

INTERLUDE FIVE

A Hat Factory, circa 1875

Above a sea of chimneypotted and stovepiped men,
four gargoyles perch in the Oxford Street skyline.
Neither lions nor demons nor saints: beavers. They look down from
Henry Heath's factory, where seventy men sew and block
Victorian manhood.

Newly carved and ensconced, the beavers are already epitaphs
to a dwindling trade, with styles already turning to silk
as arteried waters go bereft of furbearers,
as long chains stretching from the city
to the lands of the Ojibwe and Cree and Dene
creak under fashion's appetite.

In a single year:
One hundred and twenty-four thousand beavers.
Every city whim a fur desert makes.

And so turn it back.
Turn back the hands of time and commerce,
unmake.

*Felting is a process
by which animal furs are made to cohere and form a kind of cloth,
without the aid of weaving or any similar process.*

Take the stovepipes and cylinders and uncurl them,
mend them back into fine, soft skins of black-brown velvet.
Immerse them, return them to the mercury baths,
let them reclaim the guard hairs and become almost-themselves again.
Give the hatters clear air and good minds,
end the muttering and trembling that gave their name to madness.



Detail of Henry Heath's Hat Factory in Oxford Street. (Photograph by Sven Klinge, used with permission of the photographer)

*The principle of Felting
was not understood until the microscope
was applied to the examination of animal fibres. It was then found
that the fibre, whether of wool or fur, is surrounded
by a vast number of minute teeth, projecting away from the central stem.*

Carry the pelts to the docklands,
to the river,
and from there to the sea, the hungry sea.

Skins disembark in Canada, stream back along the streams
running fast with newfound damless freedom, travel into territory
and return to home waters surrounded
in new unincisored growth, birch and alder

risen up green and yellow-green and silver-barked
in the wake of the dammers' sudden absence.

*As these teeth are very sharp
and are turned in one direction, they present
an obstacle to the motion of the fibre in that direction,
but enable it to glide easily
on the opposite one; just as an ear of barley,
when placed stalk uppermost within the cuff of the coat sleeve,
will soon work its way
up to the shoulder by the motion of the arm.*

Follow the skins home into these home places
as they work their way into the places of old songs and new corporations.
Of posts with names like Cumberland, Ellice, Pitt, Edmonton.
Of scrip and hangdog trappers, traplines
handed down through families. Indigenous
knowledge on the land, winter paths and summer streams.

*When a quantity of such fibres of fur are rubbed and pressed,
and the fibres made to curl slightly by the action of warmth and moisture,
they twist around each other,
and then interlace so tightly as not to separate.*

Gently place the skin back on the meat,
white fatty inner layers against red-pink muscle,
fur wrapping limbs, a mask dropping over the face
to become beaver once again, dark beady eyes
ready to watch from water's edge, paddled tail
ready to warn—
crack!—
against the mirror of water.

Unjudder the body,
calming it against the thrashings of the snare
and returning it to the freedom of the mud path
between forest and dam pond.
Musk emerges in the waiting for life,
comes to the nostril dense and sexual, the scent of
the lodge and the rut.

Elders will tell stories of the hunt:

*How the trees float down the water because of the beaver.
The person feels like the beaver is going so fast it feels like tin rattling.
It feels like the beaver just came out of this place.
The first year I started to kill beaver.
It took me one whole year to know his ways.*

It is this knowledge of rattling years that built Oxford Street,
this house of beavers, this *amiskowestih*, this *amikwiish*, this *tsàkèè*.

In the new millennium:

four gargoyled faces against the Oxford Street sky, not lion or demon or saint.
They preside over the franchise chemist, the sex shop, the bank, and the Bennetton,
tchotchke kiosk and hair salon, Foot Locker and newsstand.
The Hat Factory, now luxury flats.

*Successful system of Head Measurement
ensures the luxury of a well-fitting Hat
adapted to the form of the wearer's head.
Henry Heath, manufacturing his own goods, can guarantee—
1st, Their Quality;
2nd, Excellence of Finish;
3rd, Style.*

So few obstacles to motion, this trade
in skins and spaces and styles.
Oxford Street and the far north interlaced so tightly
and woven into fabrics of near extinction.
In gargoyles, the signs of London's hunger.

But halfway across the world,
more than a century later,
the healing has begun.
When the city turned to silk instead of skin,
the dammers returned to the northern rivers.

Now the waters rest in beavered ponds,
faces upturned toward the sky,
waters moving down toward capital seas.¹