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The Road From Genghis Khan Thomas R. Smith

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Thomas R. Smith

THE ROAD FROM GENGHIS KHAN

A copper kettle steams, makeshift humidifier, on the encrusted gas stove. Black electrical tape zigzags across a cracked window. The gas heater rumbles its low, dutiful cadence, dull-witted conversation heard through a thick wall, full of barely audible plosives. The rugs are grimy scraps, and a deep, bitter odor of onions pervades the narrow bunks.

Stumbling out in the night in unlaced boots, I pissed, sensed around me for miles the magnificence of the snow-covered lake revolving under the stars.... Over breakfast, I tear from my hook a perch too small to keep, my only catch, scaly tube all mouth and muscle too dazed to find its way back down the glass-walled hole to home.

No one else in the ice house has had better luck. Disgusted, we throw the unused minnows on the snow. I glance briefly at their pitiful flipping, then away, disturbed, toward the western shore where Sunday morning traffic passes on the highway to the churches and the casino.

Once we threw other human beings out to die, maybe died on the ice ourselves.... What a long road we're on from the bloody claws, the flayed snout, the hook passed underneath the ribs...the road from Genghis Khan where any refusal of cruelty is movement.... The sun still noses its red ball up onto the ice from the waters below. The calm colors that disperse across the eastern sky still say a kingdom of kind hands could come....