Cold Mountain

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Extract

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the shadow of a crow

At the first gesture of morning, flies began stirring. Inman's eyes and the long wound at his neck drew them, and the sound of their wings and the touch of their feet were soon more potent than a yardful of roosters in rousing a man to wake. So he came to yet one more day in the hospital ward. He flapped the flies away with his hands and looked across the foot of his bed to an open triple-hung window. Ordinarily he could see to the red road and the oak tree and the low brick wall. And beyond them to a sweep of fields and flat piney woods that stretched to the western horizon. The view was a long one for the flatlands, the hospital having been built on the only swell within eyeshot. But it was too early yet for a vista. The window might as well have been painted grey.

Had it not been too dim, Inman would have read to pass the time until breakfast, for the book he was reading had the effect of settling his mind. But he had burned up the last of his own candles reading to bring sleep the night before, and lamp oil was too scarce to be striking the hospital's lights for mere diversion. So he rose and dressed and sat in a ladderback chair, putting the gloomy room of beds and their broken occupants behind him. He flapped again at the flies and looked out the window at the first smear of foggy dawn and waited for the world to begin shaping up outside.

The window was tall as a door, and he had imagined many times that it would open onto some other place and let him walk through and be there. During his first weeks in the hospital, he had been hardly able to move his head, and all that kept his mind occupied had been watching out the window and picturing the old green places he recollected from home. Childhood places. The damp creek bank where Indian pipes grew. The corner of a meadow favored by brown-and-black caterpillars in the fall. A hickory limb that overhung the lane, and from which he often watched his father driving cows down to the barn at dusk. They would pass underneath him, and then he would close his eyes and listen as the cupping sound of their hooves in the dirt grew fainter and fainter until it vanished into the calls of katydids and peepers. The window apparently wanted only to take his thoughts back. Which was fine with him, for he had seen the metal face of the age and had been so stunned by it that when he thought into the future, all he could vision was a world from which everything he counted important had been banished or had willingly fled.

By now he had stared at the window all through a late summer so hot and wet that the air both day and night felt like breathing through a dishrag, so damp it caused fresh sheets to sour under him and tiny black mushrooms to grow overnight from the limp pages of the book on his bedside table. Inman suspected that after such long examination, the grey window had finally said about all it had to say. That morning, though, it surprised him, for it brought to mind a lost memory of sitting in school, a similar tall window beside him framing a scene of pastures and low green ridges terracing up to the vast hump of Cold Mountain. It was September. The hayfield beyond the beaten dirt of the school playground stood pant-waist high, and the heads of grasses were turning yellow from need of cutting. The teacher was a round little man, hairless and pink of face. He owned but one rusty black suit of clothes and a pair of old overlarge dress boots that curled up at the toes and were so worn down that the heels were wedgelike. He stood at the front of the room rocking on the points. He talked at length through the morning about history, teaching the older students of grand wars fought in ancient England.

After a time of actively not listening, the young Inman had taken his hat from under the desk and held it by its brim. He flipped his wrist, and the hat skimmed out the window and caught an updraft and soared. It landed far out across the playground at the edge of the hayfield and rested there black as the shadow of a crow squatted on the ground. The teacher saw what Inman had done and told him to go get it and to come back and take his whipping. The man had a big paddleboard with holes augured in it, and he liked to use it. Inman never did know what seized him at that moment, but he stepped out the door and set the hat on his head at a dapper rake and walked away, never to return.

The memory passed on as the light from the window rose toward day. The man in the bed next to Inman's sat and drew his crutches to him. As he did every morning, the man went to the window and spit repeatedly and with great effort until his clogged lungs were clear. He ran a comb through his black hair, which hung lank below his jaw and was cut square around. He tucked the long front pieces of hair behind his ears and put on his spectacles of smoked glass, which he wore even in the dim of morning, his eyes apparently too weak for the wannest form of light. Then, still in his nightshirt, he went to his table and began working at a pile of papers. He seldom spoke more than a word or two at a time, and Inman had learned little more of him than that his name was Balis and that before the war he had been to school at Chapel Hill, where he had attempted to master Greek. All his waking time was now spent trying to render ancient scribble from a fat little book into plain writing anyone could read. He sat hunched at his table with his face inches from his work and squirmed in his chair, looking to find a comfortable position for his leg. His right foot had been taken off by grape at Cold Harbor, and the stub seemed not to want to heal and had rotted inch by inch from the ankle up. His amputations had now proceeded past the knee, and he smelled all the time like last year's ham.

For a while there was only the sound of Balis's pen scratching, pages turning. Then others in the room began to stir and cough, a few to moan. Eventually the light swelled so that all the lines of the varnished beadboard walls stood clear, and Inman could cock back on the chair's hind legs and count the flies on the ceiling. He made it to be sixty-three.

As Inman's view through the window solidified, the dark trunks of the oak trees showed themselves first, then the patchy lawn, and finally the red road. He was waiting for the blindman to come. He had attended to the man's movements for some weeks, and now that he had healed enough to be numbered among the walking, Inman was determined to go out to the cart and speak to the man, for Inman figured him to have been living with a wound for a long time.

Inman had taken his own during the fighting outside Petersburg. When his two nearest companions pulled away his clothes and looked at his neck, they had said him a solemn farewell in expectation of his death. We'll meet again in a better world, they said. But he lived as far as the field hospital, and there the doctors had taken a similar attitude. He was classed among the dying and put aside on a cot to do so. But he failed at it. After two days, space being short, they sent him on to a regular hospital in his own state. All through the mess of the field hospital and the long grim train ride south in a boxcar filled with wounded, he had agreed with his friends and the doctors. He thought he would die. About all he could remember of the trip was the heat and the odors of blood and of shit, for many of the wounded had the flux. Those with the strength to do so had knocked holes in the sides of the wood boxcars with the butts of rifles and rode with their heads thrust out like crated poultry to catch the breeze.

At the hospital, the doctors looked at him and said there was not much they could do. He might live or he might not. They gave him but a grey rag and a little basin to clean his own wound. Those first few days, when he broke consciousness enough to do it, he wiped at his neck with the rag until the water in the basin was the color of the comb on a turkey-cock. But mainly the wound had wanted to clean itself. Before it started scabbing, it spit out a number of things: a collar button and a piece of wool collar from the shirt he had been wearing when he was hit, a shard of soft grey metal as big as a quarter dollar piece, and, unaccountably, something that closely resembled a peach pit. That last he set on the nightstand and studied for some days. He could never settle his mind on whether it was a part of him or not. He finally threw it out the window but then had troubling dreams that it had taken root and grown, like Jack's bean, into something monstrous.

His neck had eventually decided to heal. But during the weeks when he could neither turn his head nor hold up a book to read, Inman had lain every day watching the blind man. The man would arrive alone shortly after dawn, pushing his cart up the road, doing it about as well as any man who could see. He would set up his business under an oak tree across the road, lighting a fire in a ring of stones and boiling peanuts over it in an iron pot. He would sit all day on a stool with his back to the brick wall, selling peanuts and newspapers to those at the hospital whole enough to walk. Unless someone came to buy something, he rested as still as a stuffed man with his hands together in his lap.

That summer, Inman had viewed the world as if it were a picture framed by the molding around the window. Long stretches of time often passed when, for all the change in the scene, it might as well have been an old painting of a road, a wall, a tree, a cart, a blind man. Inman had sometimes counted off slow numbers in his head to see how long it would be before anything of significance altered. It was a game and he had rules for it. A bird flying by did not count. Someone walking down the road did. Major weather changes did – the sun coming out, fresh rain – but shadows of passing clouds did not. Some days he'd get up in the thousands before there was any allowable alteration in the elements of the picture. He believed the scene would never leave his mind – wall, blind man, tree, cart, road – no matter how far on he lived. He imagined himself an old man thinking about it. Those pieces together seemed to offer some meaning, though he did not know what and suspected he never would.

Inman watched the window as he ate his breakfast of boiled oats and butter, and shortly he saw the blind man come trudging up the road, his back humped against the weight of the cart he pushed, little twin clouds of dust rising from beneath the turning cartwheels. When the blind man had his fire going and his peanuts boiling, Inman put his plate on the window-sill and went outside and with the shuffling step of an old man crossed the lawn to the road.

The blind man was square and solid in shoulder and hip, and his britches were cinched at the waist with a great leather belt, wide as a razor strop. He went hatless, even in the heat, and his cropped hair was thick and grey, coarse-textured as the bristles to a hemp brush. He sat with his head tipped down and appeared to be somewhat in a muse, but he raised up as Inman approached, like he was really looking. His eyelids, though, were dead as shoe leather and were sunken into puckered cups where his eyeballs had been.

Without pausing even for salutation Inman said, Who put out your pair of eyes?

The blind man had a friendly smile on his face and he said, Nobody. I never had any.

That took Inman aback, for his imagination had worked in the belief that they had been plucked out in some desperate and bloody dispute, some brute fraction. Every vile deed he had witnessed lately had been at the hand of a human agent, so he had about forgot that there was a whole other order of misfortune.

—Why did you never have any? Inman said.

—Just happened that way.

—Well, Inman said. You're mighty calm. Especially for a man that most would say has taken the little end of the horn all his life.

The blind man said, It might have been worse had I ever been given a glimpse of the world and then lost it.

—Maybe, Inman said. Though what would you pay right now to have your eyeballs back for ten minutes? Plenty, I bet.

The man studied on the question. He worked his tongue around the corner of his mouth. He said, I'd not give an Indian-head cent. I fear it might turn me hateful.

—It's done it to me, Inman said. There's plenty I wish I'd never seen.

—That's not the way I meant it. You said ten minutes. It's having a thing and the loss I'm talking about.

The blind man twisted a square of newsprint up into a cone and then dipped with a riddly spoon into the pot and filled the cone with wet peanuts. He handed it to Inman and said, Come on, cite me one instance where you wished you were blind.

Where to begin? Inman wondered. Malvern Hill. Sharpsburg. Petersburg. Any would do admirably as example of unwelcome visions. But Fredericksburg was a day particularly lodged in his mind. So he sat with his back to the oak and halved the wet peanut shells and thumbed the meats out into his mouth and told the blind man his tale, beginning with how the fog had lifted that morning to reveal a vast army marching uphill toward a stone wall, a sunken road. Inman's regiment was called to join the men already behind the wall, and they had quickly formed up alongside the big white house at the top of Maryes Heights. Lee and Longstreet and befeathered Stuart stood right there on the lawn before the porch, taking turns glassing the far side of the river and talking. Longstreet had a grey shawl of wool draped about his shoulders. Compared to the other two men, Longstreet looked like a stout hog drover. But from what Inman had seen of Lee's way of thinking, he'd any day rather have Longstreet backing him in a fight. Dull as Longstreet looked, he had a mind that constantly sought ground configured so a man could hunker down and do a world of killing from a position of relative safety. And that day at Fredericksburg was all in the form of fighting that Lee mistrusted and that Longstreet welcomed.

After Inman's regiment had formed up, they dropped over the brow of the hill and into the withering fire of the Federals. They stopped once to touch off a volley, and then they ran down to the sunken road behind the stone wall. On the way a ball brushed the skin of Inman's wrist and felt like the tongue of a cat licking, doing no damage, only making a little abraded stripe.

When they got to the road, Inman could see they were in a fine spot. Those already there had trenched along the tightly built wall so that you could stand up comfortably and still be in its shelter. The Federals had to come uphill at the wall across acres and acres of open ground. So delightful was the spot that one man jumped onto the wall and hollered out, You are all committing a mistake. You hear? A dire mistake! Balls whistled all about the man, and he jumped back down into the ditch behind the wall and danced a jig.

It was a cold day and the mud of the road was near frozen to the condition of slurry. Some of the men were barefoot. Many wore homemade uniforms in the mute colors that plant dyes make. The Federals were arrayed on the field before them, all newly outfitted. Bright and shiny in factory-made uniforms, new boots. When the Federals charged, the men behind the wall held their fire and taunted them and one called out, Come on closer, I want them boots. And they let the Federals come as near as twenty paces before shooting them down. The men behind the wall were firing at such close range that one man remarked on what a shame it was that they had paper cartridges, for if they had the separate makings – powder, ball, and wadding – they could tamp in thrifty little loads and thus save on powder.

When he was squatted down loading, Inman could hear the firing, but also the slap of balls into meat. A man near Inman grew so excited, or perhaps so weary, that he forgot to pull the ramrod from the barrel. He fired it off and it struck a Federal in the chest. The man fell backward, and the rod stood from his body and quavered about with the last of his breathing as if he had been pierced by an unfletched arrow.

The Federals kept on marching by the thousands at the wall all through the day, climbing the hill to be shot down. There were three or four brick houses scattered out through the field, and after a time the Federals crowded up behind them in such numbers that they looked like the long blue shadows of houses at sunrise. Periodically they were driven from behind the houses by their own cavalry, who beat at them with the flats of their sabers like schoolteachers paddling truants. Then they ran toward the wall leaning forward with their shoulders hunched, a posture that reminded many witnesses that day of men seeking headway against a hard blowing rain. The Federals kept on coming long past the point where all the pleasure of whipping them vanished. Inman just got to hating them for their clodpated determination to die.

The fighting was in the way of a dream, one where your foes are ranked against you countless and mighty. And you so weak. And yet they fall and keep falling until they are crushed. Inman had fired until his right arm was weary from working the ramrod, his jaws sore from biting the ends off the paper cartridges. His rifle became so hot that the powder would sometimes flash before he could ram home the ball. At the end of the day the faces of the men around him were caked with blown-back powder so that they were various shades of blue, and they put Inman in mind of a great ape with a bulbous colorful ass he had seen in a traveling show once.

They had fought throughout the day under the eyes of Lee and Longstreet. The men behind the wall had only to crank their necks around and there the big men were, right above them looking on. The two generals spent the afternoon up on the hill coining fine phrases like a pair of wags. Longstreet said his men in the sunken road were in such a position that if you marched every man in the Army of the Potomac across that field, his men would kill them before they got to the wall. And he said the Federals fell that long afternoon as steady as rain dripping down from the eaves of a house.

Old Lee, not to be outdone, said it's a good thing war is so terrible or else we'd get to liking it too much. As with everything Marse Robert said, the men repeated that flight of wit over and over, passing it along from man to man, as if God amighty Himself had spoken. When the report reached Inman's end of the wall he just shook his head. Even back then, early in the war, his opinion differed considerably from Lee's, for it appeared to him that we like fighting plenty, and the more terrible it is the better. And he suspected that Lee liked it most of all and would, if given his preference, general them right through the gates of death itself. What troubled Inman most, though, was that Lee made it clear he looked on war as an instrument for clarifying God's obscure will. Lee seemed to think battle – among all acts man might commit – stood outranked in sacredness only by prayer and Bible reading. Inman worried that following such logic would soon lead one to declare the victor of every brawl and dogfight as God's certified champion. Those thoughts were unspeakable among the ranks, as were his feelings that he did not enlist to take on a Marse, even one as solemn and noble-looking as Lee was that day on Maryes Heights.

Late in the afternoon the Federals quit coming and the shooting tapered off. Thousands of men lay dead and dying on the sloping field below the wall, and by dark the ones who could move had heaped up corpses to make shelter. All that night the aurora flamed and shimmered lurid colors across the sky to the north. Such a rare event was seen as an omen by the men up and down the line, and they vied to see who could most convincingly render its meaning down into plain speech. Somewhere above them on the hill a fiddle struck up the sad chords of Lorena. The wounded Federals moaned and keened and hummed between gritted teeth on the frozen field and some called out the names of loved ones.

To this accompaniment, the poorly shod of Inman's party climbed over the wall to yank the boots off the dead. Though his own boots were in fair shape, Inman made a late-night foray onto the field simply to see what the day's effort had accomplished. The Federals were thick on the ground, lying all about in bloody heaps, bodies disassembled in every style the mind could imagine. A man walking next to Inman looked out upon the scene and said, If I had my way everything north of the Potomac would resemble that right down to the last particular. Inman's only thought looking on the enemy was, Go home. Some of the dead had papers pinned to their clothing to say who they had been, and the rest were just anonymous. Inman saw one man squat to yank the boots off a body lying flat on its back, but as the man lifted a foot and pulled, the dead man sat up and said something in an Irish accent so thick the only understandable word was Shit.

Later, many hours after midnight, Inman looked into one of the houses scattered about the field. A light shone out from an open door at its gable end. An old woman sat inside, her hair in a wild tangle, face stricken. A lit candle stub stood beside her on a table. Corpses on her doorstep. Others inside, dead in the attitude of crawling to shelter. The woman staring crazed past the threshold, past Inman's face, as if she saw nothing. Inman walked through the house and out the back door and saw a man killing a group of badly wounded Federals by striking them in the head with a hammer. The Federals had been arranged in an order, with their heads all pointing one way, and the man moved briskly down the row, making a clear effort to let one strike apiece do. Not angry, just moving from one to one like a man with a job of work to get done. He whistled, almost under his breath, the tune of Cora Ellen. He might have been shot had one of the fine-minded officers caught him, but he was tired and wished to be shut of a few more enemies at little risk to himself. Inman would always remember that, as the man came to the end of the row, the first light of dawn came up on his face.

The blind man had sat wordless throughout Inman's tale. But when Inman was finished, the man said, You need to put that away from you.

—I'd not differ with you there, Inman said.

But what Inman did not tell the blind man was that no matter how he tried, the field that night would not leave him but had instead provided him with a recurring dream, one that had visited him over and over during his time in the hospital. In the dream, the aurora blazed and the scattered bloody pieces – arms, heads, legs, trunks – slowly drew together and reformed themselves into monstrous bodies of mismatched parts. They limped and reeled and lunged about the dark battlefield like blind sots on their faulty legs. They jounced off one another, butting bloody cleft heads in their stupor. They waved their assorted arms in the air, and few of the hands made convincing pairs. Some spoke the names of their women. Some sang snatches of song over and over. Others stood to the side and looked off into the dark and urgently called their dogs.

One figure, whose wounds were so dreadful that he more resembled meat than man, tried to rise but could not. He flopped and then lay still but for the turning of his head. From the ground he craned his neck and looked at Inman with dead eyes and spoke Inman's name in a low voice. Every morning after that dream, Inman awoke in a mood as dark as the blackest crow that ever flew.

Inman returned to the ward, tired from his walk. Balis sat goggled in the dim room and scratched with his quill at the papers. Inman got into bed thinking to nap away the rest of the morning, but he could not make his mind rest, so he took up his book to read. What he had was the third part of Bartram's *Travels*. He had pulled it from a box of books donated by ladies of the capital eager for the intellectual as well as physical improvement of the patients. Apparently, the book had been given away because it had lost its front cover, so Inman, in an effort toward symmetry, had torn the back cover off as well, leaving only the leather spine. He kept the book tied into a scroll with a piece of twine.

It was not a book that required following from front to back, and Inman simply opened it at random, as he had done night after night in the hospital to read until he was calm enough for sleep. The doings of that kind lone wanderer – called Flower Gatherer by the Cherokee in honor of his satchels full with plants and his attention all given to the growth of wild living things – never failed to ease his thoughts. The passage he turned to that morning became a favorite, and the first sentence that fell under his eye was this:

> Continued yet ascending until I gained the top of an elevated rocky ridge, when appeared before me a gap or opening between other yet more lofty ascents, through which continued as the rough rocky road led me, close by the winding banks of a large rapid brook, which at length turning to the left, pouring down rocky precipices, glided off through dark groves and high forests, conveying streams of fertility and pleasure to the fields below.

Such images made Inman happy, as did the following pages wherein Bartram, ecstatic, journeyed on to the Vale of Cowee deep in the mountains, breathlessly describing a world of scarp and crag, ridge after ridge fading off blue into the distance, chanting at length as he went the names of all the plants that came under his gaze as if reciting the ingredients of a powerful potion. After a time, though, Inman found that he had left the book and was simply forming the topography of home in his head. Cold Mountain, all its ridges and coves and watercourses. Pigeon River, Little East Fork, Sorrell Cove, Deep Gap, Fire Scald Ridge. He knew their names and said them to himself like the words of spells and incantations to ward off the things one fears most.

Some days later Inman walked from the hospital into town. His neck hurt as if a red cord running from it to the balls of his feet were yanked quivering tight at each step. But his legs felt strong, and that worried him. As soon as he was fit to fight, they would ship him right back to Virginia. Nevertheless, he was glad to be a man of leisure as long as he was careful not to look too vigorous in front of a doctor.

Money had come from home and a portion of back pay had been handed out, so he walked about the streets and shopped in the red-brick and white-frame shops. At a tailor's he found a black suitcoat of tightly woven wool that fit him perfectly, despite having been cut to the measure of a man who had died during its making. The tailor sold it at a bargain, and Inman put it right on and wore it out the door. At a general mercantile he bought a stiff pair of indigo denim britches, a cream-colored wool shirt, two pairs of socks, a clasp knife, a sheath knife, a little pot and cup, and all the loads and round tins of caps for his pistol that they had in stock. These were wrapped together in brown paper, and he carried the bundle away with a finger hooked in the crossed twine. At a hatmaker's, he bought a black slouch hat with a grey ribbon band; then, back out on the street, he took off his greasy old one and skimmed it away to land among the bean rows of somebody's garden. They might find use for it as scarecrow attire. He set the new hat on his head and went to a cobbler's, where he found a good pair of stout boots that were a close fit. His old ones he left sitting curled and withered and caved in on the floor. At a stationer's, he bought a pen with a gold nib and a bottle of ink and a few sheets of writing paper. By the time he was done shopping, he had spent a pile of near-worthless paper money big enough to kindle a fire from green wood.

Tired, he stopped at an inn near the domed capitol and sat at a table under a tree. He drank a cup of brew said by the tavern keeper to be coffee brought in through the blockade, though from the look of the grounds it was mostly chicory and burnt corn grits with little more than the dust of actual coffee beans. The metal table was rusting in a powdery orange rind around its edges, and Inman had to take care not to scrub the sleeves of his new coat against the decay as he returned his coffee cup to its saucer. He sat a bit formally, back straight, fisted hands resting on his thigh tops. To an observer standing out in the center of the road looking back toward the tables in the shade of the oak tree, he would have looked stern and uncomfortable in his black coat, the white dressing twisted about his neck like a tight cravat. He might have been mistaken for a man sitting suspended during a long daguerreotype exposure, a subject who had become dazed and disoriented as the clock ticked away and the slow plate soaked up his image and fixed for all time a portion of his soul.

Inman was thinking of the blind man. He had bought a copy of the *Standard* from him that morning as he had done every morning lately. Inman pitied the blind man now that he knew how his blindness had come about, for how did you find someone to hate for a thing that just was? What would be the cost of not having an enemy? Who could you strike for retribution other than yourself?

Inman drank all but the dregs of his coffee and then took up his paper, hoping that something in it would engage him and turn his thoughts elsewhere. He tried to read a piece on how badly things stood outside Petersburg, but he couldn't get a grip on it. And anyway, he knew about all there was to say on that topic. When he got to the third page, he found a notice from the state government to deserters and outliers and their families. They would be hunted down. Their names would be put on a list, and the Home Guard would be on alert in every county, patrolling night and day. Then Inman read a story buried at the bottom of a page in the paper's middle. It told that out in the borderlands of the state's western mountains, Thomas and his Cherokee troops had fought numerous skirmishes with Federals. They had been accused of taking scalps. The paper opined that though the practice might be barbarous, it would serve as harsh warning that invasion carried a stiff price.

Inman put the paper down and thought about Cherokee boys scalping Federals. It was humorous in a way, those pale mill workers coming down so confident to steal land and yet losing the tops of their heads out in the woods. Inman knew many Cherokee of the age to be fighting under Thomas, and he wondered if Swimmer was among them. He had met Swimmer the summer they were both sixteen. Inman had been given the happy job of escorting a few heifers to graze the last grass of summer in the high balds on Balsam Mountain. He had taken a packhorse loaded with cooking tools, side meat, meal, fishing gear, a shotgun, quilts, and a square of waxed canvas for tent. He expected solitude and self-reliance. But when he got to the bald there was a regular party going on. A dozen or so men from Catalooch had made camp at the crest of the ridge and had been there for a week or better, lazing in the cool air of the uplands and joying in the freeing distance from hearth and home. It was a fine place, there on the bald. They had sweeping views to east and west, good pasturage for the cattle, trout streams nearby. Inman joined the men, and for several days they cooked enormous meals of fried corn bread and trout and stews of game animals over a large fire that they kept burning knee-high day and night. They washed the food down with every manner of corn liquor and apple brandy and thick mead so that many in the group laid up drunk from one dawn to the next.

Soon, a band of Cherokee from Cove Creek had come up the other side of the divide with a rawboned herd of spotted cows of no singular breed. The Indians made their camp a short distance away and then cut tall pines and crafted goals from them and marked off boundaries for their vicious ball game. Swimmer, an odd big-handed boy with wide-set eyes, came over and invited the Catalooch party to play, hinting darkly that men sometimes died in the game. Inman and others took up the challenge. They cut and split green saplings to make their own ball racquets, strung them with strips of hide and bootlace.

The two groups camped side by side for two weeks, the younger men playing the ball game most of the day, gambling heavily on the outcomes. It was a contest with no fixed time of play and few rules so that they just ran about slamming into each other and hacking with the racquets as if with clubs until one team reached a set number of points scored by striking the goalposts with the ball. They'd play most of the day and then spend half the night drinking and telling tales at fireside, eating great heaps of little speckled trout, fried crisp, bones and all.

There in the highlands, clear weather held for much of the time. The air lacked its usual haze, and the view stretched on and on across rows of blue mountains, each paler than the last until the final ranks were indistinguishable from sky. It was as if all the world might be composed of nothing but valley and ridge. During a pause in the play, Swimmer had looked out at the landforms and said he believed Cold Mountain to be the chief mountain of the world. Inman asked how he knew that to be true, and Swimmer had swept his hand across the horizon to where Cold Mountain stood and said, Do you see a bigger'n?

Mornings on the high bald were crisp, with fog lying in the valleys so that the peaks rose from it disconnected like steep blue islands scattered across a pale sea. Inman would awake, still part drunk, and walk off down in a cove to fish with Swimmer for an hour or two before returning for the beginning of the game. They would sit by the rushing creek, stickbait and rockbait on their hooks. Swimmer would talk seamlessly in a low voice so that it merged with the sound of the water. He told tales of animals and how they came to be as they are. Possum with bare tail, squirrel with fuzzy tail. Buck with antlers. Painter with tooth and claw. Uktena with coil and fang. Tales that explained how the world came about and where it is heading. Swimmer also told of spells he was learning for making desired ends come to pass. He told of ways to produce misfortune, sickness, death, how to return evil by way of fire, how to protect the lone traveler on the road at night, and how to make the road seem short. A number of the spells had to do with the spirit. Swimmer knew a few ways to kill the soul of an enemy and many ways to protect your own. His spells portrayed the spirit as a frail thing, constantly under attack and in need of strength, always threatening to die inside you. Inman found this notion dismal indeed, since he had been taught by sermon and hymn to hold as truth that the soul of man never dies.

Inman sat through the tales and spells, watching the rill in the water where current fell against his dipped line, Swimmer's voice a rush of sound, soothing as creek noise. When they had caught a sackful of little trout, they would quit and go back and then spend the day swatting at each other with the ball sticks, shoving and shouldering and coming to blows.

After many days wet weather set in, and none too soon, for on both sides they were all worn out, hung over, and beat up. There were broken fingers and noses, sundry flesh rents. All were mottled ankle to hip with blue and green bruises from the racquets. The Catalooch party had lost to the Indians everything they could do without and some things they couldn't – fry pans and dutch ovens, sacks of meal, fishing poles, rifles and pistols. Inman himself had lost an entire cow, a fact he could not figure how to explain to his father. He had bet it away piece by piece, point by point. Saying in the heat of play, I'll wager the tenderloin of that heifer on this next point. Or, Every rib on the left side of my betting cow says we win. As the two camps parted ways, Inman's heifer was still walking, but various of the Cherokee had claim to its many partitions.

As recompense and memento, though, Swimmer had given Inman a fine ball racquet of hickory with bat whiskers twisted into the squirrel-skin lacing. Swimmer claimed it would power its user with the speed and deception of the bat. It was decorated with the feathers of swallows and hawks and herons, and, as Swimmer explained it, the characters of those animals too would transfer to Inman – wheeling grace, soar and stoop, grim single-mindedness. Not all of that had come to pass, but Inman hoped Swimmer was not out fighting Federals but living in a bark hut by a rushing stream.

From inside the tavern came the sounds of a fiddle being tuned, various plucks and tentative bowings, then a slow and groping attempt at Aura Lee, interrupted every few notes by unplanned squeaks and howls. Nevertheless the beautiful and familiar tune was impervious to poor performance, and Inman thought how painfully young it sounded, as if the pattern of its notes allowed no room to imagine a future clouded and tangled and diminished.

He raised his coffee cup to his lips and found it cold and nearly empty, and he put it down. He stared into it and watched the dark grounds sink in the remaining quarter inch of liquid. The black flecks swirled, found a pattern, and settled. He thought briefly of divination, seeking the future in the arrangement of coffee grounds, tea leaves, hog entrails, shapes of clouds. As if pattern told something worth knowing. He jostled the cup to break the spell and looked out along the street. Beyond a row of young trees rose the capitol, an impressive domed pile of stone blocks. It was only a scant shade darker than the high clouds through which the sun shone as a grey disc already declining to the west. In the haze the capitol seemed to rise impossibly high, its bulk large as a medieval tower in a dream of siege. Curtains blew out of open office windows and waggled in the breeze. Above the dome, a dark circle of vultures swirled in the oyster sky, their long wimple feathers just visible at their blunt wing ends. As Inman watched, the birds did not strike a wingbeat but nonetheless climbed gradually, riding a rising column of air, circling higher and higher until they were little dashes of black on the sky.

In his mind, Inman likened the swirling paths of vulture flight to the coffee grounds seeking pattern in his cup. Anyone could be oracle for the random ways things fall against each other. It was simple enough to tell fortunes if a man dedicated himself to the idea that the future will inevitably be worse than the past and that time is a path leading nowhere but a place of deep and persistent threat. The way Inman saw it, if a thing like Fredericksburg was to be used as a marker of current position, then many years hence, at the rate we're going, we'll be eating one another raw.

And, too, Inman guessed Swimmer's spells were right in saying a man's spirit could be torn apart and cease and yet his body keep on living. They could take death blows independently. He was himself a case in point, and perhaps not a rare one, for his spirit, it seemed, had been about burned out of him but he was yet walking. Feeling empty, however, as the core of a big black-gum tree. Feeling strange as well, for his recent experience had led him to fear that the mere existence of the Henry repeating rifle or the éprouvette mortar made all talk of spirit immediately antique. His spirit, he feared, had been blasted away so that he had become lonesome and estranged from all around him as a sad old heron standing pointless watch in the mudflats of a pond lacking frogs. It seemed a poor swap to find that the only way one might keep from fearing death was to act numb and set apart as if dead already, with nothing much left of yourself but a hut of bones.

As Inman sat brooding and pining for his lost self, one of Swimmer's creekside stories rushed into his memory with a great urgency and attractiveness. Swimmer claimed that above the blue vault of heaven there was a forest inhabited by a celestial race. Men could not go there to stay and live, but in that high land the dead spirit could be reborn. Swimmer described it as a far and inaccessible region, but he said the highest mountains lifted their dark summits into its lower reaches. Signs and wonders both large and small did sometimes make transit from that world to our own. Animals, Swimmer said, were its primary messengers. Inman had pointed out to Swimmer that he had climbed Cold Mountain to its top, and Pisgah and Mount Sterling as well. Mountains did not get much higher than those, and Inman had seen no upper realm from their summits.

—There's more to it than just the climbing, Swimmer had said. Though Inman could not recall whether Swimmer had told him what else might be involved in reaching that healing realm, Cold Mountain nevertheless soared in his mind as a place where all his scattered forces might gather. Inman did not consider himself to be a superstitious person, but he did believe that there is a world invisible to us. He no longer thought of that world as heaven, nor did he still think that we get to go there when we die. Those teachings had been burned away. But he could not abide by a universe composed only of what he could see, especially when it was so frequently foul. So he held to the idea of another world, a better place, and he figured he might as well consider Cold Mountain to be the location of it as anywhere.