

When the sun came up this morning, it was a distant, roseate glow beyond the copper haze. The rains that drenched us for a week had stopped and the sky seemed to be clearing so that I could see the column of smoke rising from the far side of the river. It was clear enough that I could make out the flight of a small bird, the first such creature I'd seen in months. I didn't think there were any left, until I heard this morning, just at daybreak, the chirping of a solitary sparrow.

The smoke bothers me. It comes from the place Jacob and the others went to investigate. I accompanied them down to the river last evening to help launch the boat. It was the first time we had tried to cross the river in several months and I argued with them about the mission, even though we had been told that it was safe, now that the fighting has stopped. I knew that it was a lie and told them so, but it did no good. It was almost dark when we got to the river, but not dark enough because I could still see the bloated bodies floating in the water. The river is swift where we put in, but I could still make them out: the grotesque, putrefied lumps, once human, now only a contorted, jellied mass reflected in the dim twilight. It was the same last week and last year.

I watched as Jacob's boat moved away from the shore towards the darkness beyond the river. And when they were out of sight I continued listening. For several minutes I could hear the paddles dipping into the dark liquid of the river and then, in the interlude, only the gentle swirling of water against the shore. Somewhere, out on the river, I thought I heard a faint splash like the sound of a fish rising to the surface for food. But I knew it could not be. Yet, even the memory was satisfying.

If Jacob and the others do not return, only eleven of us will remain. Hutchins wants to leave soon, but I told him we must wait as long as there is hope. Hope: such a beautiful word that rings now of hollow irony. Would that hope were a goddess, a sister to peace and the two would come and dwell among us. Yet, there must exist, even in my own mind, a little hope, for I have written a letter to you each week without fail since you left. Each week I count the letters to keep track of time, perhaps to remind me of another time. But even if I knew your whereabouts, there is no post, so I save the letters, waiting for your return, or for death.

It is now time for my watch, so I must attend. Duty is all that is left.

God speed.