

THE BURROWERS

by
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MARYANNE (V.O.)

Hold still.

INT. STEWART HOUSE - NIGHT

MARYANNE STEWART is twenty-two, she has a plain beauty to her, freckles, hair gathered in a bun. Her face is underlit by the candle she uses to heat a needle. She's holding the hand of her LITTLE BROTHER, age 6, about to remove a splinter from his finger. She blows on the needle to cool it.

MARYANNE

A splinter already hurts more than pulling it out.

Little Brother tries to be brave, but he's nervous. Pinned to her dress at Maryanne's throat is a silver BROOCH, an intricate Celtic pattern interwoven with a yellow ribbon.

In the small, rough-hewn cabin behind her, we see Maryanne's heavy-set BIG BROTHER (27), LITTLE SISTER (10), and MOTHER (50's.) They're settling for the night, cleaning the dinner dishes, getting the kids into their nightshirts, etc.

YOUNGER SISTER

I'm not sleepy.

MOTHER

We'll story you to bed.

(to Maryanne-)

You need to take your rest, too, Mary. F'you wanna look pretty when your Dutchman comes courtin' tomorrow.

MARYANNE

You hush.

Maryanne smiles, lowers the needle towards her brother's finger...

BIG BROTHER

He told daddy he was saving wages for his own settlement.

Little Brother squirms, watching the needle approach.

MARYANNE

I only just met him. He ain't...

The pin-point approaches young skin...

CRACK, CRACK, CRACK, rapid rifle fire sounds from outside. The whole family's attention snaps towards the sound. They freeze for a moment, spooked like animals.

Big Brother moves first, cracks the shutter on a window. In silvery moonlight, we catch a glimpse of waving prairie grass, MUZZLE-FLASHES with the CRACKS of rifle fire.

There's a FIGURE, running, fast approaching the house.

Maryanne sticks the needle in the candle and puts a protective arm around Little Brother. Little Sister nuzzles into her mother's arms, frightened.

LITTLE SISTER

Mom...?

BAM, everybody jumps when he hits the door, yanking it open a moment later to reveal Maryanne's heavy FATHER (50's.) He's breathless, terrified, a rifle in his hand. CRACK, CRACK, distant rifle-fire continues from the cabin behind him.

MOTHER

What's happening?

FATHER (BREATHLESS)

They were in the Williams' house.

BIG BROTHER

Indians?

Big Brother grabs a rifle off the wall, steps towards his father, who puts a hand on his shoulder.

FATHER

Stay with the women. Down, into the root cellar. Get.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK SETTLEMENT - NIGHT

The settlement is two small clapboard homes alone in an ocean of grass stirred by heavy winds. From the Stewart House, we see Maryanne and her family hurrying out of the back door and down into a cellar.

INT. STEWART HOUSE CELLAR - NIGHT

Her father ushers Maryanne down the stairs, where her mother and sisters wait with a lantern. Her brother follows after, a rifle in hand. Father lifts the doors above-

FATHER

Keep your lamp low and this door locked. You don't open it no matter what. You hear?

Brother nods as he shuts the door.

YOUNGER SISTER

Dad!

BROTHER

Quiet.

YOUNGER SISTER (PANICKING)

Mom, mom...

MOTHER

You mind your brother. Hush.

Big Brother latches the storm doors shut and backs into the middle of the cellar. He takes the lamp from his mother and turns the flame down low.

We hear muffled SHOUTS above, movement. The little children in their white nightshirts are crying, holding onto their mother. The adults all look up at the underside of the floorboards, eyes glassy with fear.

Maryanne shakes her head at her Little Brother's tears and wipes at his cheek. In a whisper, barely more than silence-

MARYANNE

Don't cry. Be brave for me.

She holds his gaze until he takes a breath, and nods.

The cellar around them is cluttered, filled with burlap sacks of grain, half-mended farm tools. Lamplight throws weaving shadows on the walls around them.

CRACK, CRACK, more rifle shots, and then a man's SCREAM. Maryanne puts a hand to her mouth. Brother tightens his fist on the rifle. Mother holds the two crying children.

Relative SILENCE above. The family stands frozen, trying not to breathe. Little Brother SNIFFS and all heads snap towards the sound. Mother puts a gentle hand over his mouth, pleads with her eyes for quiet.

Something DRAGS over the floorboards above. The family looks upwards, terrified. SCCCCRRRRRT, the dragging sounds like a carpet knife over the rough boards.

BOOM, a muffled shotgun blast. Then BOOM, another. The family all look upwards, from the dragging sound to- BOOM, a third blast, and a fourth.

All of the adults fail to notice what both of the crying children see- a silhouetted FIGURE in the shadows behind Big Brother, low to the ground, moving in.

Little Brother and Sister draw tiny breaths, eyes fixed on the figure, almost too terrified to speak.

YOUNGER SISTER (WHISPERING)

...mom.

Her mother shushes her. The DRAGGING above has stopped.

Subtly, a dinner plate-sized circle of dirt by Little Brother begins to move. He feels it through his socked foot and looks. Eight inches of soil shake like simmering water.

Little Brother looks at his mom, who stares upwards at the floorboards. He looks back down. Dirt moves outward from the center of the circle. SOMETHING PALE begins to surface, like a boiled worm, or the finger of a drowned child...

Maryanne, Big Brother, and Mother all stare upwards...

Little Brother looks down at the dirt and inhales to scream.

Little Sister looks away from the figure slinking towards Big Brother and closes her eyes, crying, terrified.

An agonizing moment before-

Big Brother SCREAMS and the lantern drops.

Maryanne spins. The lantern hits the ground at her brother's feet and shatters, the momentary flash of firelight revealing him clawing at the dirt floor as he's pulled violently back into the shadows...

The light extinguishes, leaving pitch darkness. Little Sister SCREAMS. We hear YELLING. SCREAMS. VIOLENCE.

Then sudden quiet.

There are inhuman RATTLES and PURRS, the sounds of bodies dragged over the ground. Soil shifts.

SILENCE. BLACK ON SCREEN.

TITLE
The Dakota Territories
August 15th, 1879

DRIPPING. Flies BUZZ.

A vertical line of light grows into the rectangle of an opening door, silhouetting a FIGURE in a derby and duster against the lush, slowly waving grass of the Dakota plains.

INT. THE WILLIAMS HOUSE- DAY

The figure moves into the absolute black of the house, stark contrast against the big sky glare of the Badlands. He pulls the derby from his head.

Hundreds of specks of darkness, FLIES, rise in a cloud and swarm the lighted rectangle of the doorway.

The man, little more than a dark shape in the sliver of light, is DUTCH, a heavily-accented Belgian immigrant two years off the boat. Dutch is sharp, capable but out of place, a little anxious in the West.

DUTCH(ACCENTED)
...Is anybody home? Mr. Williams?
The Stewarts are...

The pupil in the illuminated crescent of Dutch's face widens, adjusting to the dark, then narrows.

DUTCH
Jesus god.

Dutch backs away, his boots sliding through a rich, crimson puddle, never taking his eyes off the thing before him.

At the door he puts his hand against the jamb, steadying himself. There's something small and smooth under his palm.

He takes his hand away and looks. A TOOTH, a molar, lodged in the wood as if fired there. Dutch stumbles out and...

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK SETTLEMENT- DAY

...onto the porch, nauseated, his blood-stained boots losing purchase on the friction-smoothed boards. He flails and falls into JOHN CLAY.

The enormous man catches Dutch. Clay is a mountain, early 40's, easily 6 feet and 250 lbs. of John Wayne.

ALL BUSINESS all the time, he's a commanding presence, strong, an obvious leader. He's holding a black-and-white PHOTOGRAPH in a broken frame in one of his enormous hands.

CLAY

Basement's empty. The Stewarts are gone. Maryanne say anything to you about leaving?

Dutch shakes his head, no. Clay presses the Stewart family portrait into Dutch's hands and pushes him off the porch.

CLAY

What about the Williams?

Dutch shakes his head and points into the dark doorway before them. Clay turns and steps into the Williams' House, vanishing into the darkness.

We see the settlement in daylight, the two clapboard homes bleached gray from hard weather. The surrounding grass sways.

We get a better look at Dutch: late 20's, lean, angular. His body language reads somewhere between Ichabod Crane and Sherlock, contained nervous energy and remarkably sharp eyes.

Dutch looks at the photograph Clay gave him. The Stewarts are a large family, posed before their home on the Washburne Crick. The children's images are blurred, they moved during the exposure. Dutch scans the faces, focusing in on Maryanne. He touches her image, smearing blood on the picture by mistake. He grimaces and wipes it clean with his sleeve.

The TWO HORSES tied to the fence behind Dutch lift their feet and roll their eyes, nervous.

Clay emerges from the door, carrying Dutch's Derby as if it were a pair of discarded panties. Dutch takes the hat; there's a crimson stain on the crown.

Clay walks to his horse and leans his hands on the saddle, staring out at the slowly waving grass.

CLAY

Indians. God help them.

DUTCH

We have to get them back.

Clay nods, just barely.

EXT. THE SPACKS HOUSE- DAY

DOBIE SPACKS walks through the grass, looking down, lost in rumination. He pinches at his upper lip, trying to tweeze between his thumb and finger the fine down growing there. Dobie will soon be 16. He carries a pitcher of milk. Behind him, the Spacks House sits large, whitewashed, and Victorian, like some Edward Hopper sentinel.

Ahead, WILLIAM PARCHER follows Dobie's mother towards a thick, twisted box elder tree growing on a rise in the land. Parcher is a mischievous-looking rancher in his 50's, a moustache, glorious sideburns.

Parcher carries a picnic basket. He hangs back and whispers conspiratorially to Dobie-

PARCHER

I hemped three men on yonder tree.

DOBIE

Really?

PARCHER

Indians, anyway. Hanged 'em dead.

Parcher winks at Dobie, showing off. The boy smiles, he's impressed.

GERTRUDE

Don't feed my boy your horse-shit,
Mr. Parcher.

GERTRUDE SPACKS, carrying a quilt, looks back at them. She's in her early 50's, attractive, rich.

PARCHER

That ain't horse-shit, that's
history. Boy ought to learn where
we come from.

They arrive under the tree and Gertrude spreads the quilt.

GERTRUDE

Mind the cursing in front of my
boy.

They sit and Parcher begins to take food from the basket. Dobie looks up at the sun through the gnarled branches of the elder. We hear the CREAK of twisting ropes.

PARCHER
Great god amighty, is that coconut?

Parcher pulls a cake from the picnic basket.

DOBIE
Mom got it special.

GERTRUDE
I baked it. The coconut came from
back East.

Parcher looks at the cake, then at Gertrude.

PARCHER
Ten years back, not a mile from
here, I had to eat horse to
survive.

Dobie is impressed.

GERTRUDE
That's disgusting.

PARCHER
It wasn't my horse. Point is,
we're here now eating coconut cake.
Right civilized country.

Parcher cuts himself a slice that encompasses nearly a
quarter of the cake.

GERTRUDE
We have chicken and cornbread.

PARCHER
I know it. I'll attend to that
cornbread directly.

Parcher takes an enormous bite of cake, smearing his
moustache with icing.

DOBIE
There's a rider.

Dobie points. Parcher gets to his feet and squints. A MAN
ON A HORSE gallops towards them, half a mile away.

PARCHER
Listen, cowboy, how 'bout taking
your mother in the house.

DOBIE

He's got a funny hat. I think it's
your ranch-hand, Mr. Dutch.

PARCHER

Anybody can wear a funny hat and
that ain't Sunday riding. Take
your mother inside.

GERTRUDE

Let's go, Dobie.

Parcher SNAPS the cover guard off of his revolver. Dobie
turns and looks. Parcher sees the boy eyeing the gun and
grins a little bit.

PARCHER

Go on.

Dobie and Gertrude hurry toward the house. Parcher, icing
smeared on his moustache, squints into the distance.

EXT. DAKOTA BADLANDS- DAY

We reveal the rider: Dutch. He drives his horse through the
knee-high grass towards Parcher, a half-mile distant.

EXT. THE SPACKS HOUSE- DAY

Dutch rears his frothing horse to a halt in the shade of the
box elder and dismounts a few feet from parcher. Dobie and
Gertrude are specks in the grass halfway back to the House.

PARCHER

Dutch, god damnit, I was having a
picnic.

DUTCH (BREATHLESS)

Indians. They killed... Here.

Dutch fishes a many-folded square of paper from his pocket
and hands it to Parcher. Scrawled in grease pencil-

"INDIAN MASSACRE AT WASHBURNER CRICK. WILLIAMS FAMILY DEAD.
STEWART FAMILY KIDNAPPED, 6 MISSING. FETCHING HENRY V.

- CLAY"

DUTCH

It's from Mr. Clay. They took
Maryanne... her whole family...

PARCHER

I can read. Jesus. Indians kill them little Williams girls, too?

DUTCH

Yes... no. Mr. Williams did. And then, what is the word...

Dutch pantomimes shooting himself in the mouth.

PARCHER

Suicide.

Dutch points at Parcher, exactly.

INT. GERTRUDE'S PARLOR- DAY

Dutch thirstily drains a glass of water, jams his derby back onto his head. The parlor is sparse, Victorian, dusty.

PARCHER

...If we're dealing with Crow or Ute, Dobie could see things a boy shouldn't have to.

Parcher perches on a stool, pulling on his boots. Gertrude watches Dobie tie provision onto two horses outside.

GERTRUDE

I've made up my mind, Will.

PARCHER

You've already lost a man to the Indians, I don't want to take another.

GERTRUDE

I don't have a man in this house, I've got a boy. You take him to Washburne Crick and bring him back and maybe I'll have two.

Parcher's pleased with this. Gertrude turns to Dutch.

GERTRUDE

Would you like more water?

Dutch shakes his head.

DUTCH

We have to go.

Dobie enters from the front porch, dressed in brand-new riding clothes. He's Christmas-morning excited.

DOBIE

The horses are ready.

PARCHER

Then let's get to it.

Gertrude takes Dobie's head, kisses his forehead.

GERTRUDE

Be good. Mr. Parcher's lived through everything this country could throw at him. You stay close and mind him, and you'll be fine.
(then, to Parcher-)
And you, too.

She kisses him lightly on the cheek. Parcher mugs pleased shock before leaning to kiss her back. She shoves him off.

GERTRUDE

When you get back.

PARCHER

Yes, ma'am.

Parcher and Dobie eye each other significantly, both happy and uncomfortable. Dutch puts down his empty water glass.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK- DAY

Dutch stands in the open doorway of the empty Stewart house, looking in. The Williams house is open behind him, no sign of Parcher or Dobie. Dutch walks around the house and notices a SHADOW on the edge of the settlement, past the barn, a dark circle in the grass. He walks over to it.

A CIRCULAR DEPRESSION about four feet across, the grass pushed aside and collapsed, the earth beneath it churned. Hundreds of ANTS crawl around in the soil.

Dutch crouches and presses his fingers into the circle. They sink easily into the dirt.

INT. THE WILLIAMS HOUSE- DAY

In the dimmed light, Parcher and Dobie cover their mouths with dust cloths. Out of focus, DEEP CRIMSON stains the walls and ceiling behind them. Parcher crouches over MRS. WILLIAMS' DEAD BODY-

A matronly corpse, shotgunned. The neck and chest are roughly buckshot-torn, her arm nearly separated. There's very little blood, just the raspberry chew of the wound.

PARCHER

She should have bled out more.
Same with the girls.

DOBIE

Ida and Daphne... I think those
where their names.

Dobie can't help but glance through the doorway into the girls' bedroom where lie-

The TWO DEAD WILLIAMS GIRLS. Small nightshirt-clad bodies twisted in sheets torn and singed by buckshot. Remarkably little blood. Child flesh chewed like ground chuck. Dobie is close to retching. These are far from the first corpses Parcher's seen. Any concern he shows is for Dobie, almost like a kind uncle.

PARCHER

You want to wait outside?

DOBIE

No.

PARCHER

Good. I wonder...

Parcher looks at a GASH in Mrs. Williams' neck, a good eight inches above any shotgun damage. It's about an inch across and six inches long. It sinks over half an inch into her neck, but doesn't appear to have bled.

PARCHER

What kind of weapon makes a wound
like that? A chisel? Some kind of
wood plane?

As he talks, Dobie turns and looks at the source of all that crimson behind them.

MR. WILLIAMS' HEADLESS CORPSE on the rough floorboards by the fireplace, the shotgun he used to decapitate himself lying between his curled hands.

And BLOOD. Unlike his wife and girls, there was no shortage of the stuff inside Dad. It marks the wall and ceiling behind him, Jackson-Pollock style.

Dobie stares at the twin barrel of the bloody shotgun.

DOBIE

That gun only fires twice.

(Parcher waits for him)

...He would have had to reload. To kill everybody.

PARCHER

...If it was Appaches or Crow, any Christian woman would prefer dying to capture. If Mr. Williams had time to reload, it's because his wife gave it to him.

Dobie looks at the ground.

PARCHER

If it came to that, I hope you'd be strong enough to take care of your mother.

Dobie stares into the bedroom, at the little girls' corpses.

DOBIE

Alright.

PARCHER

Our pity belongs to the Stewart family, they're still alive and captive...

DUTCH (O.S., INTERRUPTING)

Mr. Parcher! Mr. Clay's coming!

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, YARD- DAY

Dutch stares to the horizon. TWO DOZEN RIDERS approach.

Parcher and Dobie emerge from the Williams house. Parcher uncorks some whisky and squints at the approaching riders.

PARCHER

He find Henry Victor?

DUTCH

Yeah, and near thirty bluecoats.

PARCHER

Mighty Christ. That cock-sure little shit's brought the whole fort.

Dutch sees Dobie, his eyes red-rimmed and glassy. Dutch touches the boy's shoulder.

DUTCH
You alright?

PARCHER
Get off the boy, he's fine.

Dutch withdraws his hand. Parcher drinks some whisky.

DUTCH
I found something.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, BEHIND THE BARN- DAY

Parcher, crouching before the circle, sinks his hand into the softened earth up to his wrist. Dutch and Dobie hover behind him. The two dozen RIDERS approach in the distance.

PARCHER
I s'pose... a wallowing buffalo
coulda done this.

He smells the dirt on his finger.

Clay, at the head of the dozen riders, reigns his horse to a stop a few yards behind Parcher.

HENRY VICTOR stops his own horse beside him. He's 40 years old, a thin, tall dandy with a doughboy face and sharp, arrogant eyes; the spoiled child of a Texan war hero. He wears military blue and Lieutenant's stripes.

HENRY VICTOR
Looks like you found yourself a
hole in the ground, Will.

There's an old rivalry between them. Parcher stands to face the mounted men as a half dozen of H.V.'s BLUECOATS arrive behind them. Parcher grins at the insult, brushing the ants from his hand.

PARCHER
That and four corpses. And six
missing. Most of those being women
and children.

DUTCH
I'll get the horses.

Dutch starts back towards the yard, H.V. stops him.

HENRY VICTOR

Hold up now. This is my command, I gotta know who we're hunting. How long have the Indians had them?

Clay looks annoyed at H.V.'s obvious, arrogant pleasure at exercising authority.

The Bluecoats behind him are soldiers, between the ages of 15 and 30. Other Bluecoats ride into the settlement below.

PARCHER

Near a day now.

HENRY VICTOR

That's more than long enough for those women to've been...

Dobie looks at Parcher, long enough for what? Dutch looks sick with H.V.'s implication.

DUTCH

We should go. The longer we wait-

HENRY VICTOR

You want to go face an Indian war party on your lonesome?

Dutch clenches his fists, looks to Clay for support. Clay shakes his head, no.

HENRY VICTOR

You go off alone, those blanket heads will peel you like an orange.

PARCHER

Maryanne is lukewarm on you with your skin on, Dutch. Follow along, we'll do this thing right.

HENRY VICTOR (TO PARCHER)

You think it's the Sioux?

PARCHER

I'd incline to guess Apache or Commanche. Got a family suicide, leads me believe the tribe'd have a right smart reputation for torture.

HENRY VICTOR

The Sioux understand torture.

His intonation almost sounds like a cruel, inappropriate joke. At any rate, a few of the Bluecoats SNICKER.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, YARD- DAY

Dutch, Parcher, and Clay stride quickly across the yard, leading H.V. towards the Williams house.

Dutch eyes the approaching open door warily, a little sick. It's so quiet that we can just hear the FLIES inside.

They pass a young black man leaning against the Williams' house porch railing, "WALNUT" CALLAGHAN, (late 20's.) Callaghan wears a worn bluecoat jacket, but the rest of his clothes are catch-as-catch-can.

Dutch slows, he's not happy to be walking back into a slaughterhouse.

Parcher, Clay, and H.V. pass the BLUECOAT LIEUTENANT standing watch at the door and enter the Williams' house. Dutch lingers on the porch. H.V. looks back at him.

HENRY VICTOR

Your Occidental isn't coming in?

Dutch shakes his head, close to puking. H.V. smirks and lets the door shut.

Dutch walks back out into the dirt patch and puts his hands on his knees. The nausea passes and he spits, looks out at the horizon. Callaghan sits nearby.

CALLAGHAN

You alright, man?

DUTCH (SHAKING HIS HEAD)

We should be going after them.

CALLAGHAN

Did you know these people?

DUTCH

I do. I know the Stewarts.

Dutch removes the rolled-up photo of the Stewarts from his vest and hands it to Callaghan. He points at Maryanne.

DUTCH

That's Maryanne.

CALLAGHAN

She yours?

Dutch shakes his head, no.

DUTCH
I was working on it.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, LANDSCAPE- DAY

We see the small cluster of homes overrun with Bluecoats, surrounded by an ocean of grass. We MOVE THROUGH the grass, as if following something stalking the settlement...

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, THE WILLIAMS HOUSE- DAY

Dobie has joined Dutch and Callaghan by the porch. Dutch finishes rolling a cigarette and hands it to the boy.

H.V. SLAMS the door of the Williams House open, startling Dutch to his feet. Fuming, H.V. stalks across the porch, says to the nearest Bluecoat-

HENRY VICTOR
Send a scout to Fort Lincoln. Tell them to wagon up the gatlin and meet us at the reservation.

DUTCH
Are we going?

CLAY (O.S.)
Not yet.

Clay and Parcher emerge from the house.

CLAY
Not till we put the Williams below ground. I christened those little girls, and I intend to give them a Christian burial.

DOBIE
But the Stewarts are...

PARCHER
We go off on horses that ain't been rested, we won't make it ten miles. We got time for a burial.

Dutch clenches his fists, knows Parcher's right. Dobie's edging towards his horse and Dutch stops him.

DUTCH
Let's get the grain.

Dutch turns to attend to the horses. As Dobie starts to follow, Parcher takes the cigarette from him and smokes it.

PARCHER

No reason to route the heathen if we're going to act like him.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK, GRAVES- DAY

Two dozen BLUECOATS, Parcher, Dutch, Dobie, Callaghan, and H.V. before four open graves. Clay, at the head-

CLAY

God tests us, and when he takes the innocent, shows us we've failed. Jesus on the mount said that the meek would inherit the earth, and there they are, down in it. I believe that was as much a commandment as a beatitude.

Throughout the sermon, Dutch seems distracted, anxious to get on the trail. He looks out at the plains.

CLAY

On that same mount, Jesus said, "blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God." We need to be those children. We got to work to make the earth a fit place for the meek. May God give the Williams family peace and paradise where we could not. And give us the wisdom and perseverance to carry on until we've finished His work. Amen.

ALL

Amen.

Clay looks at the crowd for a moment. Dutch puts on his hat, ready to leave. The Bluecoats move to disperse.

Clay launches into a hymn, "Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed-"

Dutch takes his hat back off, the Bluecoats get back in line.

CLAY(SINGING)

Alas, and did my savior bleed,
And did my sovereign die.
Would he devote that sacred head,
For such a worm as I?

The others join in. H.V. sings reverently. Dobie sings with his eyes closed. Bluecoats do the best they can.

Dutch HUMS along. He notices an INDIAN standing among H.V.'s bluecoats. This is TEN BEAR, Crow Tribe, dressed in a scout's mixture of Indian and Bluecoat garb. He sings along perfectly. Dutch gawks.

Ten Bear feels Dutch's eyes and meets his gaze.

EXT. PLAINS- AFTERNOON

Hundreds of hooves THUNDER over the plains. We still hear the HYMN being sung. Riders are scattered over an acre.

Clay, Parcher, and Dobie ride grouped together. The Bluecoats ride in rough formation. Dutch is driving the mess wagon. H.V. rides at the head with Ten Bear.

GROUP (SINGING)

Thy body slain, sweet Jesus, thine,
And bathed in its own blood.
While the firm mark of wraith divine,
His soul, in anguish stood...

As the post-lapped HYMN ends-

CLAY

Damnation. We ain't going to find
kidnapped whites on a reservation.

PARCHER

I know it.

CLAY

I ain't set to waste my time while
they're scalping the men and raping
our women.

PARCHER

We're about a day's ride shy of the
Hunkpapa trail to Canada. S'where
I'd be headed if I was a band of
fugitive Indians.

Clay nods, thinking. Dobie listens attentively.

CLAY

We could set off alone.

PARCHER

I'm chewing the same cud, but
there'd only be four of us.

CLAY

We have to find the Stewarts. If we can do that with Henry Victor's help, fine. If not, fine.

PARCHER

...I guess you've had every chance to and ain't killed us yet. Though what we'd do if-

Jump scare- Parcher suddenly LURCHES forward, his horse SCREAMS and stumbles, nearly throwing him. Clay's reigns in his own horse and grabs the lead of Parcher's, steadying the animal as Parcher jumps clear.

DOBIE

Mr. Parcher! What...

Parcher gathers his wits.

PARCHER

S'alright, Dobie. Must of stepped in a prairie dog hole.

Parcher puts a calming hand on his horse's muzzle.

PARCHER (TO THE HORSE)

There you go. S'alright...

CLAY

How's that leg?

Parcher crouches and examines the fetlock.

PARCHER

A little blood, but she's standing alright.

(to Dobie)

Hey, Cowboy, hump on ahead, see how much further we're gonna press before camp.

DOBIE

Yessir.

Parcher stands as Dobie spurs his horse forward. Once he's out of earshot-

CLAY

Why do you spend so much time rubbing that boy's belly? He already thinks you're Jesus Crocket.

PARCHER

I'm courtin' his mother.

Parcher climbs up onto his horse.

CLAY

That's Gertrude Spacks' boy?

PARCHER

Yeah.

CLAY

Skinny woman.

Parcher looks at him. A beat.

CLAY (BONE DRY)

Might as well just poke the boy.

A beat. The first joke Clay's made in months. Parcher laughs. Clay lets himself smile, they spur their horses forward.

We TILT DOWN to what neither man saw, the "prairie dog hole" that Parcher's horse stepped in. Beneath the grass, the hole is blood-colored, filled with dim GORE and shards of broken RIB-BONES...

ACROSS THE GROUP

Dutch, driving the mess wagon, nods to Callaghan as he passes. The young black man veers his horse closer.

DUTCH

Who is Henry Victor's Indian?

Callaghan looks towards the head of the group, where Ten Bear gestures and talks low to H.V.

CALLAGHAN

Ten Bear. He's a Crow Indian. And the man's paid for his work and free to leave.

DUTCH

Yes?

CALLAGHAN

So he don't belong to Henry Victor.

BLACK BLUECOAT(O.S.)

Walnut!

Callaghan looks over. A BLACK BLUECOAT, several years Callaghan's junior,

BLACK BLUECOAT
Mr. Victor's canteen's dry.

Callaghan nods. The Black Bluecoat veers off.

DUTCH
He called you Walnut.

CALLAGHAN
Yeah he did.

DUTCH
Why?

CALLAGHAN
Thinks he's better'n me 'cause nobody ever owned him. I'm not enlisted. I cook for Fort Lincoln but I'm paid and I can leave any time. Understand?

DUTCH
Sure.
(uncomfortable beat.)
...How are you called?

CALLAGHAN
My name's Callaghan.

DUTCH
Callaghan. I am Martin Van Leijderova.

CALLAGHAN
Shit, man, I can't say that.

Dutch reaches out his hand. Callaghan shakes it, laughing.

DUTCH
I am also called Dutch.

CALLAGHAN
Good to meet you.

AT THE FRONT OF THE GROUP

Dobie rides past Bluecoats and forward to where H.V. takes a pair of binoculars from Ten Bear.

H.V. points out something straight ahead to two BLUECOAT LIEUTENANTS. The Lieutenants nod and head back to their squads. Ten Bear hands H.V. a rifle. H.V. sees Dobie-

HENRY VICTOR

Take a look yonder.

Dobie squints into the distance. A SHAPE in the grass.

DOBIE

Is that a horse?

He hands Dobie the binoculars. Dobie peers through-

DOBIE'S TELEPHOTO POV- A MINECONJOU INDIAN, dismounted from his HORSE, walking in small, irregular circles and staring at the ground.

The Mineconjou glances up, looking almost directly at Dobie, then continues his search of the ground.

DOBIE

He's seen us.

HENRY VICTOR

You think I don't know that?

DOBIE

Then why ain't he run?

ACROSS THE PLAINS- TWO COLUMNS of BLUECOATS, six men each, break free of the group and CHARGE, galloping across the plains towards the lone Indian.

DOBIE'S TELEPHOTO POV- The Indian sees the charging soldiers. He runs for his horse, a spotted mustang.

The Mineconjou prepares to jump on his horse, as-

H.V. raises the rifle to his shoulder, takes aim... CRACK.

DOBIE'S POV- the horse jerks with the rifle's impact and twists sideways, falling to the ground.

ACROSS THE PLAINS- The Indian jumps away from the falling beast as it kicks and pumps blood. The two columns of riders race towards him, flanking him North and South, closing in like pincers.

The Indian turns and sprints West, tearing on foot through the tall grass. The two columns of mounted soldiers close in, hooves THUNDER.

The SOUTHERN COLUMN sweeps in first, scooping around the Indian. He stops running and draws a knife.

He turns away from the Southern Column just in time for the lead horse of the NORTHERN COLUMN to arrive, the mounted Bluecoat swinging his rifle like a club-

CHUNK. The Indian catches the rifle flat across the side of his head. His feet leave earth, he pinwheels through the air, head trailing blood, and SLAMS into the ground.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- LATE AFTERNOON

Clay crouches over the horse H.V. shot. Nearby, two BLUECOATS bind the Indian's hands to a wagon wheel. Blood leaks from the Indian's brow. Ten Bear crouches in front of him, MURMURING at the captive.

Parcher looks at the Indian; Dobie and Dutch stand nearby, staring. H.V. stands in the center, well-satisfied.

CLAY

You didn't have to shoot his horse.

HENRY VICTOR

Christ, you gonna make us bury that, too?

Clay stands and H.V. crosses to Ten Bear.

HENRY VICTOR

What does he say?

TEN BEAR

Nothing.

HENRY VICTOR

Ask what he was looking for in the grass.

Ten Bear leans in close and MURMURS words to the Indian, making signs with his hands. No response.

Dutch pulls the photo of the Stewarts from his vest and hands it to Clay. Clay nods and crouches next to Ten Bear, showing the photo to the captive. To Parcher-

CLAY

Ask him.

Parcher speaks in sub-titled Sioux, making signs with his hands as he speaks.

PARCHER (SIOUX, S.T.)
<We need to find these white
people. Bad Indians took. You help,
we let you go.>

No response. Clay stands, annoyed.

CLAY
We don't have time for this. Let's
keep moving.

PARCHER
<You Blackfoot? Minneconjou?>
(no response)
<Minneconjou, I think. Look like
Bull Bear.>

The Indian looks up sharply.

PARCHER
<But you no Bull Bear. Bull Bear
dead. I bury him.>

Parcher nods, offers a friendly grin.

PARCHER
<You Dull Knife. Son of Bull Bear.>

The Indian, DULL KNIFE, stares at Parcher a few moments and
then drops his gaze. Parcher stands-

PARCHER
His name's Dull Knife.

CLAY
Carrying a prisoner's gonna slow us.

HENRY VICTOR
I'd rather walk in the right
direction than run with my head up
my ass. We're running short of
daylight, we'll camp here.

CLAY
We're wasting time we ain't got,
Henry. You know what's happening
to those Stewart girls right now?

Dutch looks sick. Clay presses the Stewart photo into H.V.'s
hands. H.V. is suddenly very conscious of the Bluecoats
nearby, watching.

HENRY VICTOR

This isn't your outfit, Clay. If we need to raise any pigs, we'll ask your advice. But renegade Indians are my job.

CLAY

If men like me and Will Parcher hadn't cleared this land of Indians, men like you would be dead on a spit and you know it.

HENRY VICTOR

These soldiers are under my authority. Mine. So long as you ride with us, you are, too.

He tries to hand the family photo back to Clay, who lets it drop in the grass. Dutch appeals to Clay-

DUTCH

We're not gonna stop...?

CLAY

That Indian doesn't know shit and wouldn't talk if he did.

HENRY VICTOR (SMILING)

He'll talk.

Dutch picks the Stewart family photo out of the grass and puts it back in his vest.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Off-screen, Dull Knife SCREAMS. It's dinner time. None of the Bluecoats look up from their plates or away from their conversations, they've grown used to the sound.

Scattered CAMPFIRES. Men eat sociably, drink coffee.

WE MOVE TO-

Parcher, Clay, H.V., and Dobie sitting in a group near the campfire, finishing dinner. O.S., Dull Knife SCREAMS. Only Dobie looks over.

WE MOVE TO-

Dutch moving through the Bluecoats, trying to see what's happening to Dull Knife.

Ten Bear is crouching in front of the bound Minneconjou, on the edge of the firelight, doing something to the soles of Dull Knife's feet. Dutch moves tangent to the two Indians, circling around, trying to see what Ten Bear is doing. Dull Knife SCREAMS. The cry echoes across the plains, no reaction from the Bluecoats.

Ten Bear pulls a SMALL NOB away from Dull Knife's foot and sets it on the ground, something pale with a dark, shiny gloss. It could be metal, or it could be bone.

CALLAGHAN(O.S.)

You don't want to see that.

Callaghan touches Dutch's shoulder and he jumps.

DUTCH

Walnut! ...Sorry. Callaghan, I mean. ...Has he talked?

CALLAGHAN

Nah. Ain't even the point. Ten Bear stopped asking questions a half hour back. Come get some coffee.

They walk towards the mess wagon. Callaghan pats his leg.

CALLAGHAN

I was born with this leg gimp, flesh all withered and shrunk. Mr. Callaghan, the man that owned my mother named me Walnut because he thought I looked like one. I ain't partial to the name.

They arrive at the wagon, Callaghan pours coffee. Dull Knife's SCREAMS dies down to pained BREATHING.

DUTCH

I can't see anything wrong with your leg.

CALLAGHAN

It's weak. Hurts most of the time.

DUTCH

...I don't like Henry Victor.

CALLAGHAN

The man's a sack of horse-shit.

Dutch grins in agreement. Then-

DUTCH

I'm Belgian. But they thought I was German on Ellis Island, so they put my name down as "Dutch."

CALLAGHAN

What the hell kind of sense does that make?

Dutch shakes his head.

CALLAGHAN

You come to this country alone?

DUTCH (SHAKING HIS HEAD)

I had a sister; the boat killed her and we put her in the water. All I kept of hers was a... I don't know the English... a "broche."

Dutch gestures at his chest, shaping a brooch.

DUTCH

...I gave it to Maryanne Stewart.

He looks at the ground. A beat.

DUTCH

I barely knew her but... I thought she might...

Dutch swallows, takes a breath. Callaghan fills space-

CALLAGHAN

Tell me your real name again.

DUTCH

Van Martjin Leijderova.

CALLAGHAN

Shit. You want more coffee, Dutch?

DUTCH

Yeah.

Dutch glances over towards Dull Knife. He sits alone, bound to the wagon wheel, feet covered in bloody rags.

CALLAGHAN

He's give up for the night, praise God.

(considers, then-)

Shit. I hope this gets me fired.

Callaghan grabs the bowl of scraps and carries it over to Dull Knife. He sets it on the ground next to him.

CALLAGHAN

Go on, you can eat. It's alright.

Dull Knife looks at the bowl of food, he wants it badly. He looks at Callaghan. His eyes narrow, somewhere between menace and pity.

DULL KNIFE (SIOUX, SUBTTLED)

<You'll be awake in your grave.
You'll be alive when they feed.>

Callaghan furrows his brow, doesn't understand. He nudges the bowl of food again.

CALLAGHAN

Go on, eat.

No reaction from Dull Knife. Callaghan SIGHS and walks back towards the Wagon, where Dutch drinks coffee.

HENRY VICTOR (O.S.)

Walnut! My tobacco's dry!

DUTCH

I got it.

Dutch grabs a sack of tobacco and walks towards the fire.

BY THE FIRE

Parcher, Dobie, Clay, H.V., and a half-dozen BLUECOATS sit. They're drinking whiskey, coffee, they're rolling cigarettes. Dutch approaches. H.V. sees him.

HENRY VICTOR

Where's Walnut?

DUTCH

I brought tobacco.

HENRY VICTOR

Much obliged.

H.V. takes the sack with one hand while he fishes in his vest with the other, pulling out a small TOBACCO POUCH that he tosses to Parcher. It looks like shriveled leather.

PARCHER

What the hell is this?

HENRY VICTOR
Tobacco pouch.

PARCHER
It's ugly as shit.

HENRY VICTOR
Came off an Injun. Big buck named
Sackatabacky.

A few Bluecoats LAUGH.

CLAY
Oh, Jesus Christ.

Parcher throws the shriveled tobacco pouch back to H.V., who
fills it as he tells a story, excessively proud-

HENRY VICTOR
My daddy was one of the men behind
the rifles that held off the Sioux
at the battle for New Ulm.

H.V. meaningfully shakes the pouch.

HENRY VICTOR
Henry Victor senior cut this off
one of them Indians. Lends the
tobacco a sweetness I've grown
right partial to.

DOBIE
What is it?

PARCHER
It's a scrotum, Dobie.

Dobie reacts. H.V. turns his attention to the boy.

HENRY VICTOR
You know the story of New Ulm, boy?

DOBIE
Yessir. My father died there.

HENRY VICTOR
Well alright then. Did you know it
was more American civilians than
ever died in anything else? Not a
soldier among 'em. Six hundred
dead by the lowest count.

(MORE)

The Sioux knew they couldn't face the army, so they attacked a town of unarmed farmers, women, children.

H.V. is condescending, tells the story like Sunday School. He licks, seals, and lights a scrotal-tobacco cigarette.

DOBIE

Yessir, I heard that.

HENRY VICTOR

I hope you know your daddy died noble. I'll raise a drink to him and every man at this fire. We'll make sure we never see anything like that in this country again.

CLAY

I'll drink to it.

PARCHER

Any reason's a good one.

They raise flasks and enamel mugs, and drink.

They fall respectfully quiet. The sudden silence reveals a SLURPING and CHEWING. They all look over, to-

Dull Knife, hungrily shoveling scraps from the bowl and into his mouth. H.V. exhales smoke.

HENRY VICTOR

Who fed my Indian?

He stands, strides across the camp, and kicks the bowl out of Dull Knife's hands. Scraps fly.

HENRY VICTOR

We don't find those settlers 'til he talks, so he don't eat 'til he talks. WHO FED MY GODDAMNED INDIAN?

H.V. kicks Dull Knife in the Stomach, doubling him over. Chewed food flies from his mouth. H.V. picks up a loose stirrup, a metal buckle on two feet of leather strap, an impromptu LASH. Everybody watches him, Parcher and Clay get to their feet.

HENRY VICTOR

Walnut? Where are you?

Walnut is absent. H.V. is rabid. Several tense moments, then-

DUTCH
...I fed him.

Everybody turns to look at Dutch. H.V. stalks towards Dutch with the stirrup / lash. He raises his arm...

HENRY VICTOR
You ignorant son of a bitch...

CLAY
Henry.

H.V. looks over. Clay has a hand on his gun. H.V. considers, then.

HENRY VICTOR
...You raise that gun and all four of you'll be on ropes in an hour.

Clay stands holding his gun. H.V. stands holding his lash. Dutch looks like he's about to piss. Parcher gets up.

PARCHER
Christ, Henry, he was just gonna shoot you a little bit. And if Dutch fed him the same shit your cook fed us, he ain't no happier'n he was 'fore he et. Leave it rest.

HENRY VICTOR
This is my command. Mine. I can't have my authority undermined.

PARCHER(TO DUTCH)
Apologize to the man for undermining him.

DUTCH
I am sorry.

With his accent, it's hard to suss his sincerity. H.V. spits and shakes his head. To a Lieutenant-

HENRY VICTOR
Bugle taps, we're bedding down. I want a three man watch until dawn. I want guns on the night. Anybody tries to sneak back into camp, anything *moves*, kill it.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

The Bluecoats and cowboys wrapped in their blankets, asleep in small groups. Soft SNORES, the RUSTLING grass.

A soft RATTLE rolls across the plains, like the largo creaking of an ungreased door. Almost a PURR. Dutch lies awake in his blankets, staring at the sky.

A BLUECOAT SENTRY slouched by the fire struggles to keep his eyes open, leaning on his rifle. The RATTLING PURR laps against him, each swell tugging him towards sleep. The soft PURR rises again, the Sentry's eyes close.

A BLUECOAT LIEUTENANT sleeps on his side on the edge of camp, spooning with his rifle.

Dutch looks over the camp. Everybody else is asleep.

Except Dull Knife. He sits awake, eyes sunken, desperate. He stares at the plains, watching the slowly waving grass.

Dutch lies back down, watching Dull Knife. Dull Knife's eyes shine in the campfire. Dutch closes his eyes.

The Bluecoat Lieutenant, sleeping soundly on his side. We move to a short distance away, where a small circle of earth beneath the grass slowly starts to TREMBLE. The circle spreads, blades of grass fall.

Five man-shaped FIGURES crawl towards him out of the grass. They slink on all fours, silent. In the starlight and dying campfire embers, we can just barely see their burnt-looking, mottled flesh. Their movement is predatory, inhuman.

The Bluecoat Lieutenant doesn't wake up when a TALON, an organic-looking blade touches the hollow between his collar bone and throat.

RIIIP- the talon is dragged across the Lieutenant's neck, carving a deep trench in the flesh. The wound is deep but does not bleed, the scarlet blood instantly coagulating.

The Lieutenant's eyes open and immediately hands on his body CLAMP DOWN hard, holding him immobile.

The Lieutenant's eyes roll wildly. A RETCHING SOUND off screen, a SPLATTER, and then the Lieutenant's face goes slack. His eyes, still conscious, stare ahead.

He is completely immobile. A beat. A RATTLING. A PURR. The Lieutenant is abruptly YANKED off-screen.

FROM A DISTANCE-

Out in the plains, down in the grass, the dwindling campfires offer a rich glow against the waving moonlit grass. SHAPES are being dragged out into the plains, the grass forming V's behind them, like a wake in water.

CUT TO BLACK

HENRY VICTOR (O.S.)
Bullshit! Bullshit! Bullshit!

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- MORNING

Dutch opens his eyes. Most of the Bluecoats are already up. Parcher is drinking coffee, getting his boots on. Dutch sits up. H.V. storms around the camp like a child in a tantrum.

HENRY VICTOR
Somebody saw those yellow shit-
heels desert. I will not god-
damned believe four men left camp
and nobody even god-damned stirred.

Bluecoats hurry into boots and uniforms. Dutch sees Clay standing nearby, looking out at the grass.

DUTCH(TO PARCHER)
What happened?

PARCHER
'Morning, sweetheart. Henry Victor
lost some of his boys last night.

DUTCH
Where?

PARCHER
That's the question.

CLAY
Somebody dragged 'em off.

DUTCH
The Indian didn't sleep. Dull
Knife.

TIME LAPSE- ACROSS CAMP- MORNING

Dull Knife stares at the ground, beaten and exhausted. Parcher and Ten Bear crouch in front of him. Clay watches from nearby, whisky bottle in hand. H.V. paces.

PARCHER

Shit. You sure you didn't find him
out front of a tobacco shop?

H.V. snorts. Dutch approaches, tucking in his shirt.

YOUNG BLUECOAT(O.S.)

Sir? Mr. Victor?

Henry Victor looks over, a YOUNG BLUECOAT is crouching over
one of the missing men's blankets.

YOUNG BLUECOAT

There's blood here, I think. Not a
lot, but...

H.V. stalks over, Clay on his heels. There is a six-inch
smear of blood on the soldier's gray blankets.

HENRY VICTOR

I've bled more from a pulled tooth.

He turns and stalks back over to Dull Knife. Clay crouches
and examines the blood. Parcher, crouching, speaks
conversationally with Dull Knife.

PARCHER(SIOUX, SUB-TITLED)

<Know you talk. Seen you talk,
young boy.>

No response from Dull Knife.

Henry Victor is livid, his face nearly twitching, staring at
Dull Knife. Dull Knife stares back.

H.V. steps on one of Dull Knife's bloody feet. Dull Knife
SCREAMS through clenched teeth. Dutch turns away, sick.
H.V. takes the weight off his foot. Dull Knife PANTS.

HENRY VICTOR

What's he got to say now?

PARCHER

We already know that don't work.

Parcher stands and turns away. Dull Knife catches his breath,
then the corner of his mouth twitches, he whispers-

DULL KNIFE(SIOUX, SUB-TITLED)

<I'm glad they like white men,
too.>

HENRY VICTOR
What was that?

TEN BEAR
He says he likes white men.

DULL KNIFE
<The Burrowers.>

Parcher listens intently.

TEN BEAR
He says about another tribe.
Miners.

HENRY VICTOR
Miners? Indian miners?

PARCHER
He didn't say "miners." Men mine.
He used the word for when animals
dig. Burrow, maybe.
(To Dull Knife)
<The tribe Burrowers? Last night?>

HENRY VICTOR
Let my buck do his job, Will.

Ten Bear leans in close to Dull Knife, cutting off Parcher.

TEN BEAR
<Where do we find the Burrowers?>

Dull Knife nearly manages a smile despite the pain.

DULL KNIFE
<...They'll find you.>

He leans in, whispers just for Ten Bear-

DULL KNIFE
<Even if you do taste like white
man by now.>

They lock eyes. Ten Bear grabs Dull Knife's bloody mess of a
foot, SQUEEZES. Dull Knife SCREAMS.

Clay steps over and SHOVES Ten Bear off with his boot,
knocking him to the ground.

CLAY
I've finished listening to that
Indian scream.

HENRY VICTOR

He's shit-all for information
anyway. We'll get our answers from
the reservation.

PARCHER

This ain't the Sioux, Henry. He
just said the Burrowers.

HENRY VICTOR

I don't have time to be second
guessed. There's four white women
out there've probably already...

H.V. swallows his last words, grimacing.

PARCHER

All the more reason we shouldn't be
looking in the one place we know
they ain't.

HENRY VICTOR

We have to fight the enemy that's
before us. We're going to the rez.

Parcher's about to respond, when,

DOBIE(O.S.)

Mr. Parcher!

They look over. Dobie is waving from the grass near the edge
of camp. Clay and Parcher head over. H.V. moves in the
opposite direction, towards his lieutenants.

AT THE EDGE OF CAMP-

Parcher crouches over a CIRCULAR INDENTATION of crushed grass
next to Dobie, just like at Washburne Crick. Clay continues
past the circle, out towards the prairie.

PARCHER(TO DOBIE)

What do you think, Cowboy?

DOBIE

I dunno, sir.

CLAY(YELLING)

There's another one. A third
yonder.

He points further North. Behind them, H.V.'s Bluecoats are
already packing up and heading West. Parcher nods to Clay,
showing that he heard the man.

PARCHER(TO DOBIE)
Shitfire. Henry Victor'd rather
pull fingers off the Sioux than
follow the trail before us.

DOBIE
Sorry, sir?

PARCHER
...I think we're about set to quit
our military escort.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- LATE MORNING

POUNING HOOVES. Dutch, Clay, Parcher, and Dobie gallop out
through the grass, moving quickly now that they're alone.

Dutch looks back at the train of Bluecoats quickly vanishing
in the distance.

Clay, riding ahead, slows his horse to examine another
SHALLOW PIT in a ring of crushed grass.

TIME LAPSE- SOUTHERN PLAINS- AFTERNOON

Small, gnarled trees dot the landscape. The four riders cast
long shadows, climbing a gentle slope. From a distance, we
show how tiny they are, how isolated.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Dutch takes a swig from a bottle of whiskey. The four sit
around a campfire, the last scraps of dinner in the enamel
pot on the fire's edge. They're unrolling blankets, getting
ready for bed, passing the bottle.

Dutch shows Dobie how to roll a cigarette.

Clay takes an immensely satisfied drink and passes the
bottle. Parcher takes it and grins.

PARCHER
Great god a-mighty, I'm tired.
Ain't been rode this hard since we
gulched the Darrows.

Clay nods and hands him back the bottle. Parcher passes the
bottle to Dutch, then nudges Dobie.

PARCHER
On the trail of hostile Indians.
What do you think, cowboy?

DOBIE (SMILING)
It's alright.

Dutch takes a swig and passes, then gets to his feet wearily, stretching.

DUTCH
Excuse me.

Scratching his back, he walks away from the fire-

EXT. PLAINS- NIGHT

Only a stone's throw from camp, Dutch is already out of the feeble, flickering throw of firelight. We can see how the darkness and endless space makes him nervous.

The knee-deep grass is pitch-black in the moonlight. Dutch pulls out his pecker and pisses into the grass.

BACK AT CAMP

Dobie takes a swig of liquor, pretending like he enjoys it.

PARCHER
You been doing real good, Dobie.

DOBIE
Thank you, sir.

PARCHER
You oughta sleep. We'll be up and moving long before dawn. Only got a few days to find them Stewarts before we wouldn't want to.

Dobie starts to ask him what he means, then holds his tongue.

EXT. PLAINS- NIGHT

Dutch pisses into the grass, looking out at the few gnarled, dwarfish trees shaking in the wind. His eyes are a little glassy with liquor. He YAWNS.

From a distance- Dutch starts to button up his pants. We can see him clearly silhouetted against the flickering light of camp, an easy target.

A SHAPE passes in front of the camera.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Clay takes a pensive drink, sitting on his blankets.

CLAY
You think those men last night
deserted?

PARCHER
You mean ruther'n got drug off?

Clay nods. Beat. Parcher shakes his head.

PARCHER
F'they did, I hope they died fast.
You ever heard of an Indian tribe
called the Burrowers?

Clay shakes his head no, and pulls a BIBLE from his vest.

CLAY
We'll stand watch, two hour shifts.

EXT. PLAINS- NIGHT

Dutch turns and starts walking back towards camp. He doesn't hear a SNAP a dozen yards away.

He continues towards camp, leaving frame. We linger on the dark landscape behind him-

Against the waving grass, between the small, gnarled trees, it's impossible to see clearly. But we can just make out-

TWO SHAPES, moving towards the fire.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Dobie curls into his blankets and closes his eyes. Parcher already looks asleep. Only Clay sits upright, holding Parcher's rifle, reading his bible by fire-light.

Dutch walks into the edge of the firelight. He doesn't see the DARK SHAPE looming behind him.

Clay looks up at Dutch, then past him. A momentary look of concern crosses his face. He puts his Bible in his vest.

The grass sways in the wind behind Dutch. Clay jerks the rifle up and levels it, almost directly at Dutch.

Dutch freezes.

DUTCH
What...

CALLAGHAN (OFF-SCREEN)

Don't shoot!

Dutch jumps like something bit him.

Parcher comes out of his blankets, cocking his revolver as he sits up. Dobie scrambles to his feet.

CALLAGHAN

It's me, it's Callaghan, Mr. Henry-Victor's cook.

Leading his horse, Callaghan emerges from the darkness behind Dutch, and into the firelight.

PARCHER

Shitfire, Walnut. You alone?

CALLAGHAN

Yeah.

Parcher drops his pistol.

CLAY

You trying to get shot?

Callaghan moves in towards the fire, realizing how close to getting shot he was.

PARCHER

Great Christ. Tie up your horse and set. You missed dinner.

Callaghan nods thanks to Parcher, then nods hello to Dutch. Dutch nods back.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Callaghan sits with the others, their conversation already in progress.

CALLAGHAN

I can't rightly account for the others. Didn't even know they was missing until now.

CLAY

Deserting the army's a felony. They could hang you for that and jail us for riding with you.

CALLAGHAN

I didn't desert. Weren't enlisted.

Clay looks at Parcher, who raises his eyebrows in question. Clay nods.

PARCHER

Well, if you're riding with us,
you're working for us.

CALLAGHAN

That's fine.

CLAY

It's nasty work in unfriendly
country. You want to make it back
to the ranch, you'll follow and do
as your told.

Callaghan nods. Pauses, then-

CALLAGHAN

Can I ask, which one of y'all is
boss?

CLAY

We're partners.

DUTCH

Listen to Parcher, do what Clay
says.

PARCHER

I'll be dog, the German's been
paying attention... Welcome to the
outfit, Walnut.

Parcher reaches out and shakes Callaghan's hand.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- PRE-DAWN

In the lead-gray light, the five riders course across the
grasslands.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DAY

One of the round SHALLOW PITS of crushed grass and churned
earth. The five riders pass in the distance.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Coffee's on the campfire, Callaghan dishes out food. The
grass moves in the wind around them.

EXT. PLAINS, HUNKPAPA TRAIL- LATE AFTERNOON

Dutch, Dobie, and Callaghan ride in a loose group through the grass. Dobie pulls the mess wagon.

Parcher and Clay have ridden ahead and sit talking. The three ride close enough to hear their conversation-

PARCHER

...seen the last of them pits a half day back.

The trail before them is little more than a slight depression in the earth, stretching roughly East and West.

PARCHER

I'd say we follow the trail, but it's your call.

CLAY

...Take your rest. I need to ruminate.

Parcher SIGHS. They all dismount, except Clay, who rides a few paces forward.

Dutch walks over to Parcher, who takes a swig of whiskey.

DUTCH

Which way are we going?

PARCHER

You'll go whatever direction we tell you to, I guess.

Parcher offers Dutch the whiskey. Dutch drinks, then gives the bottle back.

He walks back towards Dobie and Callaghan, grabs a small stone from the ground, and chucks it at a gnarled, dead tree eighty feet distant. The stone makes a pleasant TOK sound against the trunk.

Dobie grins at Dutch, impressed. The boy grabs a rock off the ground, aims, and throws it at the tree. It sails past, well wide. Dobie leans down, searches among the grass roots, and picks up another stone. He chucks it at the tree, and again misses.

Callaghan sees the game and joins in, picking up stones and throwing them at the tree. He misses twice.

Dutch watches the two try to repeat his throw, smiling as they keep missing. It's a moment of near-relaxation, the three suddenly boys again.

Dobie steps forward into the grass, and stoops down, searching the dark earth for another stone...

Dutch pulls a piece of grass from its sheath and chews on the tender base.

FROM A DISTANCE- we see the five men alone in an ocean of grass, vulnerable.

Dobie can't find another stone. He pushes some grass aside and pauses. There's an 8-inch lock of BLONDE HAIR pressed into the dark earth.

Dobie's hand hovers over the strands for a moment before lifting it from the ground. It's human hair. He gives it a gentle tug.

SCHRT, the lock of hair RIPS free from the earth, a blood-red postage stamp of wet SCALP dangling from the end.

Dobie's jaw drops. He GASPS and flings the hair away.

Callaghan steps over, looks down. There's a patch of OPEN WOUND in WHITE FLESH in the ground.

He kneels and pushes some loose soil from around the wound in the earth, revealing SKIN.

Dutch walks slowly towards them. He sees the flung bloody lock of hair suspended in the tall grass. He spits out the piece of grass he was chewing on, looks at the ground where Callaghan is pushing away the soil...

Callaghan's digging reveals a WOMAN'S EYE, crusted with soil, staring up at the sky.

Dobie SCREAMS.

The buried woman's pupil CONTRACTS.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. PLAINS, HUNKPAPA TRAIL- DUSK

The woman, waifishly thin, blonde, lies on the grass. She's in a coma and a filthy gingham dress. Grass stains, dirt, and dried blood mark her pale skin. There is a SOFT SCRATCHING noise off-screen, like a cat pawing at a door. It sounds like its coming from inside of her.

PARCHER

She's breathing.

Parcher is crouched next to her. He tries to press her eyelids down, but they won't stay shut. Her eyes keep creeping open, staring without motion at the dark blue sky.

The other four men stand over her, looking down.

DUTCH

She's not one of the Stewarts.

CLAY

Then who is she?

Dutch shakes his head. We'll call the woman AUDREY.

Parcher pushes Audrey's head gently to the side, better exposing a deep, six-inch wound tore roughly into her neck and shoulder. There's no blood but that inside the wound itself, thickened like raspberry jam.

CLAY (RE: THE WOUND)

Same as Williams' wife.

PARCHER

Yeah. And she should have bled out more, too.

Parcher leans in. Small WHITE GROWTHS line the wound, clustered like frog eggs. The thickened blood glistens.

PARCHER

It's still moist. Maybe infected.

Parcher reaches out and touches gently around the angry pink edges of the wound. He pushes back the edge of Audrey's collar, revealing a small GOLD CRUCIFIX on a chain.

Dutch leans in to get a better look. The fungal-looking white growths surround the cross in the wound.

CLAY

She got any other marks on her?

PARCHER

You got eyes.

Clay doesn't respond. The SCRATCHING sound is still there, from somewhere inside Audrey.

DUTCH

Something's scratching.

Callaghan and Dobie look at him, but nobody responds. Parcher lifts one of the woman's arms, there are BRUISES running up and down it. More bruises on her neck.

He lifts up a piece of her dress, looks at the long vertical tears and green stains on the fabric.

PARCHER

She's been drug a spell.

CLAY

What else?

PARCHER

What else you want, John?

CLAY

Did the Indians rape her?

Dobie's eyes bug out, he gulps back shock. Dutch is listening hard, the SCRATCHING sound is still audible.

PARCHER

How the hell am I supposed to know?

DUTCH

Something's scratching inside her.

CLAY

What are you talking about?

CALLAGHAN

I hear it, too.

Dutch crouches down, across from Parcher, over Audrey's face. Audrey's eyes stare unmoving upward. As Dutch gets closer to Audrey, the SCRATCHING gets louder.

He moves down towards the fringes of her torn dress. The SCRATCHING gets louder.

One of her shoes is gone. The SCRATCHING is coming from inside her other shoe.

DUTCH

It's in her shoe.

CLAY

Pull it off.

Dutch looks at Clay, then reaches for the shoe and pauses. The SCRATCHING is fervent, insect-like.

Dutch pulls off the shoe.

Her foot is bare beneath. Audrey's fourth toe is wiggling.

Nobody's sure how to react.

Audrey's toe wiggles, her chest barely moves with her breathing, she stares unmoving at the sky.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

From beside the campfire, Dutch can just barely see Parcher and Clay standing out on the prairie, past the edge of the flickering firelight. They're deep in conversation, sharing a bottle of whisky.

Dutch is crouched over Audrey, cleaning the dirt off of her face with canteen water. Callaghan sits on the ground nearby, blowing on his coffee to cool it.

Dobie stands on the other side of the fire, anxious, kicking at the embers. He keeps looking at Audrey, building up to something.

Dutch pushes Audrey's head to the side and tries to wipe at the scab sticking the gold cross to her wound. Her head keeps slipping out of his grasp. To Callaghan-

DUTCH
Can you hold her head?

CALLAGHAN
Naw, man. I'm not touching her.

DUTCH
She can't mind.

CALLAGHAN
It ain't her I'm worried about.

Dobie approaches from around the fire, anxious. He points at Audrey-

DOBIE
Is that what rape is?

DUTCH
What?

DOBIE
Is that what rape is?

DUTCH

No...

CALLAGHAN

We don't know what them Indians did to her.

Dobie stares at Audrey, thinking hard, then turns sharply away and walks out towards Parcher and Clay. Callaghan blows on his coffee.

EXT. PRAIRIES OUTSIDE CAMP- CONTINUOUS

Parcher and Clay speak softly, low enough to escape the others' ears. Dobie approaches in the background, hearing the conversation already in progress-

CLAY

...don't know anything about him.
That's the point.

PARCHER

And what do we know about Dutch?

CLAY

He's white.

PARCHER

But he ain't American.

CLAY

I'm not about to leave a helpless white woman alone with a negro we don't know. They got... urges. It's scientific.

Dobie hovers on the edges of their conversation, hoping to be noticed, too nervous to butt in.

PARCHER

Shit-fire, everybody's got urges. That's why God invented free will, morals. And maybe you ain't met enough Occidentals to know it, but they got a lot more free will than they got morals. What do you want, Dobie?

Dobie's off guard. Parcher waits. Clay looks annoyed.

DOBIE

Um... Is that... What's rape?

Parcher looks at him and grins. He looks at Clay.

PARCHER

That'll do.

CLAY

He's just a boy.

PARCHER

Exactly.

(louder, to Dobie)

Cowboy, we got a job for you.

EXT. PRAIRIE CAMP- NIGHT

The campfire is dying down. Lying awake in his blankets, Dutch stares at the small flames dancing over the embers.

Callaghan, Clay, and Dobie are asleep in their blankets, scattered around the fire. Parcher sits by Audrey with his rifle across his knees, looking out over the plains.

Dutch admits he won't sleep, climbs out of his blankets, and crosses to Parcher.

PARCHER

Dutch. You're watch ain't another hour yet.

DUTCH

I couldn't sleep.

PARCHER(NODDING)

Dark business. Finding that woman means we're on the right trail.

DUTCH

Why would they bury her alive?

PARCHER

...I dunno. It's a miracle she ain't dead.

DUTCH

What if they buried Maryanne?

Parcher spits into the fire. Dutch remains determined-

DUTCH

We'll find her.

They sit in silence for a few moments. The fire light reflects in Audrey's eyes. Dutch looks at the glint of gold stuck in the wound on her neck.

DUTCH

...What about her cross?

(Parcher looks over,)

It's stuck in her... in the blood.

Parcher peers at the cross and nods.

PARCHER

...Maybe that ain't good. You got religion, Dutch?

Parcher takes the cross between his thumb and forefinger, avoiding touching the thick red blood glistening beneath.

DUTCH

I never did.

Parcher pulls on the cross. It's stuck in the gore, pulls at the wound, Audrey's torn flesh puckering.

PARCHER

You should get some. Might balance the account of your upbringing.

Parcher tugs and the cross RIPS free of the wound. Parcher's hand jerks away unexpectedly and the gold chain around Audrey's neck SNAPS.

PARCHER

Oh. Shoot.

There's a dark spot in the wound where the cross was, surrounded by the faint outline of a cross in the tiny white growths.

PARCHER

Here, it's yours.

Parcher presses the cross into Dutch's hand.

DUTCH

What do I do with it?

PARCHER

Hellfire, I don't know. Find comfort in your maker. Take this, too. It's your watch.

He shoves his rifle into Dutch's hand and crosses to his blankets. Dutch holds the cross and the rifle. He wipes the blood off the crucifix, rubbing it clean on his jeans. He holds the cross up to the light.

In the glint of the fire, he can just see the small white FUNGAL GROWTHS clinging to its surface.

EXT. PLAINS CAMP- MORNING

Dutch pulls tight the ropes holding Audrey to the wagon. She's lying face-up, eyes still open, on piled blankets.

Dobie's horse is tied to the wagon. The other four horses are packed with provisions and camping gear. They're all getting ready to leave. Parcher, to Dobie-

PARCHER

Once you get to Fort Lincoln, stay with her, we'll pick you up on our way back.

DOBIE

I could catch up with you in a day or two.

CLAY

We don't have more'n a day or two 'fore those missing are corpses. Or worse.

Parcher leans in conspiratorially to Dobie.

PARCHER

Wouldn't trust any other man in the outfit to do the job.

Dobie grins, proud.

PARCHER

Don't ride at night lest you want to break old Sparrow's leg.

Parcher pats the flank of Dobie's horse.

DOBIE

I know it, sir.

Dutch looks at the rising sun, still low over the horizon, then at Audrey's unblinking eyes. He tries to push her lids down one more time and again they slowly slide open.

CLAY
Enough. Let's go.

Dutch looks over, everybody's mounting up.

Dutch takes off his derby and puts it low over Audrey's head, so that it shields her eyes.

EXT. PLAINS- DAY, MONTAGE

We're sinking slowly towards the ground. Various shots, always lower: Dobie riding South alone with the comatose woman wearing Dutch's hat. The other four RIDE HARD North.

The sun climbs and we sink. Bleached buffalo bones mark the passing hours like sundials.

The four riders pass the charred scrap remainders of a teepee village at a gallop.

Lower and lower, the four ride into the NORTHERN PLAINS, more varied country, we can see mountains in the distance. The land rises and falls, is dotted with small groups of trees, scrub and silver-barked birch.

SOUTHERN PLAINS- Still sinking. Dobie sees FOUR FIGURES on foot ahead, walking the trail towards him.

NORTHERN PLAINS- Still sinking. Dutch and the others ride into scattered birch trees, almost glowing in the gloaming.

We sink into the earth, past PALE SHAPES that could be bones, and might be moving.

BLACK ON SCREEN

EXT. BIRCH FOREST- AFTERNOON

Clay and Parcher ride at the front, Dutch and Callaghan at the rear. The forest is unnaturally quiet, we can hear the trees moving in the wind. To Dutch-

CALLAGHAN
I don't like this quiet.

CLAY
Hold your peace.

There's an urgency in his voice. Parcher looks at him.

CLAY
Yonder.

Clay nods ahead and halts his horse. A FIGURE is approaching through the tangle of birch. Parcher puts his hand on his gun and draws his horse to a stop alongside. He squints into the forest.

PARCHER

I can't see him.

CLAY

Looks Sioux.

Dutch and Callaghan draw to a stop along side. Dutch sees Parcher's hand on his gun.

DUTCH

What...?

CLAY

Hush.

Dutch puts a hand on his gun. Callaghan follows suit. A BIRD WHISTLE comes from behind them, possibly a human imitation of the sound.

PARCHER

Shit. They got us flanked. I'm counting on you boys with young eyes to see that man draw his gun. Don't be bashful about shooting back if he does.

The Figure gets closer, coming through the trees, the stick in his hand might be a RIFLE.

Another WHISTLE. Dutch looks back, towards the sound, nothing but the visual noise of birch trees.

Dutch turns back facing forward and sees a SIOUX WARRIOR emerge from the forest ahead, barely twenty feet away. The Sioux Warrior raises his rifle...

Dutch draws his pistol and FIRES. The Sioux turns and sprints back into the forest. Before Dutch can fire a second shot, Clay swings a huge arm and knocks him from his horse.

Dutch drops his gun and CRASHES to the ground painfully.

The four horses, gunshot spooked, prance and turn.

Callaghan's horse glances a hoof across Dutch's brow with a CRACK like wood breaking. Dutch CRIES OUT and puts hands to his bleeding head.

CLAY
Goddamnit! That was a greeting!

Clay trots his horse a few steps forward into the birch.
Parcher looks forward to him.

PARCHER
We got trouble?

CLAY
I expect.

Dutch sits up, looks at the blood on his hands. There's a
two-inch gash on his forehead.

DUTCH
I'm shot.

PARCHER
Oh Jesus Christ amighty. Walnut's
horse kicked you. And you deserve
worse.

Clay rides back to the group.

PARCHER
So what do we do?

CLAY
We keep at it.

He turns to Dutch.

CLAY
You so much as touch your gun
without my say so and I'll holster
it in your ass. Understand?

On the ground, holding his bleeding head, Dutch nods.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- AFTERNOON

Dobie cautiously approaches a FAMILY OF SIOUX on foot. An
OLD MAN, OLD WOMAN, TEENAGE GIRL, and a BOY.

Dobie and the family, both sides nervous, exchange pantomimed
greetings and trade. Dobie reaches a slab of beef jerky from
the wagon and offers it. The Old Man takes it, nodding and
smiling. He gestures and speaks softly to the Girl, who
pulls a twist of tobacco from her pouch.

The Old Woman, at the wagon's side, inspects Audrey. She
sees the wound on Audrey's neck.

Suddenly the Old Woman is TALKING fast and low in SIOUX. The Old Man steps forward and takes a look.

DOBIE

Hey, now... Don't...

Dobie puts a hand on his gun. The Old Woman's still TALKING, pointing at the gash with it's small white growths.

The Old Man turns, doesn't even look at Dobie, grabs the Boy and Teenage Girl, and all four walk swiftly away.

Dobie, confused, watches them go. The Sioux walk swiftly up the trail, they don't even look back.

EXT. BIRCH FOREST- DUSK

The world tilts uneasily around Dutch. He gingerly touches the WOUND on his head, the skin angry and pink around it.

The four are riding in a rough group through the trees, cautious, all eyes scanning for Indians. The birch have become even more dense, visibility is minimal.

Parcher is riding point, Clay is bringing up the rear. Callaghan pulls his horse over next to Dutch's.

CALLAGHAN

You all right?

DUTCH

I'll live.

CALLAGHAN

Mr. Parcher told you to shoot.

It's moral support and Dutch takes it, nodding.

DUTCH

What does it mean, "to holster in the ass?"

CALLAGHAN

Means he's sweet on you.

Clay suddenly appears beside them, spurring his horse forward towards Parcher. Callaghan and Dutch fall silent.

CLAY(TO PARCHER)

I don't like this. You think that Indian was Burrower tribe?

PARCHER

Looked Sioux. But there's more flavors of Sioux than I can count.

CLAY

Why ain't we heard of them before?

PARCHER

Can't say. I expect they'll introduce themselves shortly. The Kraut ain't made us the most popular white men in Dakota.

CLAY(NODDING)

I'm libel to drop him when we get back.

PARCHER

Amen to that.

DUTCH

I stay on until we find the Stewarts.

Dutch has pulled up beside Clay and Parcher. He's determined, blood flaking from his brow. Clay nods, assenting.

PARCHER

That might not be so far off. F'that Indian you shot at wanted to talk, he wanted to trade. And the only thing he'd have we might want is white folks.

DUTCH

You mean the Stewarts?

CLAY

It's possible. But we don't trade for whites.

DUTCH

But it means we're close.

Clay nods.

CLAY

...We're pushing four days now they been gone.

PARCHER

Does it change anything if this is revenge rather'n rescue?

DUTCH

This isn't.... We can still find her. Even if she's been.... hurt.

Parcher looks at Clay, waits for an answer.

CLAY

He's right. We ain't found bodies. We don't sleep tonight, we don't stop--

Clay's neck EXPLODES. The CRACK of a rifle. Blood splatters backwards, spraying Dutch and Callaghan. Jugular spray pumps obscenely skyward as Clay falls backwards off his horse.

Parcher's horse bucks as he draws his revolver. Dutch wipes blood from his eyes.

Callaghan draws in a breath to scream, another CRACK, and his horse jerks violently backwards, eyes wild. Blood pours from behind its ear and the animal falls, pinning Callaghan's ankle beneath the saddle.

Clay SLAMS onto his back on the ground, blood pumping from his neck. He kicks at the earth, eyes rolling in his head. Parcher grabs his rifle and jumps off his horse.

More GUNSHOTS echo from the surrounding forest, WAR CRIES from every direction.

Dutch scrambles off his horse. Callaghan's horse, lying on the ground, pinwheels its legs and froths at the mouth. Callaghan pulls frantically, trying to free his leg.

Splinters fly off the birch trees above at the impact of bullets. BLAM, BLAM, and WAR CRIES. Dutch fires his pistol back wildly.

Parcher crawls over. Clay is fish-belly white where he isn't bloody. His eyes have stopped moving.

Dutch crawls to Callaghan, still pinned beneath the saddle.

DUTCH

Stop pulling.

Callaghan relaxes his leg. Dutch lifts the saddle and Callaghan pulls free.

Parcher crawls over to Callaghan's horse and SHOTS it in the head. The horse twitches and stops moving.

PARCHER
Get over here!

Parcher scrambles behind the horse, between it and some deadfall, finding an impromptu bunker. Callaghan crawls over to join him, Dutch close behind.

BLAM, BLAM, the gunshots continue. The WAR CRIES echo from every direction.

Dutch, Parcher, and Callaghan lie on the ground between the horse and the deadfall. Dutch fumbles more bullets into the chamber of his gun. THUNK, a bullet slams into the corpse of Callaghan's horse.

Callaghan raises up with his pistol and Parcher puts a hand on his arm, stopping him.

PARCHER
Don't waste your bullets. We'll
shoot when they're close enough to
kill.

WAR CRIES. THUNK, the horse twitches at the impact of another bullet. BLAM... BLAM... the rifle shots slow.

We can hear FOOTSTEPS, the CRUNCH of dry leaves.

Dutch peeks out from behind the horse. Clay is staring back at him, impossible to tell if the man is dead or not.

A SIOUX WARRIOR emerges from the trees behind Clay, carrying a pistol and a maul. Dutch's eyes widen. The warrior pauses over Clay's corpse, raises the maul, and SKRUNCH, sinks it into Clay's face, nearly taking off the dead man's jaw.

BLAM, Dutch cringes at the sound of the rifle directly over his head. The Sioux Warrior spins and falls to the ground with a shoulder wound.

Parcher shucks another round into his rifle as he drops back to the ground behind the horse. BLAM, BLAM, BLAM, rifle shots and WAR CRIES answer Parcher's fire.

Dutch presses himself to the ground, Callaghan likewise. Parcher waits, gets an eye over the horse.

Another SIOUX is pulling the first to his feet. Parcher springs up and BLAM, shoots the second Sioux dead in the chest. Parcher drops back behind the horse.

BLAM, a single shot answers. Scattered WAR CRIES die off.

Parcher, Dutch, and Clay lay behind the dead horse. They realize that they are laying in a pool of horse blood, spreading crimson against the fallen, silver leaves of birch.

They can hear the PANTING and MOANS of pain as the shoulder-wounded Sioux gets to his feet and runs into the forest.

RUNNING, the CRUNCH of dead leaves scatter in every direction. Parcher, Dutch, and Clay lie behind the horse and try to catch their breath.

FROM ABOVE- we see that they line up like a zodiac. Three men lying in blood behind the dead horse, Clay dead on his back in his own blood, the chest-shot Sioux dead a stone's throw away. Sudden silence with the cessation of gunfire.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DUSK

The plains are unnaturally quiet.

Dobie softly whistles ALAS AND DID MY SAVIOR BLEED. He's assembled a small camp fire and laid out his blankets a short distance from the mess wagon, where Audrey lies, still wearing Dutch's derby.

DOBIE

I guess we can make you a might more comfortable. Don't uh... Don't think I'm being forward or nothing.

Dobie approaches Audrey, a little nervous. He shyly grins and lifts her from the wagon. Her eyes look up at the sky.

Dutch's hat falls from Audrey's head and onto the ground.

Dobie lays Audrey on a thick pad of blankets.

DOBIE

There. Now, lemme...

Dobie pushes a rolled blanket beneath her head like a pillow. In the strange silence of the plains, we can hear the SCRATCHING of Audrey's toe in her shoe.

DOBIE

Well, now. Right civilized.

Dobie looks down at Audrey. His head bobs down towards her, and he pauses. He grins nervously, looks around at the empty plains. Then ducks down and pecks Audrey a quick KISS on her lower, parched lip. While kissing her, the SCRATCHING STOPS.

DOBIE

Good night.

Dobie looks down at her, a goofy smile on his face. The SCRATCHING in her shoe starts again. Dobie furrows his brow, puzzled. He looks at the shoe.

He reaches out timidly and covers Audrey's eyes. The SCRATCHING stops. He takes his hand away, the SCRATCHING starts again.

Dobie takes a breath, repeats the experiment. Covers her eyes and the SCRATCHING stops, uncovers and it starts again.

DOBIE

Jesus. You're awake.

Dobie looks like he could cry.

DOBIE

You're... I'm so sorry. What did... What did they do to you?

Dobie looks down her. She stares sightlessly at the sky, her toe SCRATCHING in her shoe.

Dobie moves off to his own blankets.

Beneath the SCRATCHING, out in the plains, we can hear that same RATTLING CREAK, a soothing GURGLE.

TO BLACK

PARCHER(WHISPERING, V.O.)

Christ amighty, is he asleep?

EXT. BIRCH FOREST- NIGHT

Dutch opens his eyes, putting a hand to the angry wound splitting his scalp and GROANING.

DUTCH

I'm awake.

PARCHER

God damn if you ain't the dumbest white man I ever met.

They're all still crouched between the dead horse and the pile of fallen birch. A stiff BREEZE moves through the forest, RATTLING the leaves.

Dutch blearily wipes at his face. Dried blood flakes off like scales.

CALLAGHAN

I ain't heard a thing in hours.

DUTCH

How long are we gonna wait here?

PARCHER

They could be waiting in ambush.

They sit in the broken moonlight.

CALLAGHAN

...Billy's starting to smell.

Parcher and Dutch look at him for clarification.

CALLAGHAN

S'what I named the horse.

PARCHER

That's my name.

Small grins from Dutch and Callaghan.

CALLAGHAN

I didn't know that, Mr. Parcher.
Real sorry.

PARCHER

Shit fire. The horse is dead,
Walnut, call it what you like.

Parcher shakes his head. Then reaches out with a gloved hand, and pulls a bunch of leafy vines from the base of a tree. He squints at it in the darkness. Parcher makes a CLICKING noise in his throat, thinking.

PARCHER

That's poison oak, ain't it?

CALLAGHAN

Looks it.

PARCHER

...I tell you what. Put your gloves on, pile up as much of this stuff as you can. We ain't waiting for dawn.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- NIGHT

CLOSE UP of Dobie's peaceful, sleeping face.

A TEARING sound, ripping flesh.

RATTLES and HISSES, something like snakes or insects. Dobie blearily opens his eyes.

A shadow withdraws from over him, shifting in the firelight. A SIX INCH CUT freshly gouged in Dobie's neck.

The FIGURE crouching over Dobie is back-lit by the fire, barely discernible. It grabs Dobie by the arm and rolls him up onto his side.

Dobie struggles for a moment, thrashing an arm, before a RETCHING sound precedes a HOT SPLASH of liquid hitting his neck. Dobie's thrashing arm goes limp. His eyes freeze forward, staring across the camp fire.

Beyond the camp fire, concealed by their flames, THREE MORE FIGURES, like small men, crouch over Audrey. The shifting firelight barely reveals them. They're on Audrey as if working on her. They arch their backs and tug, making SLURPING noises, like geriatrics sucking tapioca.

The Figure over Dobie drops him and he rolls helplessly onto his back, eyes staring upwards. The Figure is out of his sight too quickly for Dobie to clearly see it. Thick liquid drips onto Dobie's face and neck.

Where the bile drops, it STEAMS quickly away, leaving tiny WHITE GROWTHS.

The RATTLING and GURLGING sounds continue. Dobie is left momentarily alone, staring upwards. There is fear in his unmoving eyes.

The LITTLE FINGER of his left hand WIGGLES. Dobie's unmoving eyes stare upward. The finger WIGGLES.

THREE FIGURES return to him, crouching over him, blocking out the light of the fire. They cluster on the periphery of Dobie's vision. THREE MORE join the crowd, completely casting Dobie into shadow. A SEVENTH.

Dobie is unable to turn his eyes and look at the hands that grab onto his arms and legs. He's lifted from the ground and suddenly moving away from camp.

Tall grass flies past as he's dragged helplessly through the planes. Dobie stares up at the grass, the starry sky beyond.

He is dragged by the seven Figures far out into the plains, well out of the firelight's range. And suddenly dropped.

We hear GRASS TORN from the ground. The sounds of EARTH MOVING. Dobie, staring upwards, cannot see what is happening. The Figures PUFF and HISS as they dig, pushing earth aside.

The monstrous hands roll Dobie over once, twice, and into a SHALLOW PIT. Dobie lands face-up in a hole in dark earth the size of a coffin.

From the edges of his vision, he sees the dim outline of the Figures pushing freshly dug earth towards him. They cover him from the feet-up in about four inches of soil. They cover his belly, his chest.

A thin layer of dirt is pushed over his face, until only one eye barely peeks out of the rich soil, one nostril is left free to breath.

We hear the Figures turn and move off. The sounds again of GRASS TEARING and EARTH MOVING and then sudden SILENCE.

In the dark soil beneath an ocean of grass, Dobie's eye stares helplessly out across the plains. Tiny particles of soil around his nostril shake with his weak breathing.

Several feet away from his eye, a tiny patch of earth is shaking a little bit, as if a mole were trying to surface.

We SINK down into that earth, and several inches below it, find Dobie's little finger WIGGLING.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. BIRCH FOREST- PRE-DAWN

The forest is misty, the first hints of sub-horizon lead-colored light off in the distance. Dutch and Callaghan are sweating, steam rising from their bodies as they work. The pile of poison oak is twenty feet long and four feet high.

Nearby, Parcher ties John Clay's corpse to a TRAVEAU. It's like a tight hammock woven between two birch saplings tied to the horse's saddle, one end left to drag on the ground.

Callaghan throws another bunch of leaves onto the pile and pauses, breathing.

CALLAGHAN (WHISPERING)
They used to make us burn this shit
in Georgia.

DUTCH (WHISPERING)

Yeah?

CALLAGHAN

Knew a man got caught downwind and inhaled the smoke. Bled from his lungs for two days and then died. Drowned in his own blood.

PARCHER(OFF-SCREEN)

You boys about set?

Dutch and Callaghan look over. Parcher stands wiping his hands on his jeans. John Clay's blanket-wrapped corpse is secured to its sling.

DUTCH

We're set.

PARCHER

Good, then get her burning and let's go.

Parcher turns towards the corpse of the dead Sioux, still lying face-up on the ground, as Dutch fishes a box of matches from his vest, gives a handful to Callaghan.

CALLAGHAN (WHISPERING)

This don't seem right.

DUTCH

I don't like it either. But we don't have time. This gets us back on the trail.

Callaghan doesn't answer, but strikes a match and touches it to a twist of paper buried in the brush. Dutch does the same, and soon the poison oak begins to burn and smoke.

Dutch and Callaghan back quickly away, covering their mouths. BLAM, BLAM. They both jump at the sudden sound of gunfire. They look back at Parcher, who walks away from the dead Sioux's corpse with a smoking pistol.

The Sioux's eyes have been shot out of his head.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. BIRCH FOREST- PRE-DAWN

Dutch, Callaghan, and Parcher, with Clay's corpse in tow, ride away from the quickly growing flames behind them. They look like emissaries from hell, the reflected firelight dancing off of the trees' silver bark.

They ride into the forest, quickly leaving sight of Callaghan's dead horse and the dead, desecrated Sioux. Clay's traveau bounces roughly along the ground.

The wind carries the deadly yellow-tinged smoke through the forest behind them, glowing red in the fire.

EXT. NORTHERN PLAINS / FOREST EDGE- DAY

Dutch sits on the ground, using a hatchet to knock the cross-piece of a small birch crucifix into the riser.

A few yards off, Callaghan and Parcher finish shoveling dirt onto Clay's grave. Parcher, winded, lowers his shovel and steps over to Dutch.

PARCHER

Here I thought you ain't had any religion.

DUTCH

Sorry?

Parcher gestures at Dutch's cross.

DUTCH

So we'll know where he's buried.

Parcher nods, wipes sweat from his brow and grabs an open bottle of whisky.

PARCHER

You might should think about Jesus. That Bible's done a lot of good in the world.

Dutch nods, non-committal.

PARCHER

...And maybe leave off that cross. If them Indians know a white man's buried here, they're liable to dig him up and tear out his eyes, make him blind in the spirit world.

Parcher looks away, his eyes shining with tears, and takes a drink. Dutch stands and throws the cross towards the birch forest. The cross tumbles slowly, end over end through the sky, and vanishes in the grass.

Parcher sniffs and spits, drinks more whisky. Callaghan finishes his work and leans on his shovel.

CALLAGHAN

This mean we're heading back?

DUTCH(SURPRISED)

No.

PARCHER

Hell, no. John Clay'd piss on us from heaven if we turned back now.

DUTCH

And the Stewarts. You said we're close.

PARCHER

Yeah. We ride night and day, we can overtake 'em on the far side of those woods, kill the redskin that shot John and get your woman back.

Dutch mounts his horse. Callaghan pauses, looking down at Clay's grave.

CALLAGHAN

You want to say some words for Mr. Clay?

PARCHER(SHAKING HIS HEAD)

That was his job.

EXT. NORTHER PLAINS- DAY

The three ride hard. Callaghan and Dutch have heavy bags under their eyes. Parcher smokes, eyes narrow and red.

TIME LAPSE- NORTHERN PLAINS- DAY

Dutch rubs his face roughly. His and Callaghan's horses have drifted a stone's throw behind Parcher's. The three are riding more slowly now, the need for sleep overtaking them. Callaghan looks exhausted.

Ahead, Parcher's head is bowed, eyes closed. He's asleep on his horse. Dutch sees it, and looks at Callaghan.

CALLAGHAN

How do you think he does that?
Sleeps on his horse?

DUTCH

I don't know.

Dutch looks up at the glaring sun. His skin is sunburned.

DUTCH
Wish I had my hat.

TIME LAPSE- NORTHERN PLAINS- DUSK

Parcher's awake again. All three men are bleary-eyed and pallid, swaying with the motion of their horses. They stare ahead through heavy lids. There's a gentle PURRING rolling in off the plains. Callaghan's eyes creep shut.

Their three horses start to climb a rise. Dutch's horse catches up with Parcher's. Parcher is asleep again.

Dutch turns and looks back towards Callaghan.

Callaghan's gone, the horse he was riding clops along behind them without a rider.

DUTCH
Hey. Callaghan's gone.

Parcher snorts awake and looks back. He's nonchalant--

PARCHER
When did we misplaced our Negro?

DUTCH
While you were sleeping.

PARCHER
I wasn't asleep.

Dutch turns his horse and spurs it back a few yards.

DUTCH
Callaghan! ...Callaghan!

He looks around; it's an ocean of grass, the low sun casting long shadows off the waving blades. Dutch can see for miles and there's no sign of Callaghan at all.

The PURRING continues, masked slightly by the GURGLING of a small stream nearby.

Dutch looks at Parcher, anxiety in his eyes. Either one of them could have vanished as easily.

Dutch's horse trots forward, Dutch scanning the grass. Parcher pulls his horse forward in the background. Callaghan is simply gone; the grass swallowed him whole.

CALLAGHAN
...Hey.

Parcher and Dutch turn. No sign of Callaghan, until... he wearily pushes himself up out of the grass maybe fifteen feet away, right between the two horses.

PARCHER

Get Walnut back on his horse, we ain't done yet.

CALLAGHAN(BLEARILY)

That ain't my name.

Dutch gets off his horse, helps Callaghan to his feet.

DUTCH

You alright?

Callaghan nods. Dutch thinks, turns to Parcher.

DUTCH

The horses need water, we need sleep.

PARCHER

The sun's setting on John Clay's grave, and his killer's still walking. We keep riding.

DUTCH

The sun's already set. We each sleep an hour and watch one. Then back on the trail.

PARCHER

Get back on your damn horses.

Dutch starts unpacking his blankets from his saddle. Parcher raises his eyebrows and looks at Callaghan. Callaghan shrugs and starts unpacking his own blankets.

Parcher gets off his horse, pissed.

EXT. NORTHERN PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Callaghan's already asleep. Parcher and Dutch sit by the fire. Dutch drinks coffee. Parcher stews.

PARCHER

You cross me again, you and Walnut both can go to hell. I'd rather do this alone than with a couple old ladies.

Dutch nods. Beat. Parcher spits, then SIGHS.

PARCHER

Hard to fathom John Clay being
dead. Known that man since we were
little boys.

DUTCH

...You've gotten people back
before? Women. From the Indians.

Parcher looks at him, sees how worried Dutch is.

PARCHER

Not personally, not alive. But I
met a woman that come back. She
weren't never the same, but she
lived.

DUTCH

We'll find her.

Dutch looks into the fire. Another moment's silence.

DUTCH

I'll take first watch.

Parcher nods, then GROANS as he gets up and crosses to his
blankets. Dutch holds his rifle across his knees, drinking
coffee and looking out across the plains.

TIME LAPSE- NORTHERN PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Dutch shakes Parcher's shoulder. He jerks violently awake,
gets a hand on his revolver before he recognizes Dutch.

PARCHER

Jesus. Dutch.

DUTCH

Parcher, it's your watch.

PARCHER

I ain't been asleep two seconds.

DUTCH

An hour. More. I need sleep.

PARCHER

God damnit.

Parcher GROANS, sits up.

TO BLACK

PALE SHAPES move in inky darkness. RATTLES, PURRING.

TIME LAPSE- NORTHERN PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Dutch opens his eyes, sees the campfire blazing unusually high. Callaghan's blankets are empty. He rolls away from the fire, and sees Parcher's blankets empty. He's all alone.

Dutch sits up fast. He looks around. The camp is completely empty. He grabs his pistol, gets to his feet.

The harsh glare of firelight reveals a circle of grass, but obscures the moonlit ocean of movement beyond.

DUTCH

Callaghan. Parcher.

Dutch squints into the darkness. He takes a step out towards the grass and stops.

Over the CRACKLING of the fire the nighttime sounds seem amplified, SHIFTING in the grass. A moment of uncertainty.

We see him from a distance, standing vulnerable in a circle of firelight, surrounded by infinite darkness. GURGLING RATTLES slide through darkness.

He tightens his grip on his pistol.

FOOTSTEPS in the grass behind him. Dutch spins. A FIGURE approaching.

CALLAGHAN

Dutch. I can't find Parcher.

The figure resolves into Callaghan. Relief sweeps over Dutch.

DUTCH

...Why's the fire so big?

CALLAGHAN

I woke up from the heat of it and
Parcher was already gone.
Something's up.

Callaghan shakes his head. Dutch rubs the sleep out of his face. He looks around. It hits him.

DUTCH

He's... using us. The Indians see
our fire, attack us. Parcher sees
the Indians.

CALLAGHAN

...Son of a bitch.

They stand for a moment, looking out into the darkness. Then Callaghan starts kicking wood away from the fire.

CALLAGHAN

Spread it out, we'll let it die
down.

Dutch kicks from the other side. The fire's quickly lowered, Dutch and Callaghan left standing over scattered, burning logs. A beat.

DUTCH

Is there more coffee?

Callaghan shakes his head, no. The insect-like PURRING that's been rattling off the planes SWELLS.

CALLAGHAN

Do you hear that?

Dutch frowns, straining to listen. The PURRING builds and drops, hard to distinguish from the swaying of the grass.

CALLAGHAN

It's almost like...

His voice trails off. Dutch listens. A beat.

Parcher SCREAMS, off-screen. Dutch and Callaghan's heads snap to the sound.

Dutch is the first to move, he grabs a burning piece of wood and charges into the grass towards the sound of Parcher's voice, into the darkness. The RATTLING gets louder.

On the edge of Dutch's vision, three figures are crouched on the ground. Dutch throws his torch.

It arcs end-over-end, sailing through the air, and lands in the midst of the three. A HISSING SCREAM. The shower of sparks and muted flame reveals-

TWO BURROWERS crouched over Parcher. The brief light gives us a glimpse of the creatures, somewhere between a molting beetle and a drowned child. But only a glimpse.

Dutch raises his rifle.

The Burrowers, out of the torch's light, nearly invisible, slither like melted wax over the soil. CRACK, CRACK, Dutch fires his rifle at the creatures. CRACK, CRACK-

THUNK, THUNK, bullets strike the creatures without effect. They wiggle into the dirt, and in a matter of seconds, vanish down into it.

Dutch looks at the moonlit grass, collapsing in CIRCULAR INDENTATIONS where the Burrowers dug down. (Just like the indentations they've found on the trail.)

DUTCH

What... what...

Dutch is on the edge of losing his shit.

PARCHER

My neck.

Dutch looks down. Parcher has a half-inch deep, seven-inch long TRENCH carved into his neck.

EXT. NORTHERN PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

Callaghan searches through the saddlebags. Dutch is standing, looking out at the plains. The PURRING RATTLE is all around them. Parcher sits by the fire, gingerly touching the wound on his neck.

CALLAGHAN

Do we have bandages?

PARCHER

It ain't bleeding. I can't even feel it.

Parcher presses the palm of his hand against the wound, then takes his hand away and looks at it.

PARCHER

Jesus. Now I can't feel my hand.
What did that Indian do?

DUTCH

Those weren't Indians.

Callaghan pulls a bottle of whiskey and a canteen of water from the saddlebags, and throws them to Parcher.

CALLAGHAN

Here, clean it out.

Parcher ignores the water, takes a drink of whiskey.
Callaghan spits, mutters-

CALLAGHAN

...what right you had to stake us
out like pieces of bait.

PARCHER

Listen, I'm the one who's god-damn
cut. Dutch even got a look at 'em.

DUTCH

Those weren't Indians.

Dutch crosses to the fire, adds a handful of dead grass. The
fire FLARES and in the light they can see the grass moving
around their camp. RATTLES, HISSES. Some of the grass seems
to move against the wind.

The GURGLES and PURRING comes from all directions.

DUTCH

They're all around us.

PARCHER(SLURRED)

I can't feel my face.

DUTCH

I think... they're waiting for us
to go back to sleep.

CALLAGHAN

Fat god-damn chance of that.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. PLAINS CAMP- NIGHT

The campfire blazes, casting a flickering orange light over
the plains. The three sit in a circle with their backs to
the fire; each holds a gun and watches the plains.

The side of Parcher's face above the wound is starting to
droop like a stroke victim's. They don't look at one
another, but stare out at the grass as they talk.

PARCHER

Can't feel my tongue. Or much of
my arm. I'm numb but I itch all
over. ...I don't want to die like
this, not by pieces.

DUTCH
I don't think it'll kill you. That woman we sent back with Dobie, she was still alive.

PARCHER(CHUCKLING)
There's cold comfort.

Parcher is still excited, adrenaline giving a shine to his eyes behind his slightly slackened face. Dutch looks at him, bewildered that he could find some strange pleasure in this.

Dutch considers, then-

DUTCH
What about Dobie?

Parcher looks up, sobering slightly.

DUTCH
He could be out there alone with those...

PARCHER
He must be at the fort by now.
(a beat,)
...You still got that cross?

DUTCH
Yes...

Dutch fishes it out of his shirt and tosses it to Parcher. Parcher can't catch it with his numb arm, has to fish around in the dirt. He picks it up and MURMURS a quick prayer, kisses the cross.

CALLAGHAN
Can I get some of that?

PARCHER
...Amen.

Parcher kisses the cross again and tosses it awkwardly to Callaghan. Callaghan lunges, catches. He kisses it and MURMURS a prayer. Parcher feels the moist groove in his neck.

CALLAGHAN(TO DUTCH)
Here, man.

Callaghan tosses the cross and Dutch catches it.

DUTCH
Keep it.

CALLAGHAN

What, you don't believe?

Dutch shakes his head.

CALLAGHAN

Then you need it more than I do.

PARCHER

God-damned Indian must have
poisoned the knife.

Dutch pockets the cross.

PARCHER

They been alone in this country
maybe a thousand years. God knows
what devilment they could of
thought of in that time.

DUTCH

I don't think it was an Indian that
cut you.

PARCHER

Looked like men but weren't.
Sneaked up and cut a white man's
throat in the night. Sounds Indian
to me.

They fall silent. The RATTLING and PURRS continue out in the
swaying grass, still strangely SOOTHING. Dutch looks at
Parcher's wound. Parcher beats his fist against the ground.

PARCHER

Whole... damn... arms is numb.

DUTCH

Your wound is the same as the
Williams' dead.

Parcher looks at him.

DUTCH

Whoever did that is who took
Maryanne. Took the Stewarts. We
must be close. Can you ride?

Parcher nods, struggles awkwardly to his feet.

PARCHER

Shit. Alright let's go. You don't get me on a horse soon, I won't be able to get on at all.

EXT. NORTHERN PLAINS- NIGHT

They ride in a line, Dutch at the lead, followed by Parcher and Callaghan. All have drawn guns.

The BURROWER NOISES continue from the surrounding plains. The sky is enormous, filled with stars. Parcher's lip hangs limp, his eyes heavily lidded.

Dutch rides slowly at the lead, watching the grass.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- PRE-DAWN

They climb a rise in the land. Dutch is nodding on his horse, exhausted. Parcher spurs his own horse forward, alongside the lead.

PARCHER

Dutch.

DUTCH

It's almost light.

PARCHER

Maybe. I'm falling apart.

DUTCH

You'll be alright.

PARCHER

...If I don't make it back, give that cross to Ms. Gertrude Spacks for me. Or give it to Dobie, tell him it's for his mother.

DUTCH

I'll do it.

PARCHER

I appreciate it.

CALLAGHAN

A fire.

Dutch looks over, Parcher swings his head over drunkenly. Callaghan points at a dot of orange light on the horizon.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DAWN

The three riders approach FAITH, an attractive, 19-year-old Sioux woman sitting alone by a small fire with her rifle. She watches them steadily with dark, exhausted eyes. Parcher calls out, his words drunken through his slackened face.

PARCHER(SIOUX, SUB-TITLED)
<Friendly. Peaceful.>

Faith looks at Parcher. Her eyes darken. She traces a finger on her own neck, mirroring Parcher's wound-

FAITH(SIOUX, S.T.)
<You are marked. Burrowers.>

Parcher looks at her.

CALLAGHAN
What'd she say?

PARCHER
...Told us to set a spell.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. FAITHS' CAMP- DAWN

Faith's face slightly underlit by the dying embers.

FAITH(SIOUX, S.T.)
<Faithful.>

PARCHER(O.S.)
Her name's Faith.

Parcher, Dutch, and Callaghan sit around the dying fire. Parcher translates with an increasingly bleary voice.

FAITH
<Burrowers killed my family. Last night I shot my husband so he would not have to suffer the feeding.>

PARCHER
She's talking about the Burrowers. Says they killed her family.

CALLAGHAN
Ask her what a Burrower is.

PARCHER(SIOUX, S.T.)
<Burrower. What tribe?>

Faith doesn't even look at him.

FAITH

<They come every third generation.
We tried to escape to the East,
past the Great River. We were
eight.>

PARCHER

<Burrower. What is it?>

Faith looks at him. She seems tired and angry.

FLASHBACK- EXT. PLAINS- DAWN

We fly over empty plains, grasslands extending forever.

FAITH(V.O.)

<They were here before white
people, before humans even. They
feed on buffalo.>

We overcome a herd of BUFFALO, hundreds of them stampeding.

FLASHBACK- EXT. PLAINS- NIGHT

A lone BUFFALO collapses in a heap on the plains.

In the moonlight, a Burrower slithers onto the Buffalo's neck
and RETCHES. It's indiscernible as a pale shadow.

Eight Burrowers, just vague shapes in the darkness, roll the
Buffalo into an open pit.

FAITH(V.O.)

<They bury food, let it rot. The
poisoned cannot sleep.>

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DAWN

Dobie's blue eye stares out of the soil. The ground bulges
weakly over his wiggling finger.

PARCHER(V.O.)

They use some kind of poison, bury
their food alive.

Particles of dirt have collected in the moisture on the
surface of Dobie's horribly bloodshot eye. A line of tears
traces down his cheek

EXT. DOBIE'S CAMP- DAY

The mess wagon lays untouched in the clearing. FOUR BUZZARDS peck at Audrey's corpse, shriveled like a mummy. A buzzard tears her CLAVICLE free and flies away with it.

EXT. PLAINS- DAY

DUTCH'S DERBY blows by, and out into the grass.

FAITH(V.O.)

<When the blood is thick and the organs are soft, they return and eat. They drink.>

FLASHBACK- EXT. PLAINS- NIGHT

Eight Burrowers, half-concealed by grass, surround and cover the barely disinterred buffalo, mouths fastened onto it.

PARCHER(V.O.)

They eat... soft parts.

EXT. FAITH'S CAMP- MORNING

Parcher's voice smears clumsily through his numb face.

CALLAGHAN

Soft parts? What does that mean?

Parcher shakes his head, he doesn't know.

CALLAGHAN

I like my soft parts. Shit.

FAITH

<You killed the buffalo. So the Burrowers found other food.>

Faith talks to the ground-

FAITH

<We could not escape sleep. They took five of us. A baby without a breast to feed it died yesterday.>

Faith looks at Parcher.

FAITH

<You should die. The sooner you die, the less you will suffer.>

Parcher doesn't translate this.

PARCHER
<How kill Burrowers? Stop poison?>

Faith shakes her head.

FAITH
<My father said the Ute had fought them. But the Ute are as wicked as white men, they will not help.>

PARCHER
Ute Indians know how to kill them.

DUTCH
Does she know how to stop the poison?

Parcher looks at Dutch, then turns to Faith. He points at the wound on his neck.

PARCHER
<Heal? Make whole?>

Faith nods.

FAITH
<You can die.>

PARCHER
...The Ute might know.

CALLAGHAN
Where do we find Utes?

PARCHER
There's probably Ute scouts riding the same route we're on, though they avoid the trails. We can find 'em a day's ride North. There's a trading post, the Watangwa. If we can make it there...

DUTCH (INTERRUPTING)
What about the Stewarts?

PARCHER
What about them?

DUTCH
We can't stop searching so you can go after your cure.

PARCHER

We find the Utes, they lead us to the Burrower Tribe. We kill the Burrowers, you get your girl, go build that cabin on the prairie, play American.

Dutch thinks, not sure to trust Parcher.

CALLAGHAN

Is Faith coming with us?

PARCHER

Yeah. That or I'm shooting her.

Parcher smiles at her. She knows better than to smile back.

TIME LAPSE

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DAY

Dutch watches the landscape roll under his horse. Faith walks along beside the three horses. Parcher has lashed his limp left hand to his saddle horn with a cord. He's grinning, excited like a kid on an Easter-egg hunt.

Callaghan looks over at Faith, sees that she is beginning to limp, as if afflicted with blisters.

Dutch looks at Parcher, is a little disturbed by the fierce not-quite-grin on his face, twisted by his slack muscles. There's a DARK SPOT on his jaw, like a BED SORE. Parcher turns his grin on Dutch, who looks away.

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS- DAY

Trees again dot the plains. The land rises and falls in gentle swells. Stone domes poke through the ground.

Dutch watches Parcher up ahead. A SCARLET BRUISE, like a blemish on rotting fruit, marks the back of Parcher's neck. There's a sheen of yellow around it, maybe liquid.

Faith is now riding behind Callaghan, asleep against his back. Callaghan veers his horse over towards Dutch's. Parcher is a short distance ahead, out of earshot.

CALLAGHAN

You see that bruise on Parcher's neck?

DUTCH(NODDING)
On his face and hands, too.

CALLAGHAN
He's falling apart.

DUTCH
The Ute Indians will fix him.

CALLAGHAN
You believe that?

Dutch doesn't answer.

CALLAGHAN
I'm thinking maybe I ain't so eager
to risk my hide for that crazy old
shitbird's Indian cure.

DUTCH
We're not risking anything for him.

CALLAGHAN
You still think you're gonna find
your girl? That Maryanne Stewart?
What if that's happening to her?

Callaghan nods towards Parcher. Dutch looks at the sores,
slick and purple-yellow.

PARCHER(O.S., INTERRUPTING)
What's the ruckus back here?

Parcher has slowed his horse, swerves over to join them.

PARCHER
Thought I mighta heard my name.

CALLAGHAN
Just talking.

PARCHER
You boys look bushed. We're
already in Ute territory. Couple
hours shy of the Watangwa.

Parcher spits. His voice comes out in a drunken slur.

PARCHER
I didn't sleep a wink last night.
Just lay there with my gun, waiting
for something to move.
(MORE)

Whatever them Indians cut me with,
it's got my brain racing like a...
like I was a young man again. I
feel lucky. Makes me wish I could
move my god-damn arms.

Parcher LAUGHS. It's maudlin in his stroke-victim slur.
Dutch and Callaghan exchange a look.

FAITH(SIOUX, S.T.)
<Your wound is spotted.>

Callaghan starts. Nobody realized she was awake. She nods at
the wound on Parcher's neck. The wound is marked with tiny
white fungal dots.

FAITH
<That's how they will find you.>

The grin vanishes from Parcher's slackened face.

CALLAGHAN
What was that?

PARCHER
...Not a thing.

BLACK ON SCREEN

RATTLES, HISSES, the Burrower PURRING. Pale movement in
darkness, like white worms in black soil.

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS, WATANGWA TRADING POST - DUSK

The three horses and four riders approach a tall POLE driven
into the ground, rags and feathers hanging from the top.

PARCHER
We're here.

Dutch and Callaghan stop their horses. The pole seems to
mark the dead center of nowhere. Rocky, forested hills rise
up around them.

The place looks like desolation, like people have died here,
from ambush, starvation, or both.

DUTCH
What?

PARCHER
The Watangwa. We made it.

CALLAGHAN

Made it? There's no "here" here.
We're dead center nowhere.

They're completely alone, exposed, lost in the sparse trees.

PARCHER

The Utes'll come. We just gotta
wait. Get me off this horse, my
ass feels like soggy bread.

FAITH

<We shouldn't stop.>

Dutch gets off of his horse and looks around. Callaghan
climbs off his horse nervously. Faith looks at him.

FAITH

No... <Don't stop. It's getting
dark.>

Callaghan looks at her, trying to understand. Faith is
exhausted, gestures weakly as she speaks.

FAITH

<They'll kill us.>

Callaghan imitates her speech, trying to communicate.

CALLAGHAN (PARROTING)

<They'll... kill...?>

FAITH

<They'll kill us all.>

This time he gets it right, no idea what he's saying-

CALLAGHAN

<They'll kill us all.>

TIME LAPSE- WATANGWA TRADING POST CAMP - NIGHT

CALLAGHAN(O.S.)

Your watch, man, I need sleep.

Dutch blearily opens his eyes. Callaghan is crouching over
him, speaking low enough so only Dutch can hear.

CALLAGHAN

The old man's still awake.

Dutch nods, and sits up from his blankets.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. NORTHERN HILLS CAMP- NIGHT

Dutch sits by the campfire with a rifle across his knees, watching the plains. The RATTLING is soft, but it's there. Dutch looks absolutely exhausted.

PARCHER(SLURRED)

Your eyes open, bud?

Parcher is lying on his back by the fire, heavy-lidded eyes staring upwards. The BRUISING on Parcher's face is worse, spreading nearly to his left eye. His left hand is nearly black. He's rotting alive.

PARCHER

Dutch. You hear me, Dutch?

DUTCH

I'm awake.

PARCHER

Real good. You stay that way.

DUTCH

I'll tell you if I fall asleep.

PARCHER

Much appreciated.

Dutch throws another piece of wood onto the fire.

PARCHER

You think that boy and his squaw are gonna try to leave us?

DUTCH

...No.

PARCHER

I'd sure hate to have to shoot somebody for trying to abandon me out here.

Dutch stirs the fire. With each SWELL in the BURROWER RATTLE, Dutch's eyelids are tugged downward.

PARCHER

You hear what I'm saying?

DUTCH

No, I'm asleep.

Parcher grins with the half of his mouth he can move. The PURRING from out in the grass swells, Dutch's eyes go a little glassy.

Dutch yawns. Parcher grins. The Burrower PURRING swells again, tugging at Dutch's consciousness. Dutch lets his lids droop downward. A beat.

The CLICK of a cocked his pistol. Dutch's eyes snap open-

Parcher is turned, watching the grass on the edge of camp behind them. It MOVES against the wind, in time with the Burrower RATTLING. Parcher's revolver weaves drunkenly at the movement. Dutch raises his rifle.

The two gun barrels track the grass' movement, slowly across the circumference of camp. Neither Parcher nor Dutch notices behind them-

A PALE FIGURE rising from the earth on the far side of camp, between Callaghan and Faith. The RATTLING grows.

The grass moving before Dutch and Parcher pauses, then cuts back the way it came. Stalks of grass collapse.

Background, out of focus- The Burrower stalking Callaghan arrives over him, and draws back a clawed hand. Loose earth falls from its back and PATTERS softly on the ground.

Dutch's eyes dart back at the sound. He YELLS and spins, raising the rifle. Callaghan opens his eyes and SCREAMS.

CRACK, CRACK, Dutch fires. The second bullet hits the Burrower and it HISSES, retreating into the grass.

The grass behind Parcher and Dutch collapses, and a SECOND BURROWER emerges, slinking swiftly towards Dutch.

Callaghan scrambles to his feet, likewise Faith.

BLAM, Parcher fires his pistol limply into the earth, nearly throwing the gun from his rotting hand. Dutch turns at the sound and finds-

A GAPING MAW. A toothless mouth as big around as a baby's head, strung with mucous and bile, like a hole punched in a sheet of melted cheese.

The Burrower's head is mottled yellow and brown flesh, the eyes tiny, subterranean pink, too far apart. The flesh is plated, but soft, like a boiled insect.

Dutch throws himself backwards, towards the fire, CRACK, CRACK, firing his rifle into the creature. It jerks backwards, HISSING.

Callaghan grabs his pistol off the ground. Faith scrambles towards the fire.

Parcher turns drunkenly towards Callaghan and raises his pistol. Movement in the grass behind Callaghan.

Dutch fires, CRACK, CRACK, into the Burrower before him as it insinuates itself into the earth and vanishes.

BLAM, BLAM, Parcher fires his pistol at the Burrower behind Callaghan. BLAM, on Parcher's third shot, Callaghan YELLS and drops, holding his leg.

Faith grabs the dropped pistol.

Sudden silence but for Callaghan's PAINED BREATHING and the dwindling PURR of the retreating Burrowers.

DUTCH

Callaghan.

Dutch runs to him. He pulls his belt tight around Callaghan's leg, staunching the flow of blood.

PARCHER

Did you see those things? Jesus Christ.

Parcher is glassy-eyed excited, gun in hand, barely able to prop himself up. He's almost laughing.

CALLAGHAN

You shot me, goddamnit.

Dutch struggles to tie off the impromptu tourniquet, his hands slick with blood. Callaghan HISSES in pain.

PARCHER

I saved your life, boy.

Callaghan holds his bleeding leg and stares at Parcher.

FAITH

<Put more wood on the fire.>

PARCHER

Put wood on the fire, she says.

Dutch picks up his rifle in one hand and uses the other to toss more wood on the fire. The firelight jumps, but does little to penetrate the forested hills.

FAITH

<We should go. We should keep moving. They'll find him by his wound.>

She points at Parcher.

FAITH

<We leave him, he's already dead. We need to go.>

Dutch looks at Faith, shakes his head-

DUTCH

I don't understand.

FAITH

<We must go. We keep moving or we die.>

DUTCH (TO PARCHER)

What's she saying?

PARCHER

Nonsense. The squaw's hysterical.

Dutch shakes his head. He takes Faith's hands and lifts them. He gestures.

DUTCH

Use hands. Sign.

PARCHER

Oh great Christ.

Dutch ignores him. Faith gestures to Callaghan, Dutch, and the horses, then makes a moving gesture, thrusting a hand back out of the trees.

CALLAGHAN

She wants us to go.

Callaghan, Parcher, and Faith are all looking at Dutch. His decision is going to determine their course.

DUTCH

What do you think?

PARCHER

No! You're not gonna listen to
that red-skinned bitch!

Dutch looks at Parcher, makes his decision.

DUTCH

She knows more than we do.
(to Callaghan)
Can you ride?

CALLAGHAN

I don't know. If you get me on a
horse, yeah, maybe.

PARCHER

Like hell.

Parcher dumps the spent cartridges from his gun. He shoves a
fresh round into one the five chambers.

Dutch starts towards him. Parcher shuts the breach and
raises the pistol. Dutch stops.

PARCHER

We're staying right god-damn here.

Dutch looks at him, he's only six steps away, and Parcher's
barely able to lift the pistol. He steps forward.

Parcher pulls the trigger. CLICK. Dutch lunges forward.
Parcher pulls the trigger, CLICK. And again...

Dutch yanks the gun out of his hand before the hammer can
fall. Parcher flails his arm and YELLS like a toddler in a
tantrum. (Like a half-paralyzed, rotting toddler in a
tantrum.) He catches his breath, then-

PARCHER

God damn you to hell, Dutch.

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS- NIGHT

The four riders lope along in a line. Faith behind Callaghan
at the lead, nearly holding him in the saddle. Parcher
slumped on his horse, hands tied at the wrist to the pommel.
Dutch brings up the rear, weary.

Their horses pick their way slowly through the darkness.
Callaghan sweats, grimacing with each bounce of his horse.

Dutch watches the moonlit landscape, silvery and dim.

PARCHER

You boys better hope to God I die.

Nobody answers.

FAITH

<More blood is coming.>

She says it to Callaghan, gesturing to his leg. Blood is dribbling off the heel of his boot. He's near the point of falling unconscious. He pauses, calls out-

CALLAGHAN

...Dutch. We gotta do something about my leg.

He reins his horse to a halt. Ahead, Parcher grins through his stroke-victim face.

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS GULCH- NIGHT

Dutch adjusts the flame on a second lantern, the two small fires together casting an ellipse of weak light.

He leaves his rifle by the lanterns, stands, and crosses to Callaghan's horse, which Faith holds by the reigns.

DUTCH

Here.

Dutch reaches up and helps Callaghan off the horse. Callaghan leans heavily on Dutch's shoulders, grimacing and hissing with pain. He YELLS when his left leg touches ground. His right leg hangs limp, soaked with blood.

Parcher watches, almost amused. Then he looks past them, out into the darkness.

Suddenly, yelled from outside the firelight-

UTE VOICE(O.S., YELLING)

Good Indian! Peaceful! Good Indian!

All eyes snap towards the sound.

Dutch looks at his rifle. It's ten feet away, by the lanterns; he can't grab it without dropping Callaghan.

TWO UTE WARRIORS walk into the circle of lantern light. One is Tall, the other Short. The short one points at himself.

SHORT UTE

Good Indian.

(Ute, s.t.)

<Are you able to speak?>

Nobody responds. Both Ute are armed with RIFLES slung around their backs. The Shorter Ute has three BEARTRAPS on his belt.

SHORT UTE

No English.

Dutch looks towards his rifle, then back at the Ute.

CALLAGHAN(WHISPERING)

Drop me. Get the rifle.

FAITH(SIOUX, S.T.)

<Ute.>

PARCHER

Praise God, He sent us some Utes.

I don't know any Ute words.

SHORT UTE

Français?

DUTCH (FRENCH, S.T.)

<Yes. I speak French.>

SHORT UTE(FRENCH, S.T.)

<Good. To speak French. We...
good Indian. Friends.>

DUTCH

<We look for a missing white
family. Burrowers took them.>

The Tall Ute leans down and MURMURS something to the Short one. He nods towards Parcher.

CALLAGHAN(WHISPERING)

Get your rifle.

DUTCH(LOW, TO CALLAGHAN)

Can you stand?

CALLAGHAN

Drop me.

The Short Ute addresses Dutch again, pointing at Parcher.

SHORT UTE

<Dead man. We are to fix. Little fish? We come from south. We hunt. Little fish to hunt with.>

DUTCH

He says they can fix you.
Something about a small fish.
<I don't understand.>

The Tall Ute is moving towards Parcher.

PARCHER

Stay back! Tell him to stay back!

The Short Ute shows his palms, trying to calm Parcher. The Tall Ute keeps advancing. He pulls a bundle of TROPHIES from his belt, hanging on a loop of rawhide. They are trinkets, jewelry, snatches of cloth.

TALL UTE

<Little fish. We use the sick as Little fish, understand?>

He shakes the bundle of trophies.

TALL UTE

<From the sick.>

DUTCH

He keeps saying Little Fish.

PARCHER (REALIZING)

Jesus Christ amighty. He's talking about bait.

CALLAGHAN

Drop me.

The Tall Ute reaches up and grabs the ropes binding Parcher's wrists to the saddle.

Dutch drops Callaghan and dives for his rifle. Callaghan CRIES OUT in pain.

Parcher gives a slurred YELL as he's yanked off the horse and onto the ground, the Tall Ute holding him. Parcher flails at the Tall Ute, knocking the hoop of trophies from his hand.

The trophies fall to the ground.

Dutch gets a hand around his rifle when BLAM, the earth is kicked up two feet from him. Faith SCREAMS. The Short Ute is pointing his rifle at him.

SHORT UTE

<To take the Little Fish. We fix.>

Dutch stays frozen over his rifle. Callaghan half-lies on the ground, holding his bleeding leg.

PARCHER

Shoot this son of a bitch! Pick up your god-damned rifle and shoot this son of a bitch!

"Shoo zis sunuvabish" is how the words come out, slurred almost beyond understanding by now. The Short Ute holds his rifle on them as the Tall Ute drags Parcher across camp and past him, into the darkness.

SHORT UTE

<Little Fish already dead. Little Fish for trap. To kill.>

PARCHER(OVERLAPPING)

God damn you, Dutch! Don't let them take me! You killed me, you son of a bitch!

Parcher and the Tall Ute are already out of the light of the fire and out of sight. The Short Ute, holding the rifle on them, begins to back out of the firelight.

SHORT UTE

<We are to fix. We are to kill.>

The Short Ute backs into darkness and vanishes.

Dutch stares into the darkness, the Short Ute could still be just beyond the firelight, still pointing the rifle.

CALLAGHAN

Are they gone?

DUTCH

I don't know.

A beat. Dutch is the first to move. He crouches down and picks up the loop of trophies.

FAITH

<We leave. He is already dead. We leave now.>

A dozen trinkets taken from dead settlers, belt buckles, jewelry, crosses. In between each trinket, there hangs a small grayish-white bone, like half of a child's jaw, toothless, non-human.

CALLAGHAN

I hope you're not thinking of going after him.

DUTCH

They said they could fix him. Or trap...

Dutch falls silent, staring at the trinkets in his hand. His mouth opens a little, tears shine in his eyes.

DUTCH

Oh god.

In Dutch's hand, hanging from the Ute's trophy cord, is Maryanne Stewart's BROOCH. Dutch leans against the horse and closes his eyes. Callaghan watches him.

CALLAGHAN

Dutch...?

Dutch takes a breath.

DUTCH

She's dead.

He stares off into the trees. Several moments- Dutch looks on the edge of falling apart; exhausted, heart-broken. Callaghan waits to speak-

CALLAGHAN

Let's go.

DUTCH

I have to go after Parcher.

CALLAGHAN

Like hell you do. That sunuva bitch was dead 'fore them Indians even touched him.

DUTCH

It's not for him. We don't know how to heal the Burrowers poison. We don't know to kill them.

CALLAGHAN

I want to go home.

We can see that Dutch wants to go home just as badly. He puts the brooch in his pocket. He takes a breath.

DUTCH

They took Maryanne from her home.
Home isn't safe.

Callaghan looks at him. Dutch holds his gaze. Callaghan, wearily, nods.

TIME LAPSE- EXT. NORTHERN HILLS GULCH- NIGHT

Dutch pulls Parcher's pistol from his saddle.

Callaghan pushes himself painfully into a sitting position against a saddle lying on the ground. Faith paces nearby, watching the edges of camp. She throws another piece of wood on the fire. Dutch crosses to Callaghan and crouches.

DUTCH

You be alright?

CALLAGHAN

No. You hurry back. I think she'll watch out for me, but...

Callaghan gestures towards Faith. Dutch stands, crosses to Faith, and hands her Parcher's rifle.

DUTCH

Stay? Watch out for him.

Dutch points at Callaghan. Tries to pantomime the sentence. Faith takes the rifle, and nods slightly.

CALLAGHAN (TO DUTCH)

Be careful.

Dutch takes up his own rifle and nods again. He looks frightened but determined. He takes a breath and walks away from camp, out of the light of the fire.

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS- NIGHT

The starlight shines somewhere between silver and lead, everything nearly black and white in the dim illumination. It could be a daguerreotype. Luminous white-barked birch.

Dutch moves through the trees cautiously, rifle in one hand and pistol in the other. He squints into the darkness.

WIND MOVES the small trees, shifting shadows dancing over the blowing grass. Burrower RATTLES come and go from seemingly every direction.

TIME LAPSE

Dutch moves deeper into the trees. He seems to be moving towards and away from the Burrower RATTLE at the same time.

RUNNING FOOTSTEPS crunch dead leaves. Dutch spins, just as-

The Short Ute arrives and CLOCKS Dutch across the face with the butt of his rifle. Dutch drops his rifle and falls to the earth. The Short Ute lands on top of him, hand clamped over his mouth.

SHORT UTE(FRENCH, S.T.)

<Silence.>

CLICK, of a revolver being cocked. The Ute looks down.

Dutch's revolver is pointed at his chest. BLAM.

The Ute falls backwards, dead before he hits the ground.

Dutch scrambles to his feet. The Ute doesn't move. Silence, his smoking gun. He looks around. Nobody but the dead Ute.

Parcher MOANS from somewhere nearby. It's a low, weak sound, nearly a death-rattle.

Dutch turns and runs in a crouch towards the sound. He keeps his head low, pistol and rifle ready. He jogs through small trees, CRUNCHING through dead leaves, rises a hill and finds-

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS CLEARING- NIGHT

A bare expanse of rocky earth, surrounded by trees.

Dutch passes a pile of SHARPENED POLES, 12-foot birch spears lying piled at the clearing's edge.

In the center, Parcher is lying face-up on a slab of rock, his arms and legs bound by ropes pegged to the ground. Burrower PURRS and RATTLES surround the clearing.

Dutch moves cautiously out towards Parcher.

PARCHER

Jesus, Dutch. Thank God.

Dutch leans down over him and unties Parcher's good arm.

PARCHER

They put something in me. Made me
drink...

DUTCH

Drink? What was it?

Dutch reaches across to untie Parcher's rotten arm. Parcher glances past Dutch and GASPS.

Dutch follows Parcher's eyes, glancing over his shoulder.

Parcher LURCHES upward and GRABS the pistol from Dutch's waist, pointing it at the TALL UTE suddenly behind Dutch.

BLAM, Parcher FIRES the gun, inches from Dutch's face. The muzzle flash SEARS across Dutch's eyes, he falls backwards.

A bullet wound PUNCTURES the belly of the Tall Ute.

DUTCH'S POV- Washed-out, overexposed, a RINGING in his ears.

Dutch stumbles backwards, holding his flash-blinded eyes. His left foot pushes through a pile of dead leaves and SNAP, a BEAR TRAP springs up, biting his ankle.

Dutch SCREAMS and falls to the ground.

The Tall Ute is half crab-walking, half dragging himself away, bleeding heavily from the gut. Parcher holds the pistol on him blearily, his arm swaying.

Dutch is close to shock, his POV bleached nearly white.

The Ute, near the edge of the clearing, lets himself collapse, holding his belly. Parcher lets the pistol drop and lies back on the rock.

Dutch wedges his fingers beneath the jaws of the bear trap. He pulls, straining. The jaws begin to separate... then a fingernail tears and the trap SNAPS shut again.

DUTCH (PAIN)

Shit!

FROM ABOVE- The Ute lies bleeding near the clearing's edge. Parcher lies tethered by three points to a rock. Dutch sits struggling to free his leg from the bear trap. SIX INDENTATIONS appear in the rocky soil, churning.

SIX BURROWERS emerge into the clearing. They slink like cats, moving on all fours.

They cast their heads towards the etc, and Dutch, then focus in on Parcher and spiral in towards him.

Parcher is the first to see them. He GASPS.

Parcher weakly lifts the dropped gun and BLAM, fires once before the first two Burrowers are on him.

Dutch looks up at the sound, just in time to see the other four Burrowers FLING themselves onto Parcher. They fasten their gaping maws onto his body like piglets on a sow.

Parcher opens his mouth to scream, but the only sound that comes out is the dying WHEEZE of a broken bellows. The Burrowers arch their backs and suck, SLURPING the rotten organs from Parcher's body.

A Burrower pulls its pale head away from the buffet, its face dripping with blood and gore, as if fresh from a pie-eating contest. It swings its head towards Dutch.

Dutch, still tethered by the bear trap, looks at the creature. It HISSES with a blood-and-mucous strung mouth.

Dutch crabwalks backwards, away from the Burrower, pulling the trap's tethering chain nearly taught before he FREEZES. He looks down at his left hand, a SECOND BEAR TRAP waits beneath a thin covering of leaves.

The Burrower starts slinking towards him. The thick yellow nails on it's three-fingered hands drip white venom.

Dutch looks from the bear trap blocking his path to the approaching creature. It's ten feet away. It tenses to pounce, HISSING, then FLINGS itself at Dutch.

Dutch YELLS, and catches the Burrower's hand, the dripping talons inches from his neck. He twists, pushing the creature onto the SECOND BEAR TRAP.

The trap SNAPS, CRUNCHING into the Burrower's side. The Burrower ARCHES and SCREAMS in pain.

Dutch rolls away, and from the ground grabs a STICK, arm-length, about two inches around. He wedges it into the jaws of the trap holding his ankle, and pries it apart.

The trapped Burrower, arm's length from Dutch, LUNGES at him, swiping. Dutch YANKS his leg free and rolls away, the venomous claw missing him by inches.

TALL UTE (UTE, SUB-TITLED)

<No!>

Dutch looks over. Another BURROWER is slinking towards the gut-shot Ute, talons dripping. The Ute cries out.

Dutch LURCHES to his feet, his wounded ankle nearly giving out, and limps to intercept the creature before it reaches the Ute.

One of the Burrowers still feeding on Parcher suddenly lifts its head and HISSES. It stumbles back from Parcher, drunkenly, and then collapses to the ground.

The other three Burrowers raise their bloody maws from Parcher's drained corpse and look over. The unconscious Burrower lies on the ground, sucking small, shallow breaths like an asthmatic child.

The Burrower bearing down on the wounded Ute weaves drunkenly, but is only paces away. PANTING with pain, Dutch grabs a SHARPENED POLE from the pile on the ground.

The Burrower raises back a claw, ready to swipe at the Ute. Dutch lunges, PLUNGING the birch pole through the Burrower's torso and into the ground below. The creature SCREECHES.

The bear-trap Burrower's eyes are closed, it pushes weakly against the ground.

The three Burrowers over Parcher stumble away, drunkenly. The Burrower speared to the ground wearily lolls its head.

DUTCH
...You poisoned them.

The Ute, breathing through clenched teeth, almost grins.

One-by-one, the Burrowers collapse blearily to the ground, unconscious. Barely standing, Dutch watches them fall.

All six creatures lie unconscious, smeared with Parcher's dark blood, breathing shallowly.

Dutch tries to catch his breath.

Parcher's body is an empty husk, pale white and mummified. His chest and belly collapsed like a sunken soufflé.

DUTCH
Heavenly god.

The gut-shot Ute is weakly trying to CALL OUT.

Standing over an unconscious Burrower, Dutch gets our first real clear look at the creatures:

Humanoid. Three thick fingers on each hand ending in thick, black, curled nails. A half-dozen small, vestigial, beetle-looking TALONS, like Alaskan crab legs, line its torso beneath the arms.

It has tiny, puckered eyes. Mucous-strung mouths as big around as softballs. Completely hairless. A soft exoskeleton, like a molting insect's, over mottled, rotten-looking flesh, a stark contrast against the crimson stains on their cheeks and chins.

Goopy strings of Parcher's blood blow in and out of the things' mouths in time with their RASPING BREATH.

The Tall Ute CALLS OUT to Dutch, barely more than a directed MOAN. Dutch looks over.

The Tall Ute's tunic is nearly black with blood in the moonlight. The Ute points across the clearing.

Dutch's gaze follows the Ute's hand to the pile of BIRCH SPEARS, the sharpened poles at the clearing's edge.

Dutch picks one up. The Tall Ute nods, and points at the Burrower Dutch speared, pinning to the ground. Then he points at the other unconscious creatures, pantomiming thrusting spears into them.

Dutch limps over to the nearest Burrower, holds the spear over it, and looks at the Ute. The Ute nods desperately.

Dutch kicks the Burrower onto its back, raises the spear, and PLUNGES it downward into the thing's chest.

The Ute pumps his fist, pantomiming driving the stake down deeper. Dutch twists the spear and pushes it through the Burrower, down several feet into the ground.

The Burrower twists with the pressure and BILE dribbles from its mouth.

The Ute looks towards the East, where the first gray light of dawn is appearing. He turns back to Dutch and points at the other Burrowers.

Dutch nods, limps over and grabs two more spears.

He kicks the second Burrower onto its back and drives the stake through its chest and into the ground. He drives a stake into the third Burrower.

The Ute nods, relieved, and collapses onto his back, PANTING. Dutch impales the fourth Burrower. The fifth, and the sixth.

Dutch stands, the Burrowers are STILL BREATHING. Blood and mucous shakes on their lips with every exhale.

DUTCH

It didn't work.

(French, s.t.)

<It didn't work>

The Ute doesn't look at him.

DUTCH

<They're still alive.>

The Ute doesn't respond. Dutch is exhausted and all fucked up, looks like he's about to cry. He walks over to Parcher. Parcher's corpse looks frail as a baby bird.

Dutch crouches down and grabs Parcher's corpse from under the arms. He lifts him, and starts to drag him away.

He pulls him back six or seven feet before Parcher's boot catches on a rock. Dutch pulls and Parcher's withered left arm TEARS OFF.

Dutch falls onto his ass with the mummified limb in his hand. He YELLS and drops it, scrambles backwards, and comes to a rest sitting on the ground.

Dutch sits there. He stares at the ground. He looks at the gut-shot Ute lying on the ground. Dutch looks back at the ground and sits. SUNLIGHT hits him. Dutch looks up. The first rays of dawn cresting the horizon.

The ASTHMATIC WHEEZING quickens, becomes more urgent.

The Burrowers are stirring, limbs moving over the ground. The sun climbs a little higher over the horizon. Light is now falling directly on the six creatures.

They WHEEZE and HISS, there is a faint SIZZLING. One Burrower opens its maw and lets loose a high-pitched sound like a DOG WHISTLE. It raises its arms to the spear pinning it to the ground.

The others come fully awake, HISSING and SCREAMING.

Dutch watches. The Burrowers' skin pulls tight in the sunlight, STEAM rises off of it.

A Burrower digs at the ground, uselessly scratching at the earth.

TINY BLISTERS appear on their yellowish flesh.

A Burrower, SCREAMING, pulls at the stake pinning it to the ground, actually lifting itself off the earth.

The gut-shot Ute watches with fierce satisfaction.

Burrower skin SIZZLES and CRACKS in the sunlight. BILE bubbles up from their mouths. They STEAM and SCREAM, flesh falls from their bodies in blistering scraps. The Burrowers writhe on the ground, their flesh burning away. Huge BLISTERS rise and break.

Dutch watches as they SCREAM and fall to pieces.

By the time it's done, the Burrowers' corpses look like BURNT CHILDREN staked to the earth.

Dutch, bathed in sunlight, sitting on the ground between Parcher's corpse and Parcher's arm, wipes the tears from his eyes with bloody hands.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS CAMP- DAWN

Callaghan is sitting and Faith pacing where we left them.

Dutch, holding the Ute's arm around his shoulder, stumbles into camp. The Ute's feet barely drag on the ground, his whole torso dark with blood. He's pale, but conscious.

TIME LAPSE- MORNING

They have the Ute laid out on blankets, taking shallow breaths. Faith is gently tying strips of blanket around the still-seeping wound in his stomach.

Callaghan and Dutch sit nearby. Dutch drinks coffee.

DUTCH

It was sunlight. Burned them alive. The Ute poisoned them. Put something in Parcher that would make the Burrowers sleep.

CALLAGHAN

Parcher's dead?
(Dutch nods.)
I'll miss him.

It's not a convincing performance. A beat, then-

DUTCH

I don't know what the poison was.

Callaghan looks at the gut-shot Ute.

CALLAGHAN

Can he talk?

DUTCH

I don't think so. ...If he dies we won't find the poison.

CALLAGHAN

Shit. Nothing's easy.

DUTCH

I can make it to Fort Bismark and back with a doctor in two days.

CALLAGHAN (RE: THE UTE)

You think he can live that long?

DUTCH

I don't know. What about you?

CALLAGHAN

...Get to it. The longer you wait the deader we get. And you better stay dead South. You miss that fort by a few miles, you'll be lost for days.

Dutch nods with heavy eyes. He wants nothing but sleep.

CALLAGHAN

And if you gotta sleep, sleep in the day, you hear me?

DUTCH

I won't sleep.

Faith, her hands red with the Ute's blood, watches Dutch and Callaghan. Callaghan reaches out a hand, Dutch takes it and they shake.

Faith cradles the wounded Ute's head in her lap. He blearily tries to speak, but can't. Faith is close to tears.

The Ute weakly points at Callaghan and Dutch, then covers his ears with his hands. Tears roll down his face. Faith cradles his head in her lap.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- MORNING

The rising sun finds Dobie's blue eye, slightly clouded over, staring up at the deep blue sky.

EXT. NORTHERN PLAINS TO SOUTHERN PLAINS- VARIOUS / MONTAGE

POUNING HOOVES. From morning to noon to night, Dutch pushes his horse hard across the sparse plains, Clay's horse galloping on a rope tied behind. He switches horses to keep up his speed, eyes raccooned with exhaustion.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- NIGHT

Dutch rides, exhausted, world tilting carnival around him. Burrower RATTLES swell out of the grass around him. The small GOLD CRUCIFIX, marked with WHITE GROWTHS, bounces inside Dutch's breast pocket. The grasslands are watching him.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- DAWN

A red sun crests the horizon.

ON THE GROUND- Dobie's eye stares out over the plains.

DOBIE'S POV- through the grass, Dobie sees a horse and rider approaching.

UNDERGROUND- Dobie's finger wiggles furiously.

The rider is crossing Dobie's sight diagonally. He gets close enough that we can see that it's Dutch. We see hope in Dobie's unmoving eye. Underground, his finger wiggles desperately.

ON DUTCH- He reins his horse to a stop forty feet from Dobie, looking down at the grass. He grins a little bit and we see what got his attention-- Dutch's HAT, suspended in the grass. He swings down, grabs the hat, and jams it onto his head.

ON THE GROUND- Dobie watches Dutch climb back on his horse and ride away.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- AFTERNOON

Dutch stands, waving his arms at a MILITARY TRAIN, a dozen Bluecoat soldiers and a mess wagon marching Northward. TWO RIDERS break away from the train and head towards him.

INT. ARMY BARRACKS- NIGHT

CLOSE UP on Dutch's face, exhausted but at least cleaned up, eating. He watches the OFFSCREEN SOLDIERS talk-

SOLDIER(O.S.)

I can't rightly say, sir. He says
Will Parcher was killed, and
another man named Clay.

LIEUTENANT(O.S.)

Does he know the tribe that
attacked him?

SOLDIER(O.S.)

No, sir. He's a foreigner, sir.
Might be simple.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- MORNING

Dutch sits on a wagon, his left ankle thickly bandaged. He's cleaned up, in fresh clothes. A black DRIVER and a DOCTOR sits in the wagon behind them. Six BLUECOATS ride alongside, along with an OGLALA SCOUT.

Dutch holds a cane across his lap and watches the prairie ahead of them, anxious to return to his friends-

EXT. NORTHERN HILLS / MILITARY CAMP- DUSK

Faith and the Tall Ute hang dead from an impromptu GALLOWS.

The blood from his stomach wound tracing his legs show that the Tall Ute was still alive when they strung him up.

Dozens of BLUECOATS mill around, setting up camp.

Standing by the wagon, leaning on his cane, Dutch stares slack-jawed at Faith and the Tall Ute's corpses. His eyes shine with tears.

Campfires burn all around him, throughout the trees, a pleasant glow in the quickly fading light.

HENRY VICTOR(O.S.)

Parcher's German! Hey, Parcher's
German!

Dutch turns, Henry Victor walks quickly and warmly towards him, rubbing his hands together with satisfaction.

HENRY VICTOR

My god, man. They told me you were here. I'm afraid you were too late for Will Parcher.

DUTCH

I know.

HENRY VICTOR

What the hell'd them Indians do? We buried him proper, though. Man was wiser'n I gave him credit. Took four days and no small pain to get them Sioux to tell us what Parcher guessed right off. We've got scouts routing out the Ute to the North as we speak. Were able to clear just about every last one of them from this land. Reg'lar Indians: they could whoop to beat the band but can't fight for shit.

DUTCH

Where's Callaghan?

HENRY VICTOR

Who, now?

DUTCH

He was your cook. He was with...

HENRY VICTOR

Walnut! He would have owed me his life if he had survived.

DUTCH

What?

HENRY VICTOR

Amputated his leg and he up and died on us. Man was delirious, halucinating, never really woke.

Tears creep down Dutch's cheeks. Henry Victor's talking to himself, barely notices Dutch is there.

HENRY VICTOR

'Course we never did find them Stewarts. Doubt we ever will, were probably dead before we even started looking. I guess all we can really do is make sure it never happens again.

Dutch looks at the ground, crying.

EXT. SOUTHERN PLAINS- MORNING

Dutch rides Parcher's horse away from a dozen BLUECOAT SOLDIERS riding South.

EXT. WASHBURNE CRICK - DAY

We see the settlement from out in the plains, alone in a world of grass. The houses are still unoccupied.

We tilt down and reveal six SUNKEN PATCHES in the ground. They're graves, recently robbed. If we look closely, we can see scraps of bone and withered skin in the grass. A piece of lace from one of the Stewart children's nightgowns.

They were buried less than a 1/4 mile from their homes.

EXT. THE SPACKS HOUSE- DAY

Dutch rides towards the large Victorian home. He eyes the approaching home with trepidation.

EXT. THE SPACKS HOUSE PORCH- DAY

Gertrude, wiping her hands on her apron, opens the door and finds Dutch standing with his hat in hand. Dutch inhales to begin speaking...

INT. GERTRUDE'S PARLOR- DAY

Dutch perches uncomfortably on a wing-back chair as Gertrude WEEPS softly, sitting on the sofa opposite.

This has been going on for some time. Dutch holds his hat on his knees, moving his hands along the brim.

The GOLD CRUCIFIX dangles by its chain from Gertrude's hands.

Gertrude gets control, wipes at her face with a kerchief.

GERTRUDE

Have you had lunch, Mr. Leijderova?

EXT. THE SPACKS HOUSE- AFTERNOON

Dutch carries a picnic basket, walking next to Gertrude, who carries a blanket. They walk towards the box elder tree where the earlier picnic took place.

GERTRUDE
Dobie's still alive.

DUTCH
I think so, too.

GERTRUDE
It's not a thinking matter. A
mother would know. My son will
come back to me.

The GOLD CRUCIFIX is looped around Gertrude's neck.

GERTRUDE
Do you like pineapple?

DUTCH
I don't know.

GERTRUDE
I think you will. Parcher loved
pineapple.

She pauses.

GERTRUDE
I'm sorry about Maryanne.
(Dutch nods)
Her poor family... I don't want to
feel guilty. I think our duty is to
live as well as we can. It gives
reason to the sacrifices that men
like Parcher and you made. A lot of
Americans died so we could make a
life here. It would be a sin if we
didn't.

They arrive in the shade of the Box Elder. Gertrude fingers
the gold cross. It's still spotted with tiny WHITE GROWTHS.

EXT. THE SOUTHERN PLAINS- NIGHT

The grass moves in amber waves across the slowly sloping
land. The cloudless sky casts clear, stark, starlight down
onto the plains. Dobie is pulled from the earth by a dozen
hungry hands. He's still alive, still awake when the feeding
begins.

THE END