and wide. The very words for the trees likewise began to change, get lost, become obscured. Among the words that faded, thanks to federal assimilationist policies that prohibited the Onondaga and other Iroquois tribes from speaking their own tongue, was the one for chestnut. As actual chestnut trees started disappearing early in the twentieth century because of an insect-induced blight, stories about the tree likewise began vanishing. So did instructions for using the properties of chestnut trees as medicine. Several Iroquois languages eventually had no words for these trees. And if there were no words to speak of the chestnut, there eventually would be none to speak *to* it. Of a new genetically modified chestnut tree, brought in by scientists as a form of restitution, an Onondaga elder recently asked: “Would you really trust that this new being will have the ability to hear it when it’s spoken to and understand that you’re speaking to it?” In the spiny burrs enclosing each chestnut, the tree held a secret about propagation and doom, about a language spread to the winds and dying on the ground.

Portraits themselves carried a natural genetic code that spread the likeness of a person like seed. Again like trees, portraits sheltered an unspoken dialect, a far-traveling muteness, a funerary retirement within themselves. If trees had become so accustomed to becoming boards that they had forgotten the meaning of their own rustling leaves, then portraits as they went forth also lost their origins, forgot their purpose, kept their peace. One of Wilgus's subjects "placed himself in the attitude of an orator," but Ut-ha-wah has nothing to say: nothing except that he will silently assist his viewers in forgetting who he was.

Only the feathers make a kind of sound, a note of sovereign brightness. Nearly weightless, and for that reason flying, they make a crown of lightness and soft abandon. They sanction being lost on the horizon. Call it historical consciousness: the flutter of things from afar, gathered roundabout the head, struck down and raised up. The crown and the aim, the spoil and the game, some memory remains.