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**From *Necessities***  
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## Christopher Merrill

### FROM *NECESSITIES*

*Return the swastikas*—that's what the letter instructed us to do. There was no signature, although the canceled stamp bore the figure of a famous poet. The thieves thought our confusion was a mask. Nevertheless they offered to forge new documents for us. Our passports had expired, and we were afraid to ride our horses over the Alps—the Trinity Alps, that is, where vigilantes had turned the sawmills into training centers for the afterlife. The felled trees spiked with nails, the tribes drowned in the lake, rugs woven out of feathers: these we could return, at least in theory. Where's the poet now? we asked the thieves, who were printing up a series of manifestoes concerning the rights of bears. We had run out offences. Feathers, too. The horses lay on the ground, in the first snow of the season. We propped a cross against the barn door and bolted it shut. We vowed not to open our mail until the spring runoff, when we could present our credentials to the guards at the pass.

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Every building from the century in which costume balls prevailed must be razed, according to the professors of desire, the men in top hats writing letters of recommendation for their versions of the past. The wooden matches they produce will never light the stove or end an argument, though the warm waters leaking from the canisters in the salt caverns should clear our minds: every marksman can see the river glowing at dusk. *Razed or raised?* These are terms only the initiated employ. But no one will go hungry tonight, at least not in the canyons patrolled by coyotes. Fill our wine glasses with Apache tears, hard and black as the forgotten histories of America: we would use them as instruments of writing or torture, if we weren't afraid of the dark. Nor can we console the woman crying by the stove; the dress she bought at an estate auction is stained with blood. Besides, say the professors passing their top hats out the window, it's too cold to wear a sun dress to the ball.

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Reinvent the past: that was how the patent lawyers proposed to solve the housing shortage. Resurrect the sonnet and symposium, crossbow and convent. They filled prescription pads with demolition orders for the illiterate. They watched the river burn. The drunken ferryman suspended all crossings in calm weather. No passengers complained when the inventors, who preferred to work in their sleep, promised to march one night with the homeless, whose protest was in its seventh year. The ground was shaking again. Bridges crumpled like paper. *Sell today, or jump tomorrow!* was the cry we heard outside the stock exchange. The futures market had closed early, the fire having spread from the mouth of the river into the songs of the women in the street. No one said a word about the man carrying a rifle into the patent office: he looked like any other soldier of fortune. Even when he took aim at us we held our tongues. Sunlight streamed in the window. We smelled smoke.

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The blacksmith speaks in tongues to settle the horse that kicked him in the head one night, the white mare he must shoe before the exodus begins. The metal plate in his skull functions as a lightning rod for the church; his congregation thinks the rusted nails he uses once belonged to a saint. But no shoes fit; the fire keeps burning out; and the horse's owner, who paid in knives last time, forgot to enclose enough pennies to ward off bad luck. The boatload of refugees who drifted out to sea, believing the new anchor would catch, have thus returned to port. *A word is a rudder and a sail*, the blacksmith sings to them. *Where will we sleep tonight?* they ask. He tells them his dream: to forge a currency out of alms and intrigue. The horse is impatient. Likewise the faithful marching toward the paddock, scanning the sky for thunder-heads, the ground for nails. In the barn is a cross soaking in gasoline: if the blacksmith's luck changes, one spark from his anvil will ignite another wave of conversions.

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Cloistered in fire, in the snow-covered desert, in the crab apples rotting in the monk's cell: Why did you abandon us in the middle of the service? Where did you hide the stamps the soldiers left on the altar? And who will be your second? This is an event not to miss—a mar-

riage of convulsions, according to the saint who took over the kitchen after the last skirmish. The floor is a spill of blood and feathers. The message entrusted to the deaf boy will never arrive. And the soldiers refuse to tell us who they buried up on the mesa. Each rock of the cairn, however, is a signed confession, which will remain sealed until we find a place to store our summer clothes, our ancestors' erotica. The message? *Don't let the roots dry out!* Time to assemble a new field guide for lovers, to shore up the walls of the courtyard in which we used to duel. Coyotes are digging around the cairn. The saint is cooking enough geese for an army. The monk burns all our mail. Smoke rises from the snow.