

certain the animal crouched, hidden, that she didn't even pause to wonder who might be bothering them at such an hour.

"Mara?" Benny called, her name bouncing against the looming piles of boxes. "Mara? It's happening. It's all happening."

But she did not answer at that point, so close was she to the animal, hunched and waiting herself, every muscle coiled – so close that she could feel its frightened breath, its curled claws, its sour odor sharp in her nose and almost human.

Lucas Southworth

## IN IGNORANCE, IN PEACE

The morning was not yet the morning; the morning was not yet the dawn. The gossip of the birds seeped through the window's glass and played in the dark like some careful, cautious dream. Father Sanchez rose to light his candle from the ashes in the fireplace. Beyond the sacristy, where he slept, he passed five travelers huddled on the pews, their breathing filling up the nave. He opened the main door as quietly as he could and watched the birds shiver along the edge of the meadow. A hundred or so had gathered in the naked trees, their songs fitful, nervous. He caught their words for smoke and fire but smelled only the dew slicing the cold like crystal, the musk of dead leaves and dry earth.

Since he was a child, Father Sanchez had been blessed with an ear for music, an ear for languages. He had the ability to repeat songs as soon as he heard them, to pick up tongues almost as easily. God had given him this gift, he believed, and it was the reason he became a priest and the reason he suffered the cruel trip across the Atlantic and the twenty years as a missionary in New Spain. When he finally fled to the swamps and woods of America and trudged the long lonely

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paths, relentlessly north, the birds had been his only companions. He realized the key to understanding them was stifling the impulse to translate, the urge to distinguish which words were words and which were just notes twisting away. He gathered that they measured distance in darkness and light, in vague yet specific swaths, in unseen turns of wind and sun. What the birds discussed might have happened months ago or years; it might even be a kind of prediction. A decade in the Carolinas, and Father Sanchez had never heard them talk about a fire bigger than one in somebody's camp. But the more he listened now, the more he became convinced one might be spreading between King's Mount and Fishdam Ferry. That was leagues away, but rains hadn't fallen like they should, and a blaze might tear through these dry woods faster than a man could walk or run.

The priest turned to the sleepers under their blankets and skins. On mornings like these, when the church was full, he looked at them like children sleeping in ignorance, in peace. Though America always seemed to be filling up, pushing in every direction, pushing especially west, the church remained a three-day walk north of the closest settlement, fifty leagues south of the nearest village, and far west of the plantations multiplying along the coast. Travelers often stopped as they would at an inn, and Father Sanchez charged only conversation and confession and whatever food or time they were willing to donate. This group had been the first to shake off winter, to return to the roads and paths. A trapper snored in the first pew, his face red and raw and blistered like an overripe tomato. Behind him slept a black boy of around twelve, a runaway or orphan or both, and next came the one who called himself a naturalist, his kinked ankle hanging off the bench. In the second to last row, a father lay, his young son dreaming and churning in his arms.

At the head of the aisle, above them all, hung Christ, heroic and reckless from His cross. The large crucifix had been waiting above the altar, haunting it, when Father Sanchez wandered into the meadow and into the abandoned church. He'd wiped the dust from Jesus's face with a white cloth and prayed to Him, asking if this was his new destiny, his second chance. God hadn't answered, then or ever, but Father Sanchez stayed. And each morning a slant of sunlight showed him Christ's pain, which spread from His face to His ribs to the impossible angles of His feet. And each morning, Father Sanchez stifled his jealousy and anger and forced himself to surrender before it. He asked Jesus the same questions he always did, and received, as always, the same breath of silence.

The birds screamed and skittered beyond the open door, and the child suddenly began to twist, to let loose a noise that sounded like it

came from some other body. The father secured him and anchored a hand over his mouth. The others woke one by one, sitting up in their pews, their faces heavy, their bodies hazy.

Shall we pray? Father Sanchez asked.

All bowed their heads except the child. The priest tried to ignore the birds outside as he spoke. He tried to hold his prayer, tried to grab onto it, tried his best to keep it from slipping.

The trapper flung on a jacket and hat and went out to check his dogs. He came back chewing on his words. Strange out there, he said. The naturalist lingered in the doorway and told them the sparrows were behaving like they were under threat, like there was a predator close. Father Sanchez faltered, wondered when to tell them, worried that if he did, they might ask how he knew. Instead, he mentioned the bald bluff beside the church.

It's a better place to see, he told the naturalist, and a good place to reconcile your sins before moving on.

The naturalist agreed, and the two men climbed the rocky path and finally stood side by side at the top, panting and staring over trees that rose and fell with the hills. The priest assumed they'd see smoke, but the sky shone clear in every direction. The trapper's gun cracked in the distance, the shot and then the sharp silence of a reload. The howling of his dogs echoed against the horizon. The naturalist collected a few twigs and lit a small fire. He lowered himself to his hands and knees to blow on it. When he had it going, he sat as close as the flames would let him and slid his pad and pencils from his pack.

I turn these drawings into plates, he said. Then we can print hundreds, thousands.

A chill rattled the bare branches, and Father Sanchez rubbed the backs of his hands, a habit he'd acquired since coming north. The birds sang their sporadic language. As far as the priest could tell, the fire was holding strong, rushing forward, and he pressed his emotions down at the thought. He'd been waiting for God in this little church for ten years, and had waited even longer in New Spain before that. He believed, still believed that God's acknowledgement would come. Now, he feared it all could disappear in flames.

I must take your confession, Father Sanchez said.

The naturalist was quiet for a moment. I used to read Pliny the Elder as a child, he said. Pliny decided that vultures were bald because they ate what was already dead. He thought that if they didn't return to the corpse every four hours, the rest of their feathers would fall out and they'd tumble from the sky.

Father Sanchez followed the naturalist's gaze, and together they

watched one of those large birds circle. It appeared majestic until something revealed itself, a jitter in its flight, a jaunt that exposed the scavenger. The naturalist's eyes flickered between the paper and the bird he'd singled out to draw. The priest saw a sparrow on the paper, perched on its branch exactly, its eyes exactly wild.

The Indians say the vulture was born when the sky touched the earth, the naturalist said. Some tribes say he was the one to bring us fire.

Father Sanchez glanced up again. What do you believe? he asked.

The naturalist told Father Sanchez he'd grown up in England, fascinated by the New World. He'd joined the Royal Society, and for a long time he wanted to be elected leader. But he struggled around women. When he saw a thread or string or piece of lace, he felt it against the dark edge of his soul. Thoughts came to him that unraveled quickly, and he had to rush out of town, sit among the plants and beasts and birds.

Do you seek forgiveness? Father Sanchez asked. Do you seek penance?

The naturalist shaded feathers, wings. I seek understanding, he said.

He flipped to an earlier page in his book and showed the priest. On the Bahama Islands, he said, I watched the long-beaked booby dive, and the man-of-war bird hover over the water, waiting to steal the booby's catch as soon as it surfaced.

God can help us overcome our guilt, Father Sanchez said. If we seek His forgiveness.

Have you known that to be true? the naturalist asked. Have you seen it?

He turned to a blank page. We're all gnashed in the teeth of nature, he said, and sometimes we are those teeth as well.

Have faith, Father Sanchez told him. Have faith, he repeated. Have faith.

None of the travelers left that day, and no new ones came. At night, the six of them sat around a fire in the meadow, silhouetted orange, the moon tangled in hoary limbs. The trapper reported he'd seen a flock pull into itself, each bird losing its direction and suddenly flying on its own. The orphan, who'd been shadowing him, said he watched a hawk pick a smaller bird out of the sky, separate its head from its body, and carry the pieces in talons tight as fists. The child sat on his father's lap, his hands dancing, his eyes wavering. Wetness glinted under his nose, fat from the rabbit the trapper had cooked. Above, the birds chirped in frenzy, in fear.

That afternoon, the father had offered to replenish the wood pile along the church, and Father Sanchez had led him past the edge of the meadow to a fallen tree that hadn't yet softened into rot. They sat on two flat stones and faced each other, the handle of the ax resting against the father's left thigh, the long blade of the saw propped against his right, the boy on the ground beside his feet. The stream had little water in it, and it crawled over the rocks like worms or slugs.

When the boy was two, the father told the priest, cows began toppling to the ground. At three, the wells went dry. At four, he'd lifted the child from his bed and found a swarm of beetles covering his legs. The whites of his wife's eyes smudged after that, and they began to hit the child, demanding that he speak. But the boy didn't, and they finally agreed they had to keep their daughter safe, had to keep the boy from the others in their village.

The father touched the handle of his ax as he spoke. He was taking the boy to a place where he could do no harm. And if he found out for sure the boy was beyond saving, he was prepared to remove the child's head somewhere in the silence of the woods.

The child began to blubber, and the father moved to cover his mouth.

Give him a moment, the priest said. Let me listen.

He heard what sounded like the cadence of speech; but patterns refused to present themselves, words refused to step forward. And at that moment, a flock lighted in one of the trees above them, whipping their small wings by the hundreds, rocking the branches with their weight. The boy grew louder, but then quieted and the birds quieted too. The father picked up the child as he stood, his ax and saw shedding to the ground. He turned his back toward the birds like a shield, and Father Sanchez recalled the natives of New Spain doing the same, thrusting their bodies between their children and conquistadors who saw a demon in every girl, a devil in every boy.

Fly, the birds sang, flee.

I need more time to listen, Father Sanchez said. Trust that God led you here. Trust that He can save the child.

That night, Father Sanchez decided he could wait no longer. He told them he'd been in the path of a fire before, and the animals, especially the birds, had acted like this. The trapper tamped the flames from their fire and spread the ashes with a stick until they lost their glow. The naturalist glared at the night sky. They all went inside and took the same pews, and, alone in the sacristy, Father Sanchez ignored the nagging in his chest. He wove his fingers together and pulled them apart. His lie had been a small thing, smaller than a star, but he apologized for it.



I can help them follow the birds, he announced to God. I can lead this group past the fire to safety.

In the morning, they discovered the orphan's blankets in knots, the main door open just wide enough for a twelve-year-old to slip out. Father Sanchez peeked through the crack before tugging the door the rest of the way. The sound of hundreds or thousands of wings grew louder, brushing, filling the trees, feathers among feathers among branches. The trapper joined him and a chill played dryly as they stood staring. Not one of the birds mentioned the orphan. They warbled about the fire, warned it was closer. The air felt constricted as if with smoke, though Father Sanchez couldn't see or smell any.

The orphan rounded the woodpile an hour later. He told them he'd been afraid. All night he'd felt the temperature growing hotter and seen shadows dueling along the foggy glass. When he looked out, there was no fire, so he tracked the moon through the trees and followed it up the rocks to the top of the bluff.

What did you see when the sun came up? Father Sanchez asked. Did you see anything on the horizon? Did you see haze?

The boy appeared unsure. Then he nodded. Yes, he said.

There was no discussion after that. Everyone gathered their things. And before they left, Father Sanchez lingered in front of the ugly crucifix and ran his fingers over the crown of thorns whittled and dull.

I will not fail You, he mouthed. I will not.

They entered the woods in a loose, unsteady row, Father Sanchez leading in the same direction the birds were going. They went hard, west, northwest, their feet scraping dirt, needles and spines clinging to their ankles and letting go. The birds filled many of the trees like listless, preening leaves; purple daws and starlings, the naturalist pointed out, blue jays and nuthatches, finches and larks. Whenever the group drew close, a flock clambered up in great numbers, holding the shape so it looked like one tree hung just a few feet above the other. The trapper noticed an eagle, and they all stopped to stare through the branches that crisscrossed in diamonds and rectangles like latticework in the windows of the little church. The eagle flew high over them, slanting before the cold sun and a string of white, impassive clouds. The wind stammered, full of its own language; whispering, Father Sanchez thought, whispering the voice of God.

Later, they settled down in exhaustion, and the eagle floated to the top of the tallest tree, cocking its head and beak, its eyes glazed and callous. It screeched the words for black and cloud and death, and the men threw a rickety camp together, their mouths pinched,

their eyebrows unfurled. As they sat around the fire, the little boy convulsed into hysterics. The father hugged him until he sobbed and quieted. One dog began to bark at the trees to their left; the other did the same to the right. The orphan glanced back and forth. The trapper whistled. The naturalist croaked in the back of his throat.

Father Sanchez put his hands together as if to pray. He stood and walked around the circle, placing a palm on one man's shoulder and then the next.

God is already protecting us, he said. He will continue to do so. Amen, he said.

Amen, they replied.

To break the silence, the naturalist told them about the American nightingale. Not long ago, scientists believed it never stopped singing, he said. If it did, it would forget its song, and if it forgot, it would choke and die. The song was its life, and it changed as the bird got older, grew faster and higher and higher.

Father Sanchez rubbed the backs of his hands.

The trapper grinned.

A kid's story, he said.

On the second day, they left the path and trampled through undergrowth. The eagle rose and dipped and kept with them, and in the late afternoon when they set up camp, it settled as it had before, tucking its great wings and watching, the wind quivering its feathers. Smaller birds threw their songs back and forth, and Father Sanchez thought he heard them mention the meadow, the church. None of the men had seen any hint of fire, had smelled anything like smoke; but the behavior of the birds remained enough to convince them.

The trapper went to hunt, his shots skittering through the trees, the muscular snap of the father's ax sounding much the same. Father Sanchez heard the birds mention a stream that wasn't dry, and he scrambled down the slope to find it. At the bend, he knelt and cupped water to his face three times. He pushed each empty waterskin under and waited until the bubbles stopped. He breathed to slow the creaking of his body, the blood in his ears, the happiness, the exultation. He'd never known the birds to talk this much about death. For them, meaning had always been connected to the land and the sky, and death was a simple disappearing, a sudden silence, a tear in the flock and a replacement, a filling of that hole. The priest was sure their words were for him, a warning that only he was meant to hear. He'd stayed loyal to God, sometimes past the edge of his capacity for faith, and now, he thought, the birds had become God's way of reaching him, and he was ready to receive it.

Hello Father, a stony voice said.

The priest opened his eyes and saw the trapper crouched beside him, a string of rabbits and squirrels hanging from his hands. Blood matted their fur but didn't drip, and the trapper ran a thumb over his front teeth staining them red before licking them and his fingers like a coyote.

We should keep eyes out for the French, he said. They're known to get far south this time of year.

The French aren't as cold as the stories make them, Father Sanchez replied. They won't hurt children. They won't hurt a priest who speaks their language.

The trapper punctured the skin between a rabbit's front legs with his knife and worked it down past the belly.

We should keep eyes out for the Indians too, he said. For what we know, all this might be their kind of hocus pocus.

You don't believe that, Father Sanchez said.

Only from them, the trapper answered. Only from the way they live in these woods.

God is with us here, Father Sanchez said. That I know.

The trapper's eyes moved in his skull; his face turned a deeper shade as he laughed. He cut off one of the rabbit's feet and gave it to Father Sanchez before tossing a handful of viscera into the stream. He wrenched the skin free, pulled it off like a hood, tufts of fur floating like ash or snow.

He told Father Sanchez he'd been headed back to the woods when he'd seen the church. A man in Salisbury mentioned it was friendly, so he thought he'd spend a warm, dry night before the mushrooms started growing on his skin, the moss underneath his fingernails.

While he finished the second rabbit and began cleaning a squirrel, he gave the priest a whole list of sins. Trials of a life in the woods, he said. He told Father Sanchez the forest had a mind of its own, and it snatched God out of a person like a doctor yanking a bullet from the meat of a man's thigh. Everything he'd done, every bad thing, he simply stepped away from, moved on. He called it survival, he said. Survival.

That was confession, Father Sanchez told him.

The trapper picked up the next squirrel. The water stained red around the intestines he tossed in. Birds hopped along the opposite bank. Their chirping grew louder at each splash. Guts negotiated rocks downstream, and the birds pecked at them, beat at each other with their wings.

Did you come from New Spain? the trapper asked.

A decade ago, the priest answered.

The trapper picked up the last animal, another squirrel, and studied it. Ruthless there, I hear, he said. Downright barbaric.

He skinned it and dipped all five animals in the water one by one. He strung them up again, pink and skinless and trembling. The voices of the smaller birds rang together. The eagle called alone.

Have you ever seen anything like that? Father Sanchez asked. The way he's following?

The trapper stood and flung the line over his shoulder. Don't see too much in that, he said. It thinks it has a chance at one of these squirrels, maybe one of these rabbits if it gets lucky.

He laughed and Father Sanchez saw his teeth rotting away. They struggled up the slope together, and back in the camp, they huddled around a fire the father had made. They cooked the animals on crooked sticks and ate, burning their fingers and tongues. Night came, and more birds with it, each a new shadow against the darkening sky.

The orphan had stumbled into the church a week ago, his clothes torn rags. He'd been thin, so thin, and Father Sanchez carried him to the bed in the sacristy and nursed him, praying until life seeped back into the boy's young face and he could eat without vomiting.

When he was well enough, he told Father Sanchez about the dove.

One night, he said, he'd heard a knocking on the shutters of their little house at the edge of the plantation. It sounded like the tap of a cane, but sharper, more faint. He got up from the floor, where he slept next to his sister, and cracked the window far enough to see but not so wide as to let the evil night air in. A white bird perched on the hitching post as if waiting, the moon glowing off its feathers. The boy followed it, forgetting about the cold and forgetting the danger of stepping off his master's land. He followed until they came upon a woman sitting in the fork of a tree, her legs tucked beneath her. She was dark-skinned too, and when she opened her palm, the dove flew up and landed on it. She sang what sounded like another song, and she told the boy his plantation would soon be attacked. Anyone who was there in three nights would die.

The boy repeated this to his parents, but they insisted it was the dream of a child. They warned him not to tell anyone or the overseer would find out and punish him for lies. Two nights later, the night before the attack, the boy stole his father's knife and filled a bag and plunged into the woods. He lost his direction first and lost the knife next, trying to stab for fish. He drank from rivers and streams; he ate anything he could find. The fever came, and the dove returned at the height of it. It led him to the meadow, to the door of Father Sanchez's church.

A swirl of empty blankets lay beside the orphan's yawning pack in the center of camp. The trapper insisted he saw no evidence in the brush of anyone or anything sneaking upon them. He tracked the path he said was the orphan's, but it suddenly disappeared as if the boy's feet had lifted off the ground. The men called; they searched for a body, for a drop of blood. The child cried in his father's arms, his wails carrying into the woods. Father Sanchez could still hear them as he walked, his eyes sweeping past trees that looked like slashes of paint in the soft light. He stopped at the base of one, dried and petrified like bone. Its branches had all fallen off, and the trunk shot up above the others like an arrow. Father Sanchez ran his palm over the rough bark; he worked a finger into a gash that looked like someone with a giant ax had swiped with the strength of twelve men. The eagle stared down but said nothing. The other birds flocked thick as ever, calmer than they'd been in days. They twisted their necks, scrutinizing the priest with one eye and then the other. One bird said the boy was underground. Another that he was at the top of the trees. One bird said the boy was right there, behind, and another that the dove had come and taken him away.

The priest kept a hand on the tree as if feeling for a pulse. He'd never believed the boy's story, had always assumed him a runaway doing his best to survive. The birds' songs greyed and varied, turning back and inside out and upside down. And for the first time, he wondered if they could embellish too. He put his hands together and tried to pray but couldn't. He began to chastise himself. How vain he'd been to expect redemption after his failures in New Spain. How vain to think God would stoop to speak to him. And where was he taking these men? And where were they going? And where were the birds leading them?

Back at the camp, he wiped his forehead and shouldered his pack. The rest of the day, he walked with little faith. His past shuffled behind him, and the pasts of the other men joined in. He felt their sins and guns. He felt the two dogs bouncing at their heels.

The naturalist hobbled up. That tree, he said, the dead tree you found. It was a live oak, a *Quercus virginiana*.

Leaves crunched. Their feet ground the leaves back into dry earth. The eagle spiraled, and hordes of smaller birds flapped and jittered. When the sun was highest, the naturalist leaned forward to part two withered ferns. He picked up a feather and showed them the fringe-like edges that resembled a row of teeth. It was a young owl's, he said, and a few steps later, he stumbled on his bad foot over the whole bird. That afternoon he found another, and then another surrounded

by the only ring of flowers they'd seen. None of the dead owls had injuries, the naturalist said. None of their deaths seemed to have anything to do with fire.

That night, they tried to ignore the wall of chirping just past the edge of the flicker. They tried to ignore the bad omens and the fact that they believed them; they tried to ignore that their group, once six, was now five. The woods creaked sinister, and swayed. The boy mumbled what sounded like questions and answered them in a different voice. His language remained snarled and impenetrable, and Father Sanchez thought he saw a flash of red cross the child's face. When the boy started to laugh, the birds rustled as if they were laughing too.

The devil has his hands on us, Father Sanchez said, his voice shaking.

The trapper hugged his gun to his chest. How long are we going to walk like this? he asked. How many of us still believe in this fire?

When no one answered, he told them of the great river to the west, the times he'd stood ankle deep in mud on its crooked banks.

The naturalist glanced up from his drawing. There is no evil in nature, he reminded them. If you think you've seen it, you haven't.

Then it must be in one of us, Father Sanchez answered.

They kept their fire raging and watched the woods. Father Sanchez suspected that if he slept he might never wake, or he might wake to find himself alone. But in the morning, all were still there, all ready to go on. The priest suggested they head north, not with the birds but not against them. God had come to him in the night, he lied, and told him that was the way to avoid death's tightening grasp.

They went less than five leagues before a shadow plunged them into dark. An endless flock of purple jackdaws and starlings and passenger pigeons rushed overhead crowding out the sun. None flapped down to join the birds in the trees; they just kept going, holding the woods in a serious dusk. The men moved little, stunned by the weight of it, their legs so heavy they could barely lift them. The trapper stomped off and shot, but the flock swallowed the bullets like the surface of a rough sea. There were so many, their chirps and songs mixed to nothing, a pure sound, a blur.

The flock tapered in the late afternoon, and the trapper returned with twenty on his line. Though the birds appeared black when together, they were navy or purple or brown up close. The men recoiled from the smell but cooked them, each breast only a few nibbles of meat, each sour and dry and taking on the bitter flavor of wild onions the naturalist had dug up the day before. The next morning, they woke to another flock, and again the trapper shot blindly, bird after bird raining through the branches, his dogs retrieving them and piling



them up. He had about fifty this time, and once the flock faded off, the group moved as far as they could before-dusk, birds dangling from their hands, tied in bundles and looped from their belts and packs, the smell stronger, greasy and ripe with the metal of blood.

That night, the boy blubbered so loud, they took him to the edge of the camp and covered him in blankets and skins. They placed stones around the edges heavy enough to trap him. He struggled before he slept, fitful and muttering and twitching, always twitching.

They woke to the relief of open sky and continued north. As night came again, they made their camp, pinned the boy down like before. Even the naturalist offered no explanation, though he insisted there was one and that binding the boy had nothing to do with it. The rotten taste of the birds remained on Father Sanchez's tongue and radiated from his skin and hair. The heat of jealousy and anger rose in him, and for the first time since New Spain, he let it spread past his collar and up his neck.

The explanation is easy, he said. The boy is the fire. We're not following the birds. The birds are running from us.

The trapper nodded, and the father stared off, his gaze probably back at home with his wife and daughter.

It's not possible, the naturalist said. It can't be.

I understand his language now, Father Sanchez told them. I've understood it for days. It's one of the hardest to speak. It's the language of the devil too far under the boy's skin.

He looked at each of them. He told the father it was time to use his ax.

Another priest had once told Father Sanchez that his talents were those of a saint's, and Father Sanchez carried that comment with him always. He'd arrived in New Spain toward the end of the Great Conquest and found the natives still unwilling to convert, still refusing, and few missionaries and fewer conquistadors bothering to learn their languages anymore. Each day, Father Sanchez forced himself past the crosses and stilts and vultures hovering, but he could not bring himself to look at what he could not save. And, in the evenings, when the young soldiers came to him, weeping, demanding he absolve them, the priest assured them they were under the grace of God and God was deaf to the pain of those who did not believe. After twenty years, he fled, hoping to die in the woods of America. Then he found the meadow and the little church, and then he endured there and tried to redeem himself. The coming of the fire had given him another chance, but that had dwindled, and he was sure now he wasn't any kind of saint.

The father sawed two flat pieces of wood, and Father Sanchez placed one on a flat stone and held the child's head against it. The trapper slid the other under the crook of the boy's neck before wrapping his arms around the boy's legs to keep him steady. The birds chanted about fire, about death. The eagle shrieked. At the edge of camp, the naturalist lifted his pack and limped off to brave the trees alone.

The priest prayed, reminding them God would soon shine through. The birds would soon flutter off, the great blaze snuffed out.

The father's ax swung down. The priest and trapper pulled their hands away, and the boy's body shivered and rolled off the rock, the ground so dry his blood barely soaked in. The birds went silent. The wind died, the whole forest watching.

The father's legs gave, and right there, next to where the boy lay, he started scratching the dirt with his fingers. The trapper crouched to help him dig. Father Sanchez staggered, one hand rubbing the back of the other and switching and rubbing and switching. A squirrel squeaked from the trees; a rabbit froze to stare. Then the birds began to chide him, to flap their wings thick and heavy in his direction.

The priest had never tried to speak their language, had only listened, only translated for himself. He was not sure he had the tongue or throat for it. But the song came, red and raw, cutting like none he'd ever spoken.

Why are you still here? he asked.

We led you to the woods, the birds said. We carried you away.

Are you God? Father Sanchez asked. Or are you the devil?

What is God? they chirped. What is the devil?

The orphan? the priest said. Is he safe?

The boy is not safe, the birds answered.

Father Sanchez's body tightened under his robes. His mouth clenched, and he pictured the large crucifix hulking inside his little church; he pictured it burning, Jesus's face. He remembered the questions he'd asked before it every day for ten years, the same ones over and over.

Why don't you speak? he sang. Why do you meet us with silence?

The birds skittered. We don't understand, they answered. We don't.

Father Sanchez fell to his knees and stared, his neck awkward and strained. He thought he smelled fire but wasn't sure. He thought he heard the rush of flames lapping air. The birds began taking off, all at once, rippling wind, billowing like smoke. They covered the priest with their shade, and he couldn't breathe, and he felt their movements etching along the back of his shoulders and neck. For a moment, he

saw the birds as fabric, as a blanket or net draped carefully over the top of the canopy, over the forest's living skin. He saw how they attached themselves to each other with invisible threads, how they wove the sky, pulling it together and apart, how they knew the air in a way he would never know the ground or anything that walked on it.

The priest had one more question.

Who am I if not for God? he asked. Who are we?

But the birds had left or were leaving, and with them all that Father Sanchez believed, and with them the faith with which he'd always believed it. Good was nothing and evil was nothing. And God meant nothing, and the devil meant nothing either.

## ESSAYS