

OUT OF NOWHERE

I open my eyes to a lunar glare. I rise and feel my way through the moonlit rooms. Out beyond the glass door, on the plain of bright snow, bare branches of the elms press down their long, definite, forking shadows.

And through them I glimpse a half-opaque, half-translucent procession of creatures, moving one by one across the wide clearing—hunched, hurrying, low to the ground, or gliding, leaping, stretching upward along the stone wall. The size of—oh, porpoises, maybe.

I watch, stunned for a moment. Then my mind takes over, the one that wants me to go outside, find out what it is I'm really seeing. Here, in the real world.

I pull on my jacket and boots, step out onto the stones, look up toward the bright moon, almost full, falling now behind the chimney at the roof's peak, casting onto the backyard—ah—shadows of smoke! Shadows of smoke, blown southward in irregular gusts. Gusts. Not ghosts.

As I stand watching, hugging myself against the cold, out of nowhere a thin gray hound breaks from the woods and streaks across the clearing in the opposite direction, right through the shadowy parade, so low and fast and silent I think at first it's another shadow.

It disappears into the woods on the north side, headed, I guess, for the open field beyond. From inside the house, my own dogs catch the scent now. Frantic, they bark and scabble at the door. *Too late, buddies*, I tell them. But I let them out and they race by me, eager for the chase, noses to the ground, tails high.

I turn and walk the other way, down the gravel track into the strangeness at the edge of the circling world, where the great burr oak lifts its long bare limbs towards the heavens, saying something I nearly understand. It looks like *hallelujah*, but it isn't. A planted stillness within the moving air. A quiet, stern declaration: *I am oak*. Or maybe just *I am*.

The heavens, we say—heaven upon heaven, space opening upon space, doorway beyond doorway. My dogs somewhere out there follow the scent of the thing they'll never catch.

Then, off at a distance, low on the snow-covered hill across the road, a sudden flare of golden light traces something like a small Chinese ideogram on the darkness and disappears. A breath or two later, another.

After that, nothing. The whole night is waiting. There is, no doubt, an explanation for this phenomenon as well. Can anyone tell me what it is?

And where has the hound gone? And where are my dogs?

The earth settles back to what I know of it. The moon moves now a little further across the open sky toward the western horizon beyond the barn. I stay where I am a while longer, my breath sending its own small ghosts into the dark. Then I call my dogs back from wherever they've gotten to.

I hear them panting toward me from a long way off.