

Fever dreams were always one of the early signs of the Föhn. First the sky would fill with clouds shaped like enormous, tufted fish, and the blue would take on the shade of a bruise as dust interfered with the light. High pressure patterns south of the border, in the flatlands of Piedmont and Lombardy, would push a wave of heat in the direction of the Alps. Gusts of wind would funnel through the passes of Ticino, building strength on their way to the Berner Oberland, and then they'd tumble over the tops of the mountains to batter us for days on end. That was the Föhn. The atmosphere would feel as dry as a cellar warmed by a furnace. The air would writhe with swirls of flies and, in autumn, wasps. Black and yellow devils, stealthy and vindictive, would slip through windows to threaten you as sat down to a meal, or tried to focus on work, or lay in bed at night, until you slapped them dead. Then they'd spring to life again, until you realised that their resurrections were more effects of the Föhn. Pressure on the skull, torrents of sweat, wavering vision and fever dreams. You couldn't trust your own eyes or the clarity of your thoughts.

The Föhn hit the mountainside at nightfall. I'd sensed its approach, its imminent arrival, as I'd taken to the pathway with a bassine broom and swept clear the last few scraps of snow. For many people a sudden migraine is another early sign of the wind, a result of the plunge in air pressure that heralds the coming gale. It struck me like an ice-pick to the forehead, as if some sharpness in the air had targeted me for trepanning.

After I went back indoors I downed a handful of headache tablets. I knew full well they'd do me no good. With the heel of my hand pressed hard to my brow, I eyed the letter from the Director of Instruction and Assessment. It was still at rest where I'd left it on the keyboard of the laptop. Innocuous from this vantage point. Incendiary when I re-read the words. With my free hand I flipped it over and pinched it into a transverse fold, as if in doing so I could silence it. Then I sat out the onset of darkness feeling the heat inside the house become more intense, more compressed, as the pressure outside rose even higher and warmth gushed over the peaks. Shoes off, socks off. Bare feet helped to keep me cool. Through the kitchen window I watched the forest sway like kelp in a deep sea current, entire trees like fronds of weed waving in the black.

It took the Föhn only an hour or so to liquefy the white. The snow would never thaw fast enough to flood, too densely packed on the roof, too tightly clinging to the tiles, but it weltered into a sprawl of trickles and rills that purred over the shell of the house. Run-off squiggled lines down the panes of the windows. Droplets fell from eaves and spattered cement and brickwork. Trembling beads of water troubled the lintel above the kitchen door, plonking arrhythmically into a puddle that stretched from there to the edge of the forest. Sheltered now, and dry, but surrounded

on all sides by spit and drizzle, I watched the Föhn gnaw into the winter. As snow dwindled down into water, the world around me rippled.

My wife, on the sofa, told me to go to bed.

I'd just sat down at the kitchen table and powered on the laptop. The letter, I saw, was no longer in sight, but the dark screen captured my wife's opaque reflection. I watched her where she sat, behind me, as she smoothed the creases from a sheet of paper on her knee. She'd been reading through it again, contemplating its contents, though she didn't mention it.

Now the laptop screen lit up. I clicked open a browser.

What are you trying to do? my wife said from over my shoulder. You've been awake for—what?—another twenty-four hours? You look raddled. You need sleep.

It's the Föhn, I said. Like always. Feels like it's cracking me open.

So go to bed. Sleep through it. At least sleep through the worst of it.

I said nothing in response, pressed my hands to the table, hauled myself out of my seat and made for the bathroom. A splash of water on my cheeks, a smear across my brow, a couple of dabs around the temples. Then I returned to the glow of the laptop. The ashes in the urn remained behind the screen. I clicked through to the news.