

From *Empty Spaces*

Jordan Abel

When winter finally arrives. When a soft, silvery wind rushes through the branches and into the road. When the footpaths are hard and worn. When the air is cool and clear. When the town seems to disappear from eighty or ninety feet up in the air. When there is a moment. When the forest freezes over. When the lights from the village cut through the brush. When the sun is directly above the earth. The crisp air. The frozen animal bones in the forest. The silvery clouds. The light from the windows. The icy rocks. The blood on the leaves. The skulls at the bottom of the lake. The breath and the laughter and the bright, shiny night. There is a clear sheet of ice and frozen bodies somewhere in the mud at the bottom of the lake. Outside, fingers will freeze. Toes will rot. Ears will turn black and eventually fall off. The clouds will drift apart. The stars will puncture the darkness. To see the line that connects the spoon to the fingers to the arm to the jaw. To puncture the skin. To extract the organs. To sift for gold. To see the skull in the snow at the frozen stump of a tree trunk. To see the carvings in the wood. On the shore, there is a flat, black rock between two halves of a body. There are broken bodies and broken bones in the ice. In the frozen river, there is blood. Tomorrow is a dream that repeats again and again. Tomorrow is a line that cuts endlessly through the forest. Tomorrow is a circle. Tomorrow, there will be silence. Tomorrow spreads out horizontally along all the hard surfaces. Tomorrow might arrive on the roadway across the water. There will always be a roadway. There will always be a future. There will always be some idea of a country. There will always be words. There will always be voices. There will always be towns connected together by pathways of hard dirt and small, broken rocks. Somewhere out in the brush beyond the town there are frozen voices crying out in the snowy forest. Somewhere in the cold brush there are bodies. Somewhere out there flesh is freezing in the biting wind from the mountain. Some mountain waters become ice. Some waterfalls freeze over. Some flesh carries the lingering scent of roses. Some flesh protrudes from the frozen mud. Some flesh becomes petrified. The bones in the earth will crust over with frost. In the winter, the mud will harden and freeze over. Bodies on bodies on bodies in the coolness of the night. Bodies reflected on the glassy surfaces of the ice. Bodies in the darkness. If there are bodies on those roadways. If there are steep pathways between the rocks that lead

up the mountain. If the flesh becomes still. If the bodies are drained of blood. If there is a tumbling in the air above us. If the darkness never lifts. If blood is gushed from every body. If some other, softer place is always just down the road. If some other, softer place is not softer at all. If there is a howling wind in the passageways between the broken rocks. If there is a nation. If there is a country. If there are bodies and towns and broken land and hunger and fire and windows that look out onto the road. If the moon reflects the light from the sun. If slow, intermingling drifts of sounds and scents float through the air. If bark is peeled from a tree. If the blood runs like a river. If there is fear. If there is sickness. If there are broken sheets of ice in the lake water. If there is the promise of warmth after the winter unfolds in the woods. If there are caverns in the rocks that lead us into darkness. If there is old light and bright snow and icy rocks. If the woods disappear under the ice. If the light between the branches is just moonlight. If the broken lines come together again at the centre of town. If the bodies hang in the trees just past the outskirts. If the south seems like a dream. If the town is just a point in space. If the smoke consumes the forest and the roadways and the town. If there are moments that lead to other moments. If there is the taste of rot in the air. If the bones sink into the mud. If there is ever true darkness again. If the lake sometimes shines in the light from the campfires. If there is just flesh in the snow and in the frozen mud. If there are no more hills or banks or caverns or ravines. If there are connections between the precipices. If a line is drawn. If the ice breaks open. If there are parallels between the tree branches. If there are voices. If the blood sprays into the air. If there are leaves scattered along the dirt road. If the road branches silently into other roads. If there is blood at the throat. If the bodies here in this village are forever. If the scattered rocks in the dirt can't quite be seen in the darkness. If the darkness drifts through until the day breaks. If the thousands of glittering stars above are never quite visible in the light from the afternoon. If the trees that have fallen in the forest by the village are cleared away. If there is the taste of wilderness in the town. If there is a gust of wind that follows the curvature of the valleys and glides up to the black clouds eighty or ninety feet up in the air. At this height, the shining stars are just a little closer. There is flesh and there are campfires and there are moments where they seem to intertwine and exist only together as one. There are bodies that walk through the trees. There is a darkness that drifts through the forest. There is water that hangs in the air on the drifts of darkness that brush the tallest trees in the forest. Just above the treetops there is a black, cold sky. Just above the treetops there is the old light from old stars piercing the darkness. Just above the treetops there is

the scent of roses and whiskey. Just above the bodies there are clouds of breath. Just above the glittering stars there is an emptiness. Just above the expanse. Just above the darkness. Just above everything there is a darkness that can only be heard. There are slow, intermingling drifts of darkness. Where there is smoke, there are bodies. Where there is fire, there are bodies. There is smoke here in the dark night. A night that drifts through the branches of the trees above and up to the canopy. A wind cuts through the trees. A trail of smoke drifts through the pine needles. The ripples in the frozen lake look as though they're always about to break. From somewhere under the deep, frozen lake. From somewhere in the dark water. From some other voice. From some other body. Some breath. Some wilderness. Some distance. Some ice. In the frozen wind, there is sometimes no way to tell what's smoke and what's snow. In the frozen wind above the icy lake there is some blood and some dirt and some silence. There are pieces of bark crusted with ice. There are limbs frozen into the lake alongside some branches and some dirt. In the coldest winds, some bodies can survive for just a few hours. Even in the darkness out on the frozen lake in the cold wind there is some other colder, darker place. But somewhere above there is light from somewhere other than here. Some stars can be seen above the lake and through the broken canopy. Somewhere above there is a soft, silvery wind that disappears into the trees and cuts through the night. Somewhere above there is a tumbling in the air a mile above us. If there is space between the towns and the trees and the roads and the shrubs, it is filled with a soft, heavy darkness. If there is space for all these bodies, it is here in the snow overlooking the path that winds through the trees that winds down into the town by the lake. If there is space here for voices, then they are as loud as they ever have been than before. Between the trees and the broken branches and the icy rocks. The ice drifts out over the lake and crunches against the shore. There is ice falling from the dark sky and breaking apart the frozen sheets on the lake. Beyond the curvature of the shore, there is the dark outline of the town. For a moment, the flesh is remembered by the forest. For a moment, there is a soft opening for the tired and the sick and the broken bodies of the earth to rest briefly behind closed doors. To rest briefly by a fire. There is time for quiet reflection. For a moment, the bodies exist here in the town by the frozen lake. For a moment, the town and the lake are lit up by torches and fires and stoves. For a moment, the town can be seen from the other edge of the shore. For a moment, light touches a place it has never touched before. For a moment the light from the town illuminates everything that surrounds it, and the forest is not the dark place it used to be. For a moment, the only darkness that remains is at the

bottom of the lake that seems to absorb any light that might touch it. Here, the light disappears. Here, there is darkness. Above the town there is a soft, silvery wind. In the woods, there are still frozen waters and icy bodies lost somewhere in dark, deep places. There are bodies that are stuck there at the bottom of the bottom of the frozen lake. Blood and snow and dirt and rocks and branches and ice. Blood sinking into the soft snow. Blood freezing to the surface of the lake water. Blood gushed from soft, delicate bodies. Blood gushed over and over again. Each body softer than the last. Today, the air is crisp and cold and tastes like salt. Today, there are frozen sheets of dark ice colliding with the shore. Today, the blood blooms in this water. The water at the dark bottom of the lake. In earlier seasons, flowers would bloom on this shore by the woods overlooking the deep stillness of the lake. But in this season, there is just blood and snow and ice and dirt and soft, delicate bodies between the trees. Today there is no flesh other than this flesh. There are no bodies other than these bodies. There are no shores other than these shores that crunch with ice. There are no sounds anymore except for the crackling of the fire in the woods. Beneath the broken clouds is a steep, rugged descent and a trail of bodies spilling down into the frozen lake. For every cheek pressed against the snowy trunk of a tree. For every drop of blood. For every limb. For every mound of flesh. For every broken body. For every leaf that has fallen from a tree. For every cloud that breaks apart. For every flake of snow. For all the broken rocks and immovable trees and deep, narrow ravines and soft, dark places. For all the leaves that have fallen to the ground. For all the right angles that cut across each other until there is a moment where they intersect. For all the dark mounds of earth and icy rocks and broken branches and intersecting lines of sight. For all the frozen chunks of driftwood along the shore. Voices can be heard somewhere out there in the storm. In the far distance, there is more smoke, more snow, more wind. All the clouds of smoke, all the drifts of snow, seem to intertwine with each other. In the far distance, there is another clear sheet of ice, another frozen shore, another islet, another mouth, another body gushing blood in the snow. Here, there is darkness. Here there is a stillness. Here there are glimpses of grey smoke billowing over the tops of trees in the distance. On another quiet shore. On another quieter, softer shore there are no bodies. No blood. No frozen fingers in the crusted mud. On another shore at a different edge of a different forest, there are quiet voices and calm fires and cooked meat and laughter and a cold wind. On this shore, there is short breath and burning fire and burning flesh. There are so many voices. On the shore, there are piles of bodies. The bodies are frozen together. The flesh sticky with blood. The flesh pressed up against other flesh out

there in the snow. Sometimes there is the taste of copper in the air. Sometimes after all this blood there is just the sound of the wind. All the waters are frozen. The water in the lakes and the rivers and the streams and the waterfalls are full of ice. Sometimes these waters break apart. Sometimes the ice finds its way to the shore. Somewhere out there above the frozen lake there is a tumbling in the air a mile above us. Somewhere out there away from the shore there is a clear sheet of ice and bald rocks just beneath the surface. Today, the sun is rising and lighting up all the piles of bodies by the frozen lake. The snow swirls around those bodies. Today, when the sun sets. Today, when there are just memories of wildfire. Today, when the frozen water is covered over with snow. Today, when there are numberless branches and the broken tree limbs and the black rocks and the mounds of earth and chunks of ice. Today, there is a flame. Today, smoke can be seen through the branches. Today, there are a few moments. Today, all bodies become lost in the smoke. For a few moments, the stars will light up a pathway that winds through the forest and past the frozen lake and between the mountains. If the west is to be made, then this flesh will make it. There are bodies. There are bodies that have voices. There are bodies that have voices that intersect with each other and cut through the wind. There are bodies that have voices that overlap. There are bodies that make the west. There is flesh that makes the west. If west is right now, it is caught up somewhere in the uproar of voices that come from the bodies in between the trees. If the west is right now, it hangs in the air on this breath. If the west is right now, then the ice and water must reflect the light from the moon at midnight and the flesh must witness it. If there are echoes of voice that cut through the wind. If there is light shining down on the flesh and the trees and the frozen snow on the ice. If the bodies are silent. If the flesh remains soft and delicate. If the conversations are overheard, the flesh might break apart. The bodies might gush with blood. What world breaks open in this silence? What trust forms from breath? What bitterness hangs in the air? What bodies fill the air with words? What flesh can stand this cold? What footsteps are covered over by the drifting snow and the rushing wind? What country is formed by these bodies? What nation cuts through this fog? Rocks and logs and immovable mountains and frozen chunks of driftwood and broken tree branches and icy lakes and piles of bodies and a soft, silvery wind. The air swells.

Empty Spaces is a book-length project that draws on the repetitive descriptions of landscape from James Fenimore Cooper's *The Last of the Mohicans*, a book that, as Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz argues, played an important role in reinventing the colonial origins of North America. What started as a refusal of Cooper's representation of land as *terra nullius* quickly moved past this point to become a project about rewriting land and reaffirming Indigenous presence. Each chapter break is a moment of reversal, a moment where I started writing back and through what I had already written, returning to the same landscapes, the same places, again and again. In the preceding excerpt taken from the fourth chapter, each sentence has been written over, written through, written beyond, at least three previous times. Writing in, around, and over Cooper's descriptions of land, nature, and territory *Empty Spaces* rearticulates Indigenous presence. But it also asks what it means to be an urban Indigenous person, to have been severed from the land, or to have limited or no access to traditional territory (and also traditional knowledges). *Empty Spaces*, then, is also a project about imagining land through fiction—remaining in and reimagining a space that has been closed off and irreversibly altered. If there are constraints here, their bounds are what existed before in those spaces.

—Jordan Abel