

SAMANTHA SIMPSON

Saga 1 (detail), 2017
Ink and watercolor on paper, 92 x 51 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

KAYLIE SAIDIN

Death Protects This Gold

We grew up in the foothills of the mountains that stood tall in the way of Nevada, hiding us from the rest of the wide-open country. We grew up there because our fathers had grown up there and their fathers before them, and someone, stone-faced with an adorning beard that we did not inherit, had first traveled west in a covered wagon and stopped there. That was why we were there. If they had just gone a hundred or two more miles, we always thought, if their oxen had had the energy and their smoked meats had been fresher, they would have met the vast, cold ocean. But they didn't. They made it over the mountain pass and found that the land was a perfectly fine place to build houses out of pine trees and search for treasure, and so we grew up there, too.

Our town was the kind of town that had saloons, preserved in the kitschy name of history with glossy wooden walls and swinging doors. When we were eight, we sat on the wooden steps outside these saloons while our fathers spent time inside. We drank root beer and tried to make it squirt out of our noses. Our town had a store called Old-Tyme Candy, with *time* spelled wrong but nobody ever thought it was wrong, just old. On the outskirts of town, there was a mine that was not a mine anymore but rather a museum with a gift shop that sold bags of smooth tumbled quartz and crusted geodes.

Only the kids in our town knew where the real mine was: hidden off a canyon road, higher up in the foothills than most of us were allowed to go.

One summer when we were ten, we explored the real mine, walking single file down the path, our shadows interweaving with one another to create an amorphous figure. There was not a trail that led us there, but there must have been, because in our path the dirt was pressed down into the earth, and someone had stacked stones atop one another as markers to show us the way. We followed a shallow creek that our grandfathers had told us was once a great flowing river. In the side of a rocky hill, we found the cavernous opening, just big enough for us to enter, just dark enough for us to fear it.

In our hesitation, we pulled our hair and stepped on our toes beneath our sneakers and said to each other, My father wants me home by sundown. We left without entering it then, running back home down the path alongside our shadows, suddenly feeling like we were being watched.

Kaylie Saidin grew up in the San Francisco Bay Area and now lives in New Orleans. This fall, she will enter in the MFA program at the University of North Carolina Wilmington. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in *upstreet #15*, *Atlas & Alice*, *Okay Donkey*, and elsewhere.

The stories about the mine we heard in school back then frightened us. Those who ventured into it told us that beyond eyesight there was a downward drop and a wooden ladder that disintegrated beneath your feet as you descended. At the bottom, they said, there was graffiti, and a slab of wood that said DEATH PROTECTS THIS GOLD in big carved letters. That was as far as anyone we knew had gone into the tunnels. Unlike the mine-turned-museum-and-gift-shop, which had railings for us to hold and glossy panels with text printed on them that explained what panning for gold was, the real abandoned mine felt eerie and unhistorical to us. It felt too present, modern-day, like the echo of our shouts across the land, and so we turned away from it.

* * *

We were twelve when our grandfathers died. Heart attacks claimed them in the winter, their long white beards no longer able to weather the snow. Their dogs barked and beckoned our fathers to check on them in their old houses, and our fathers, pulling back plaid wool blankets, saw their blank faces and knew what had happened.

Our fathers told us to wear black, but we owned no suitable colors, so we wore our darkest denim and borrowed button-down shirts from our older brothers. We went to dinner with our extended family members, whom we had not seen since we were tiny children, meeting them at the nicest restaurant in our town. They had flown in from Montana or South Dakota or even as far as Illinois. These relatives pinched our cheeks, asked us our favorite subjects in school, and told us stories about our grandfathers. We were forced to imagine our grandfathers at our age, perhaps even younger, learning to drink black coffee and bring down mighty hacksaws upon broken lumber. Even when we closed our eyes, we could not imagine these gruff old men as young boys with obedient baby faces, so we had to imagine our own faces in their place.

Our relatives ordered us apple pie and told us of the great things our grandfathers had done. Our grandfathers survived on a dollar a day, slaving away at mills and lumberyards to feed their families. They kept a jar of gold dust on their nightstand for good luck, an heirloom passed along from the fathers of their own. They joined the town efforts to build a school up on the hillside for the local Native

children to attend, piling bricks upon muddy foundations, all the men working as sweat pooled on their temples, and when the schoolhouse was finally erected, they breathed out sighs and stared up at the massive structure and patted one another on the back.

The school was never used, though, our relatives said with a terse frown. The Indians burned it down the night it was built.

Native Americans, we said. You're supposed to call them Native Americans.

Well, they said, looking at us with startling blue eyes, so pale they seemed alien. Your granddaddy called them Injuns.

I know what he called them, we said.

Our stoic grandfathers had frightened us when they were alive. They cursed and drank whiskey and packed tobacco into wooden pipes. They refused to use real indoor heating, instead showing us how to heat granite stones over the furnace and then place them in our bedsheets to warm ourselves. Even now, we can still remember the way those hot, smooth rocks felt as we passed them between our feet and thighs in the night.

Sometimes, while we slept on our stones, our grandfathers would return from the wintery outside, slamming the screen door and awakening us. In the light of the furnace, we could see their silhouette, much thinner than we had noticed before. Their skin was damp and their silvery hair strewn from the wind and the whiskey. When nights like this happened, we knew to keep silent, but also to listen.

The Devil is in these forests, our grandfathers would tell us. D'you know what I mean, boy?

As we stared at them, we would see in their eyes a subtle fear, a fear of ghost towns, of vanished treasure, of fiery resistance, of land giving way. Yes, sir, we would say.

We would wake up in the morning after spending the night at our grandfathers' home with our ears numb from the frost outdoors. We would feel the stone pressed against our side, having gone cold with everything else.

* * *

We were fourteen when we entered high school. Our town was small, and there was only one school, with a wide, sprawling outdoor campus outlined in red and black colors. It exuded the wafting smell of heated lunch.

We started in September, when the air was still unbearably hot and dry, making cracked lines in our legs and elbows that became ingrained with dust. School began at eight thirty, and we were happy to be walking so early. Eight thirty was long before the sun could rise and place its sweltering jaws around the foothills and the valley that stretched out beyond us like an endless desert.

Each of these honey-colored mornings our mothers poured us cereal and rushed us out of the house, while our fathers stood at the window, watching absently as our sandals crunched the pine needles and brush as we ran off. Before we were born, or when we were babies, our fathers had been drafted into the war and had shipped out with the navy, entering the frigid ocean and leaving the foothills and mountains behind. A few years later, they returned with sallow cheekbones, an unfathomable gaze, and money for our mothers to spend at the recently constructed shopping plazas. We did not know much about them.

We walked to school together, and sometimes we talked to each other, but sometimes we said nothing. The hot sun would rise behind us over the mountain peaks, and for a moment, it would almost make us look like the people we wanted to be. Taller, maybe. With a driver's license. And although we would not admit it to ourselves yet, we wanted the impassive faces of our fathers, of our grandfathers. We imagined them watching bombs drop on German cities, watching the schoolhouse they'd so meticulously constructed burn down from arson. We imagined their inscrutable faces, the reflection of flames in their eyes making it look as if they were possessed. Secretly, we wanted to look this unflinching.

* * *

We were fifteen and in school when we thought we met the Devil. He was a boy in our gym class, where we ran miles, circling the clay-red rounded white lines over and over until our saliva was sticky in our mouth. The sun was hot that year, beating down on the chalky green turf and melting its way into our running shoes. We knew everyone in the class; we ran with the same people that we'd played in the trees behind our homes with as children, people we'd grown up together with in the town. Except for him. We did not know him.

He was our age, and he had shaggy black hair, skin the color of tanned leather hide, and a baby face and black eyes, blacker than any of us had. We can remember what he looked like, even now. In his uncharacteristically small hands he held a red iPod that he listened to when he ran the mile. As he ran, he stared straight ahead, looking far into the distance with his black eyes at something we could not see but we both longed to and were afraid to.

Hey, we said to him. You new here?

He said nothing to us, but stared back at us with his dark eyes. We had never known a kid our age to have eyes like that. They were beady and unwavering, qualities usually reserved for hardened old men who had been in war or lived through famines and storms. These eyes frightened us, and in response to our fear, we grew angry.

We said, Are you new here? We snarled.

Then we shoved him, but he barely stumbled backward. He started to run away from us, keeping in pace with the class mile. We followed behind him, but he was quicker and more conservative with his energy. He set the class median pace for the mile, clocking in at an exact eight minutes and thirty seconds like a calculated machine.

Later, we saw him at lunch, eating with the rest of the Native American kids. There were some students who came in on buses from the reservation nearby. Most of them kept to themselves in the secretive, childhood way of lunchroom politics. We felt they knew things about the town that we didn't, perhaps because we'd learned in history class that they'd been there far longer than our great-great-great-grandfathers with the beards that came in covered wagons. And for this reason, we said nothing to them, but watched them from afar in a way we realized was bordering on exoticization and misunderstanding as we grew older and felt shame.

Look, we said. There's the new kid.

We snickered, and then he turned to us with his dark eyes and raised an eyebrow and smiled. The way he did it seemed as though he was in on a joke with us, that our reaction toward him earlier in class was a point of amusement if we really stepped back to look at it.

Hey, we said, approaching him as he rose from his table to throw out his empty lunch tray. New kid. You're a pretty fast runner, huh?

I'm not that fast, he said. Just faster than you all.

His voice sounded huskier than the rest of ours, like the deep and throaty voice of an adult. In contrast with his youthful exterior, the dark hair that swung over his face and his tanned skin, we didn't know what to make of this.

You think you're faster than us? we said. Okay. We'll see tomorrow.

Look, he said. I'm just trying to get by here in school, and you're just afraid. If you have algebra next period, we can study together, if you want.

We're not afraid, we said. We nodded curtly, making sure to keep our jawline higher than his. See you around.

As we walked away, we said to one another: What a weirdo.

We said: Nobody our age should have eyes like those.

We said: Why should he go to our school if his grandfather probably helped burned down the schoolhouse our grandfathers built?

We thought: The Devil is in these forests, just like our grandfathers said, and we saw him in this boy's steadfast gaze, his frightening voice, his black eyes that reflected flames back at us when we sent them to him.

It was only later, as we walked home through the late-afternoon glow that encompassed our town and brought out the glints of gold that lay embedded and hidden in granite rock, that we registered our envy of him. He was new at school, but he was not new at all, not really. The way that he had avoided our taunting shove and confrontation with a smile showed his casual yet undaunted demeanor. It showed that he had earned those beady eyes. In many ways, he was what we longed to be: aloof, stoic, mysterious, and standoffish.

Like our own grandfathers, we felt that he understood things we could not. And yet, unlike our grandfathers, but more like ourselves, we felt that he sensed the Devil in the land, too.

* * *

We were sixteen when the storm came. The radio had called for unusual winter conditions in the Sierra Nevada region, claiming snow and sleet and wind gusts, but the schools had ignored these warnings and maintained attendance. We sat in algebra as the snow began. Then, as we watched with our faces pressed to the cold glass windows in the classroom, the snow became hail and barreled

against the panes, threatening to break them into a million tiny pieces. Our teacher shrieked at us to get away from the windows. We did not move, instead electing to stare out at the darkened sky, the pine needles and leaves being pulled into the air and spinning as if trying to transcend our earthly plane.

We were instructed to stay put in our classrooms, but when three thirty arrived and school ended, they had to let us go. We bundled up our jackets, linked arms, and prepared to brave the walk home. The rain that had pounded on the asphalt the morning before had frozen over and left us sliding along the sidewalks outside the campus, hoping not to careen into the streets. When we exhaled, our breath made ghosts in the air. The wind pulled us by the hide of our jackets and spun us about, and the ice and rain stung our eyes and frosted over our lashes.

The Native American boy from our gym class walked on the other side of the street, and after one strong gust that whipped at our feet and knocked us all to the hard icy ground, we looked over at him. He looked back at us with fear in his eyes, and we knew in that moment that it was not him that we had been afraid of, but rather the creeping sense of anxiety that had been instilled in us since we'd seen the abandoned mine and realized how many men had been inside when it collapsed. How the land threatened to take us all, no matter how we chipped away at the hillside.

We called out to him, and he slid across the street, joining our huddle. He told us the buses that took him home were not coming today, and we told him he could come to our house, if we made it there. We knew that our mothers were at home, pacing by the fireplace, having brewed hot cocoa and called the local police department by now. We knew that they would be too kind and instinctual to refuse to harbor another in their homes.

Now that our grandfathers were dead, we thought, buried under layers of frozen soil in the graveyard up the hill, we could at last hide together from the Devil that glared at us from the clouded sky, that attempted to swallow our town and land with lightning and the threat of obscurity. The fiery fight, we now understood, had been between our grandfathers and this boy's grandfathers, and now, we all stood in the wake of the ashes, trying to piece back together the land and the town and the feeling of when it was new.

We grew up surrounded by glossy and wooden preserved buildings, gift shops that sold obsidian arrows with feathers wrapped around them as talismans, and family stories meant to make us afraid. We grew up as everything was slowly drying up, as the land became a historic oddity of a narrowly avoided ghost town. As nature tried, valiantly yet unattainably, to reclaim the act of preservation, an act that the great-great-grandfathers stole, as the flames of human corruption still followed us in schools and on our walk home.

We clung to this boy, and he to us, as we walked home through the storm.

At some point, the hail stopped as the temperature swung down, and all became slow-falling snow again that covered our bodies. We crossed the bridge over the creek, which now once more resembled an overflowing river, its hardened surface having cracked and now being caked again with snowfall.

* * *

When we were seventeen, we went back to the abandoned mine. Perhaps we went to prove to ourselves that we were no longer afraid, perhaps we went in foolish hope of finding treasure, or perhaps we went because the blackness of the cavern had been calling to us since we'd heard of its existence from the older kids in school. We might all have had different reasons for going, but we all went together nonetheless.

Now, when we get together at reunions and funerals, and, eventually, the ceremony designating our town as a National Historic Landmark, we laugh about the mine and our childhood in the gold-country town. We have since moved away, and we laugh at the town's status today as a destination schoolchildren from the city visit on field trips to learn about state history. We laugh about the river running dry and our mothers, who have since grown silver and gray, still living there in the same houses.

But as we joke, as we reminisce with one another, whom we no longer see much, we each feel a private sense of fear, even still. We might have never understood what our grandfathers meant when they came home panicked, talking about the Devil, but we think the Devil is still there. He's been there, maybe, since our great-great-grandfathers arrived and built the mines and slaughtered their

sick oxen and sifted sacred river water on tin pans, poking at the metal for gold flakes. They thought the land was new because the state was new and the feeling was new, but now we know the land was and still remains old. Ancient, even. It's possible, we think, that the Devil was there even before our great-great-grandfathers brought him out, hiding somewhere in the wind as it sifted through the pines.

When we returned to the mine, the path was cooler and the wind blew over it from the east. The rocks that had once shown us the way were gone, scattered around the earth, and the remnants of the trail seemed to have faded after lack of use. It was as if, after a period of enthrallment years prior, as the local kids dared one another to venture deeper and deeper inside, the mine now lay in the dust, forgotten. We walked single file along the rocky hillside until we came to the opening.

The tunnel into the side of the earth was supported by wooden timbers that held up the arch of the entrance like a doorway. We were afraid of the way it looked foreboding, like the open curved doors of a dark church, but we imagined our great-great-grandfathers carving this mine out themselves, chipping away at rocks with pickaxes, eroding the soil and extracting every last natural resource from the land until it gave way, until finally we were left in the dust of a quiet ghost town. This did not make us feel less afraid, but it made us wonder: If our town had never boomed, if nobody had ever stopped here in their wagons, if nobody had ever gone over the mountain pass at all, would the cavern still be here? Had the mine been built inside a cavern, or was it tunneled and blasted out through the hillside, like the burrow of an invasive species of ants?

Our entry into the mine was met with cool air and a damp floor that we quickly realized held a shallow layer of water. As we walked, we looked underneath us, and the stream that flowed at our feet was as clear as the creek that people had once panned for gold flakes in, the one we had splashed in outside our homes. Submerged cart tracks still lay, as if untouched, under the thin, watery ground. We put our palms to the walls of the cave and felt the cold stone and a strange, overwhelming desire to put our face to it and feel it against our cheeks.

Once we had walked so far that the doorway we had entered through was a distant light and our flashlights glowed, we found the downward plummet those who had been

inside talked about. There was a wooden ladder down, not rickety as we'd heard, but strong and sturdy, perhaps made of redwood. Beside the ladder was a large metal ore chute, one that we imagined had had water cascading down it once upon a time. We wondered why it hadn't rusted, why it looked silver and new. Here we thought to turn back, to head to the entrance, but we knew we had to climb down the ladder to see what was below. A small part of us, the part that would fade as we got older but never really go away, thought we might find treasure in that darkness and strike it rich, bring home jewels to our families, the way we were taught our great-great-grandfathers had wanted to do. We climbed down the ladder.

At the bottom of the sturdy wooden steps, there was not a sign that said DEATH PROTECTS THIS GOLD. There was no sign at all; instead, there was nothing but more tunnels, expansive in every direction we looked, like the arms of a long, infinite spider. No gold lay nestled in the cavernous walls, no water came barreling down the chute, and we did not have pickaxes and hard helmets, but rather flashlights and muddied sneakers. We saw that there was nothing left there, nothing left to mine and discover. Everything had been discovered already. There was no frontier, and death did not protect the gold, or the hillside, or those who lived there before we came, because if it did, we would not be where we stood. We knew this now.

And as we climbed upward through the tunnels and back toward the light-filled opening, toward the approaching dusk and the warmed homes we lived in, we thought of our grandfathers, of our fathers, of the flames we saw reflected in their eyes, of the boy we'd befriended in school, of the busloads of Native American kids that came in each morning with a solemn smirk, of the Devil. We thought we felt him. We felt him in the colossal storm that had been brought that year, in the sound of trains roaring through the pines, in the way we searched our whole life for some kind of density that was manifest and still found nothing. We felt him grinning up at us from the pages of history textbooks, from the wide-open blue sky above us, smirking as if to say, Nothing will protect you. Or any of this.

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