

The Dream of the Monongahela River

It was a simple thing, to be bled. The General knew this, and he didn't fear it. And he was sure that it was the first thing Dr. Craik would order, so he didn't hesitate to summon one of the estate's overseers, Albin Rawlins, before dawn and request that he aid him in beginning this final engagement at first light. When he arrived at the General's bedside—hours before the doctor would find his way through the cold Virginia morning to see it for himself—Rawlins observed the obvious: death inhabited the room, and it made his pale hands rattle as he held the metal lancet above the great man's heavy, weary arm. The General eyed him calmly and smiled. "Don't be afraid." A thing he'd told thousands of men, but he'd never before meant it in exactly this way. He nodded at Rawlins and offered his arm again. Breath choked in the General's throat, its swollen passage constricted, succumbing. It wouldn't be long—he was certain of it.

He knew this territory intimately. He'd watched men hunted by disease. As a boy he saw his father taken down. Ten years later, he accompanied his older brother, Lawrence, as he was stalked by tuberculosis. They'd tried to

run from it, together, to Barbados—for some reason that had never been clear to him until now. In his own final hours it was obvious that the chapel of St. George's high up on the Barbados hill had been his brother's lancet. And it was, in fact, Lawrence who had been on his mind that morning, even before the trickle of earthen red began to pour from the vein in his thick forearm. It was Lawrence whom the General wished he could speak to one last time—if only to experience a simple narcissistic satisfaction that had never been possible during his epic ascent: to astound someone whom he cared to astound. He wanted to call him into the room, clear it of everyone else, and then see his expression when he said it: *Lawrence, while it was that you were dead, I became the first leader of a new Republic—I am the Alpha of some new history. They're building a city on the Potomac, brother, a city with our name.* His thoughts of the long-dead Lawrence rode with him into a patch of deep unconsciousness that followed the first bleeding. Nearly a pint was gone. But even as he laid there, seemingly at rest, the General's breathing grew steadily worse and everyone was certain more bleeding would need to be done.

It was then, for the last time, that he had the dream—the one that followed him everywhere, the dream of the Monongahela River. Although the dream suggested otherwise, in the vile, terrifying chaos of that late afternoon along the Monongahela, the young someday-General had been too naïve to believe that he was going to die there. The hellishness had come down on them like a storm: the Ottawans, Hurons, Shawnee, all of them, more, raining a savage death through the trees and from all directions into the clearing where hundreds of the Americans and British fell. Nothing can horrify like the screams of men when they are dying together in a confined space, even under a perfect July sky. Soldiers killed each other accidentally among delirious clouds of gun smoke and bedlam. In the midst of the human inferno, as the young Virginian pushed himself up from the dirt—his second horse felled and

the carnage near its peak—it struck him that it was all madness and without purpose, and yet it would undoubtedly produce some outcomes, *consequences*, that were desired somewhere. This was the domain of men, raw and unadorned; he was its witness. Whenever the General dreamed about that afternoon, however, it wasn't the battle that he relived, but the fording of the river as they retreated. In the dreams, although surrounded by the cries of men, he fights the water alone. And the river—almost torrential by the time he nears its center—always washes him away, draws him helplessly downstream before he can reach the other side. There is never anyone there to save him, and in the dreams he knows this, so he doesn't holler or call out for help. He just drifts down the raging Monongahela, on his way to some falls or lake or gulf or ocean, some destination in water at which he never arrives.
