

A LIVING

My father made his living gutting houses. Copper, aluminum, brass, nickel, tin. Lead and bronze. A concrete floor will be veined with steel, and the steel will fetch a good price. In smaller quantities, gold, silver, platinum. These are found in the derelict mansions. It is a tedious assignment, though, like mushroom hunting. Plucking a gold-plated faucet from the wall, gathering the doorknobs. There will be imposters, alloys. Any fair merchant will only deal in unalloyed metals. If you mistakenly throw an alloy on the pile, he will turn you away forever. My father never made this mistake. He did honest work.

My father studied engineering, but there was no work for an engineer.

I was born in lean times. I don't remember, so I go by how my father told it. He told it:

The expense of heating and illuminating a house grew enormous, untenable. People did without water indoors. Then heat. A luxurious utility. Electricity went last. Finally, a person will not endure shivering stinking in a black house.

They left, abrupt as birds. (I don't remember the great migration, I was too young.) They went south. They went west. The houses sat. The houses filled with rot and rats.

Most everyone, my father tells it, locked the front door. A quaint habit. A sentimental gesture. But they must have known they would not return. He would go in through the windows.

He worked alone. He was sometimes unnerved by the empty houses, eerie, echoing. Moss creeping across the floors, a damp green carpet. Rosettes of black mold unfurling on the ceilings.

Once, he came across a golden deer in a dining room, sniffing the lace curtains. More often, he found the lice-livid sleeping bags and piss-pots of squatters. The squatters were skittish as deer. They made themselves scarce when they heard his work-boots on the stairs.

By the time I came up, the houses had been picked over. There is no money to be made in it anymore. I had to find work of my own. My work is not so different from my father's.