

Nighthawk Falls, Dusk *The Opalescent River, Adirondacks*

Alexander Helwig Netherwood (1826-1892)
Oil on canvas 48 x 36 inches

RICHARD BENTLEY

The waterfall into the Opalescent River was called “one of the most glorious cascades of the Adirondacks” by nineteenth-century guidebooks.

Netherwood, a transitional figure between the Hudson River School and the American Impressionist Movement, began as a harness-maker’s apprentice and signmaker. He scoured the mountains, woodlands and waterways of North America, easel strapped to his back, in search of the ideal and the allegorical. This painting of Nighthawk Falls captures at once a sense of fixedness and fluidity, what Netherwood called “The voice of the wilderness which strikes its own chords. The falls and lofty Adirondacks stand afar – mauve hills gently rising from the flood, receding like steps by which we may ascend to the Great Temple, whose pillars are the Everlasting Hills and whose dome is the Boundless Vault of heaven.”

Nighthawk Falls, due to its remote location, is rarely visited today.

Exhibition Notes by Lionel Netherwood
(Great-grandson of the artist)

Just before he awoke, Netherwood, the art historian, was mixing on his palette with a number five brush a shade of mauve whose color symbolized both complexity and distance. As the dreamlike dribbles of mauve lifted, colors from childhood began to edge into his vision,

and he awoke, startled, to discover that his campsite was full of the vivid purple of morning, with clumps of mist coiling over the river like unraveling satin.

The Northlands! The vast wilderness! The unknown!

Netherwood propped himself on his elbow and stared at some rocks that looked as if they were on fire in the morning sunlight, and then at the folds of his sleeping bag, etched in gold. His aluminum-framed backpack leaned attentively against a tree, like a waiter ready to take an order. It made him think of food, and a saddle of bear he had once eaten at a wild game dinner at the Harvard Club. It made him think of breakfast.

“Pancakes, Mr. Hartshorn?” he said. “Rise and shine.”

Hartshorn, his guide, lay zipped up inside his sleeping bag, knees under the chin. Although he slept like a child, Hartshorn was a man of seventy. His nose was long and tubular, like a sturdy root, and his eyes, even when closed in slumber, had a look of primeval wisdom. He was, to Netherwood, the personification of the Adirondack wilderness guide; perhaps the last of that great breed. He was nostalgia made flesh, the man who had first taken him camping, fishing, and exploring; the man who had told him ghost stories full of giddy adventures when he was a child, nearly half a century ago.

Netherwood had returned to that part of the world that held the summer memories of his youth; mountains and streams, valleys and lakes pervaded by the scent of pine forest. He was pleased to find the Adirondacks still filled him with the enchantment of those dream-bound years.

“Pancakes, Ralph?”

His guide refused to stir, so Netherwood bolted out of his sleeping bag and struggled into his hiking boots, which were newly purchased from the catalogue and made of split-leather suede with breathable, abrasion-resistant Cordura nylon and carbon rubber outsoles. He heard a loon, its cry muffled by the fog on the river, and accepted the bird's distant song as a good omen for the day.

By the time his guide awoke, Netherwood was crouched by the fire, poking a spatula into an iron skillet. The air smelled of pine, dew, smoke, coffee and bacon.

"Pancakes, Ralph? With blueberries?"

Hartshorn crawled over to the fire, and Netherwood filled his plate with steaming cakes. "Why so ding-danged early?" Hartshorn said. He squatted down across from Netherwood and sullenly forked the food into his mouth.

"We should get started," Netherwood said. "I'd like to reach the falls before sunset."

"No way do we get to the falls today," Hartshorn said. "I already told you that. For one thing we'll be traveling through brackish swamps and pools of green slime. Beyond that, you have your fern and bog marshes, tamarack thickets, and bad weather."

"And beyond *that*," Netherwood cried, "Nighthawk Falls. Our destination. Our reward."

Netherwood felt entirely confident that with Hartshorn's help, he could accomplish his mission. This would be his first trip to Nighthawk Falls, the once-celebrated cascade that lay far back in the wilderness. Although he had only seen pictures of the waterfall, one of them painted by his great-grandfather, he felt he knew it intimately

— a rushing torrent of water falling through a rocky gorge. The falls had been captured by painters of the Hudson River School, portrayed in woodcuts, lithographs and stereopticon photographs. In the nineteenth century the waterfall was an American icon, an ineradicable image of the wilderness. The image could still be seen in art museums and prints by Currier and Ives, but as far as Netherwood could tell, few people had actually visited the falls in nearly a century. Perhaps a rockslide had obliterated them. Perhaps it was their distance from numbered highways and the arduous effort to reach them. Perhaps it was indifference.

Whatever the reason, Netherwood had persuaded his old friend, Hartshorn, his childhood guide, to make one last journey. Although it seemed a strange journey for them to undertake at this point in their lives, Netherwood had felt a growing sense of sterility in his career, a descent into pedantry. Hard times in the market had forced him to close his art gallery, and he mourned the tradition of painting that had fallen into disrepute as the privileged creation of that private club known as art history. It was now possible to spend an entire day touring the SoHo galleries without seeing a single painting. Instead, the current vogue was for “installations,” pages torn from porn magazines, rearranged cases of 7-Up. He knew the time had come to revive the great traditions of the past, to try and breathe new life into old forms. He would try to recapture his great-grandfather’s methods, as well as his relationship to the wilderness. If Hartshorn was to be the physical guide on this trip, he, Netherwood, would be the spiritual leader. His new digital camera lay in the bottom of the canoe, next to the supplies and groceries. He would bring the falls back electronically,

restore them to the American consciousness.

Hartshorn tossed the remains of his pancakes into the fire. “We may never get to the falls outright,” he said. “From everything I’ve ever heard, it’s a rock-strewn shitpile back there.” He dipped a cup of water from the small tin pail. The water was warm, and a breeze during the night had blown pine needles and ashes along the surface, mixing them with dead mosquitoes. Hartshorn made a face and spat the water on the ground. “It ain’t going to be so pretty as it looks in your mind. Every time you reach out, you’re likely to grab a handful of mosquitoes, no-see-ums, black flies, deer flies, horse flies, moose flies. It’s a by-God bug hell back there.” He looked at Netherwood as if daring him to go to bug hell.

Some men, Netherwood was convinced, never saw past the bugs, never looked beyond the metaphysical mosquito bite on the tip of the nose. But he knew that Hartshorn’s head was filled with practical wisdom – observations, woodsmanship, the design of a canoe, the length of shadows, the direction of the wind. And *his* head? – it was crammed with different stuff: dreams, visions, scholarly distractions, and the fact that his new boots hurt his feet despite the expensive materials they were made of. He had to be tolerant with Hartshorn – appreciative – or together they would never survive.

Netherwood limped down to the river, where their canoe was tied to an alder bush. Dew had soaked the grass and ferns, made the leaves soggy under his feet. He started to take a compass reading; then, realizing that a compass would be a pointless instrument on a journey of this nature, he knelt and drank from the river.

A wide orange sun was coming up as the two men set out in their

canoe. The sky behind them was a dull red, but in front of them the air was still dark blue. with a fading, transparent moon. The Opalescent River was a calm sheet, bearing only minute glints of ripples, and the steeply wooded shores seemed to be pressing in slowly. Netherwood, paddling in the bow, felt himself to be the focus of the whole landscape.

“Those old stories you were telling me last night,” Netherwood said. “Not since I was a child have I wanted to believe anything as much as those stories.” Hartshorn had always been known for his ability to tell a different story every night for months. Most of his stories began with some sort of truth, an element of bragging, but some never gave truth a nod.

This part of the Adirondacks, Hartshorn told him, had its many legends. There were banshees, escaped axe-murderers from the State Prison, even ordinary ghosts. Old Jean LeGrand was a local figure who was said to have been seven feet tall and capable of carrying two oxen stacked on his back. The wizard of the woods was a man named Joe LeBeau. He could make coons disappear up rainspouts. He could make saws rip through trees by themselves. He could turn pebbles into gold coins, and he was headless.

“Which story was I telling you?” Hartshorn said.

“The Witch of the Woods. Georgina Rutledge. You were telling me how, on one occasion, a man saw a rabbit and tried to kill it by throwing a rock at it. When the rock hit the rabbit, the rabbit disappeared and Georgina Rutledge materialized on the spot and punched the man in the nose. I don’t remember the rest.”

“You fell asleep,” Hartshorn said, tugging at the brim of his hat.

“You never used to do that.” He did not sound particularly disgruntled, having already recorded most of his tales for an English professor at a nearby community college. “Anyhow, this Georgina Rutledge story ain’t over yet. That Witch of the Woods is still around. I was out in the swamp one moonlit night. A mist came up, laying there like a bedsheet. You’ve seen those nights. Fog was rising up like a thing coming out of the water. Something screamed. My hat flew off my head. I run home, through the underbrush. My arms was all cut up.”

“But why did you run? Sounds rather captivating to me,” Netherwood said. “a real Witch of the Woods. I would have at least waited until she materialized. Perhaps she had something important to tell you.”

“That is no fake story,” Hartshorn looked affronted. “She snatches pigs right out of pens. I believe she took a baby once, down in Oswegatchie. I’m telling you the truth.”

“They say my great-grandfather was part of Adirondack folklore, too,” Netherwood said. “He could make rivers flow uphill. He could make the sun stand still in the sky for hours. Doubt if there was any magic to it, though. He did it through his painting. He did it through... art.” Inane comparison, he quickly realized, and fell into silence.

They continued to paddle. Toward noon, Netherwood’s arms and shoulders began to ache. He shifted his weight with each stroke of the paddle, causing the canoe to rock from side to side. Hartshorn had to shift his own weight as a counter-balance, causing them to turn in half circles.

“Paddle, damn it,” Hartshorn shouted. “You paddled better when you was ten years old.”

Now and then Netherwood would bang his thumb against the side of the boat, shake his hand in the air, and thrust the thumb into his mouth. But Hartshorn's goading seemed neutral and impersonal. Netherwood had heard it all before.

The sky became brighter, and Netherwood began to complain about bugs. When they stopped briefly for a snack, he dropped his new digital camera into the river while peeling an apple, and could talk about nothing else all morning.

"For shit's sake, then," Hartshorn said, "why are we doing this?" By now Netherwood was hardly pulling his weight at all. He would dip his paddle into the river and let it drift back alongside the canoe without any force. His head was rolling as if it were about to drop off his shoulders.

"Why, why, and what for?" Hartshorn repeated.

"The falls," Netherwood said. "We must keep going." He stopped paddling altogether. He looked very weary and began to lecture hoarsely.

The greatest of the waterfall paintings, he explained with broad gestures, was his great-grandfather's *Nighthawk Falls, Dusk*, now in the Fine Arts Museum in Cleveland. The painting depicted a group of Cambridge intellectuals converging at the foot of the falls.

"To do what?" Hartshorn said.

"To botanize, to commune." Netherwood widened his eyes as if he could actually see the painting before him. "In the background are giant pines three or four feet in diameter, framing the falls. Ralph Waldo Emerson stands isolated in the center of the painting, wearing red suspenders. He is being watched intently by Louis Agassiz,

William Cullen Bryant, James Russell Lowell – you’ve heard of them, of course – as he aims his rifle at a target on a tree. My great-grandfather painted himself in the foreground, fly fishing, but you wouldn’t know it unless you studied the picture carefully. He always disguised himself in the underbrush. Thoreau,” Netherwood explained, “was not invited on the trip, having been considered something of a loafer. Longfellow had been invited but declined to come when he heard that Emerson was bringing a gun.” Netherwood continued his description: “The small figures in the foreground,” he said, “merge into the noble, grand and gentle ribbon of waterfall that is bathed with light. And this light leads the eye upward, past blasted trees, toward a transcendent view that goes on indefinitely – infinitely, you might say – into light itself. The smallness of the figures remind us that they, like we, are standing before a divine creation, before the cosmic grandeur of nature. Before God himself.”

Hartshorn stopped paddling and looked at his fingernails. “Well,” he said, “all fools have their fancies. Of course, a lot of money is made by folks with big pinup pictures in the back of their minds, but not with no waterfalls.”

“I know you’ve always taken a less than transcendental view of things,” Netherwood sighed, conscious of his hideous inability to express himself.

“Don’t provoke me,” Hartshorn said. His voice was firm. His chin went up. “I’ll get you somewhere. But this here’s no way to do it. They ain’t made a canoe yet that’ll get you where you want to go.” Hartshorn said they weren’t designed efficiently, for one thing. Dumb design. “They make canoes with them big decorated upsweeps which

look artful in the showroom but which extend the freeboard areas above your submersion points, with the bow and stern too narrow. Ain't been a canoe designed yet that wasn't a death trap, that wasn't a coffin."

Netherwood nodded, or at least attempted to nod. He seemed to be having difficulty breathing. He spread a hand over the front of his shirt and gasped deeply, as if he were in pain. "In any case," he said, "I'll restore the falls. If the falls will accept me." His face became blotched and red.

On the floor of the canoe, a cardboard cylinder held a 1950s U.S. Geological Survey map which showed railroad lines that no longer existed, bridges that had long since collapsed into the river, logging roads that were grown over. Netherwood knew that this wilderness was, in fact, a new wilderness, much of it wild only since the turn of the century. There had been lumbering in the area; there were tanneries, saw mills, mines, and camps. At one time it had been possible to buy a ticket somewhere, get on a train, and ride to Nighthawk Falls. Now the forest had reclaimed everything. Netherwood would not be surprised if the falls turned out to have disappeared entirely. He wondered whether he, himself, was not on the verge of making such a disappearance. He would vanish without having made much difference to anyone. At times, he almost enjoyed the feeling. It tended to make him feel less serious and self-important, more like Hartshorn. He turned and resumed paddling; at that moment, as the canoe turned slightly, they saw something bright along the shore. It seemed unearthly, yet flesh-toned. A splash of color through the ferns reminded Netherwood of the dawn that had disturbed his dream.

They approached warily.

Imagine a woman lying face downward in a bed of ferns, quite still, with her arms embracing an orange knapsack.

"Is she alive?" Netherwood said. As they drew closer, they could see that she was wearing jeans, and the color of her shirt seemed to blend with the mossy floor of the forest. Her reddish hair was spread out from her head, covering her arms and shoulders. Netherwood stepped uncertainly out of the canoe and onto a rock. Grasping at branches, he worked his way onto the shore, and stood over her cautiously. "She's breathing," he called out. "She's alive."

Hartshorn tried to keep the canoe pointing into the shore. "She must be a long way from home," he said. He tied the canoe to a tree trunk and clambered up next to Netherwood on the river bank.

As they bent over the woman, she raised her head a little and blinked. Then she slowly lifted one hand to her head, and her fingers disappeared into her hair. Netherwood felt his breath drawn up by her gesture. "Excuse me..." he began. "Excuse us..." The woman sat up, and he stared at her for a moment as she slowly pushed back her hair. There were twigs, leaves and pine needles twisted in it, like a garland, and a faint strip of white along the part. She had full, red lips and tiny, sharp teeth like a child's. A pendant of milky stone hung from a leather thong around her neck.

She shook her head and said, "I thought you were never coming." Netherwood's senses were too dulled to do anything but smile foolishly. His eyes traveled from her thighs, to her breasts, to her forehead, then made a circular sweep down along her bare arms and back to where her fingers lay concealed in her hair. He suddenly wanted to

reach down, pick her up, and draw her against him so he could feel her cool breathing against his cheek. He wanted to look deeply into her eyes as he held her closer and closer.

Netherwood would have collapsed next to her if Hartshorn had not pulled him roughly back.

"I thought you were never coming," the girl said again. "You *are* Gordon and Ralph? From the Wildwood Service?"

Netherwood felt as if he would admit to anything.

"Hold everything," Hartshorn said. He drew Netherwood aside. "Excuse us for just one minute."

A slight distance away, he put his hands on Netherwood's shoulders. "Trouble," he said.

"She looks lost," Netherwood said.

"Something here ain't quite on the up and up. She looks like a river rat to me."

"We can't leave her here," Netherwood said.

"We can," Hartshorn said. "We can and we should if you ask me, but you don't, and you won't, which proves my point."

"She needs rescuing," Netherwood insisted. His anger brought an expression from Hartshorn that seemed both stubborn and pleading.

"I'm the guide," Hartshorn said, at length.

"I'm paying for the trip."

"Your head's gotten too heavy from all the paddling, the heat and the colors."

Netherwood knew this might be true. It was either that, or some developing fever. Should he try to conceal his condition from Hartshorn? Assuming a cheerful tone of voice, he turned to the

woman. "You're welcome to join us."

But she was already in the canoe. She clasped the back of her head with both hands and stretched her elbows out, as if she had known the two of them for a long time but from a great distance, like servants.

Hartshorn rolled his eyes and threw up his hands. He kicked a stone into the water as Netherwood climbed, almost toppled, into the bow. "This canoe is overloaded," Hartshorn exclaimed.

The woman glanced back at Hartshorn, who was murmuring to himself as he pushed the canoe into the river, then she settled back against the pile of gear in the middle of the canoe. Her face was serene. The white pendant gleamed just below her throat.

"We're not Gordon or Ralph from the Wildlife Service," Netherwood said, "if it matters. In fact, I don't believe we've met."

"I don't believe we have either," she said. She made a slight hand wave.

"Been here long?"

"I live here," she said.

Netherwood nodded, with a puzzled expression. "This is some kind of vacation?"

"I'm not on vacation. This is where I live and work." She smiled. "I'm a business person. I have a degree in biominerology. What sort of work do you do?"

Netherwood stretched his right hand under the seat and lifted his knapsack from the bottom of the canoe. He rested it across his knees and unzipped it. He pulled a business card out of the pocket and handed it across.

"Lionel Netherwood," the woman said. "Fine Art."

"Do you like realism?" he said.

"Of course," she said.

"I thought perhaps not, somehow," he said.

"I love landscapes," she said.

"Do you?" Netherwood said. "We happen to be headed for a waterfall that was painted by one of the greatest landscape artists of the nineteenth century. Would you like to come with us?"

"Thank you," she said.

"You mean you'll come?" he said.

"I'd like to," she said. "It's nice of you to ask."

"Not at all," he said. "You know, I think it must be marvelous, really, to live as you do. No strings, no commitments. But surely you must get lonely sometimes."

"I like my own company," the woman said. "It's all quite delightful if you know your way around."

Netherwood, leaning over the side of the canoe, thought he could see a firm, heroic face smiling up at him from the river's surface. It made him feel a little less feverish. "And when you get lonely?" he said.

"I sit by the river, and hope two nice men like yourselves will come along and pick me up."

Netherwood turned. They smiled at each other.

Hartshorn continued to paddle, with an air of muted apprehension.

Around a bend, the trees parted and the sky rose before them, a wash of blue. The sun had moved swiftly and effortlessly, and now it shone on their faces. They fell into silence, soothed by the monotony of paddling and a mauve-colored line of hills in the distance.

"What exactly," Netherwood said, "does a biominerologist do?"

She smiled. "All I can tell you is what I've done." After graduate school, she explained, she ran a guide service, taking birdwatchers and rock collectors into the back country. After one of these trips with a group of businessmen and their wives, she received a letter offering her a grant. The businessmen represented a foundation that gave away money to people who didn't ask for it. "Now I search for treasure," she said.

"Treasure," Netherwood said.

"You've heard of Adirondite, perhaps."

Netherwood shook his head. She held up the milky stone that she wore around her neck.

"Some kind of rock, is it?" Hartshorn said.

"It's more than a rock, it's a tool. A tool for a whole new way of life."

"A tool?"

"I'll try to make it simple," she said. "Adirondite is a crystalline, glassy material that has recently been discovered in this area.

Scientists say Adirondite might be hardened drops from the outer surface of meteorites fused and melted during their passage through the atmosphere, then splashed about like tears on impact with the earth. The rocks have ripply striations on the outside surface, which may be a runic code, carrying messages of extraterrestrial origin as yet to be deciphered. In any case, it is only recently that its spiritual properties have been explored."

"What's that rock that you're holding up worth?" Hartshorn said.

"I'm coming to that. The stone definitely has an etheric pattern that heralds a great time, not only on this planet, but for all beings in all places. It has no karma associated with it and was created in great

secrecy in the days of early Lemuria by a very select group of Brothers of the Light and it was kept out of this dimension.”

Netherwood, clutching his temples, was starting to shiver all over. “Karma?” Hartshorn asked.

She laughed. “I’ve explained it badly. As we all know, the distinctions between matter and energy tend to blur on the sub-atomic level. For example, because Adirondite is a white stone, it can help in the secretion of breast milk and semen, strengthen the teeth, and reduce inflammations. But its main value is spiritual transformation. The stone has indicated that I will travel to an interesting place today.” “God, I hope so,” Netherwood said. He wondered if she could be persuaded to pose for him before the legendary Nighthawk Falls. He wondered how the woman would look in a cocktail dress at a gallery opening, her arm in his, leaning on his shoulder.

The woods were gradually thinning, and Netherwood was distracted by strange sights. He gazed at rocks on the shore which looked thick and fleshy. Then he saw, as though over his own knuckles as they clutched the canoe paddle, a streak of dim dribbles along the forest floor that blotted out the vision of ecstasy he had been trying to arrange for his eyes moments ago.

They were coming into an enormous marsh. Before them, the river seemed to wind on an upward-climbing curve, leading their eyes through a steamy haze toward light. Netherwood tried not to look up, but in this sky, at the edge of his peripheral vision, there floated a veil of creamy white scrubbed down to the distant hills, a scrim, at once opaque and translucent, like a yellow mist. However, he had only to look directly at it and it would vanish, and again the sky would

explode with an even, dense blueness.

Netherwood blinked his eyes and pulled his paddle through the thickening water. "This is new country for me," he said.

"We're far from civilization now," the woman said. "It's beautiful. Beautiful in a way that's kind of intimidating."

"I know what you mean," Netherwood said. "Lush. Overpowering." He glanced at the toe of her right hiking boot. He tried to think of something more to say. On each side of the canoe elongated pools flashed, and over them hung dark swarms of midges. A large swamp flower brushed past the canoe, shyly vibrant, a bluntly polychrome vision. It exuded a disconsolate scent rather like turpentine.

I must pull myself together. Netherwood thought. In spite of the sultry heat, he felt chilled. He imagined that he might faint and that the outlines of his delirium, showing through the sky and water, would gain complete control of his consciousness. At times, Hartshorn and the woman seemed to grow transparent and he thought he saw, through them, a rough and tumble of shapes and colors so improvisational and so ordered that they had no botanical identity. He took hold of himself, straining to keep his eyes open. He looked at Hartshorn, at his stubborn profile under the gray hat with the upturned brim. He felt, to his horror, that he was forgetting who Hartshorn was and why he was with him. He remembered himself as a boy; always tugging at Hartshorn's shirtsleeve, "Can ya take me fishin', Mr. Hartshorn? Can ya take me campin'?" The memory reminded him that he would be entirely alone in the world if he were ever separated from his guide. But at the same time, a terrible excitement shook him as he realized he was also indispensable to Hartshorn.

The map that Hartshorn held on his knees began to flap in the wind. He tugged at his hat.

“Where are we?” Netherwood called out.

“Upriver,” Hartshorn said, adding defensively, “Have I ever gotten you lost?” He reached into his knapsack and issued them each an apple. The apples seemed to have been appropriated from somewhere, a bowl, and to Netherwood it was an art-historical problem to figure out from where. As he ate, his apple hovered against an apparently monochromatic representation of the girl’s cropped face, consisting of eyes, eyebrows and the white hairline. There seemed to be a visual pun intended, connecting her eyes with the oranges, the oranges with her breasts, in a network that left behind, like her detached grin, an illusory concept. A dull, hermeneutical emptiness settled over him.

“Look, how odd,” the woman said. “We must get through this swamp to reach the hills on the other side. But could this be a mirage? The forest is no longer visible.”

Netherwood scanned the space before him. Yes, it was true, the forest was no longer visible. Imagine that there was only a quivering vapor hanging over the marsh that obliterated all solid objects in ambiguous transparency that made the scenery indistinguishable from the weather. “You probably can’t see it,” Netherwood said, “but someone is trying to come through.”

“What are you talking about?” she said.

He realized that what he was saying was nonsense and stopped. His head was spinning and there was a humming in his ears. He knew there was no medicine among his supplies. The girl sat in silence, morosely picking at the crystal that hung around her neck.

“I must touch it,” he said to her, stretching out his hand. “I... not feeling well.”

“Serves you right,” Hartshorn shouted. “It’s too bad. I tried to warn you. Just too bad...”

Netherwood imagined he was referring to the corruption of pure landscape by the woman’s presence. In the course of the last few minutes, ever since they had stopped to rest in the swamp, Hartshorn seemed to have grown larger and swelled. There was now something mocking and dangerous about him. He took off his hat and, pulling out a dirty handkerchief, wiped his forehead which was orange over the brows, and white above that. Both colors came off on the rag. Then he leaned forward and said, “Pull yourself together. We’re moving on.”

“Maybe we should leave him here,” said the woman’s faraway voice.

“Nah,” Hartshorn said, “He’s just blocked up, full of stoppages. Now I’m not wise like you, not too smart, don’t seem much point in pretending to be, either. That stone of yours absolutely don’t need us in order to be a healing stone, in order to be true or untrue. But let him touch it. Can’t do no harm.”

As Netherwood reached for the stone, delirious visions were quietly and firmly finding their places. Three notational trees hovered over the river, like wriggling tadpoles, and the river itself seemed to recede into an illusory distance and to remain on the surface of the distance, as if it were surface and depth at once. Gathering all his willpower, Netherwood focused his gaze on a patch of vermilion and magenta, doubtless referring to flora, while a sort of loop danced at the top edge of his vision. It could have been the sun, or a cloud. It

condensed so much power, inspiration and aesthetic risk, that it took his breath away.

His fingers closed around the stone, and at that precise moment the canoe hit a rock; slid right, and hit another.

“Damn,” Hartshorn said. “Current seems to be picking up a bit.” He began to paddle with short, light, rapid chops. They could hear a low, murmurous sound, like a distant avalanche.

“Look out!” the woman said suddenly.

They felt not only the violent thrust of the water, but a sudden sucking noise, more powerful than the weight of gravity.

“The falls!” Hartshorn shouted, finally, above the sound. “It’s drawing us in!”

The roar of water became thunderous. Hartshorn tried to turn the canoe, but a rock flew by, then a ledge, then a clump of bushes. They were rushing, plunging, skimming the surface, then sinking too low, shipping water. Netherwood’s heart raced in panic. The canoe was bucking, heaving, bouncing. He shouted, and the shout turned into a scream.

They overturned. They found themselves in the water, gasping and choking, grabbing the canoe’s sides. Battered by rocks, bruised and stunned, Netherwood felt too astonished to feel pain, and simply let himself be carried along.

Then the canoe was thrown sideways, smashing broadside against a rock. He tried to clutch at the canoe, but his fingers slipped. He sank, swallowed a mouthful of water, surfaced to find himself on the other side of the canoe. He was able to breathe in short, ragged gasps, even to glance at the woman, as she crawled up an embankment far-

ther back. She waved at him, then stood swinging the leather thong, with its stone pendant, around in circles over her head.

Hartshorn disappeared. He surfaced again, farther upstream, looking like a canvas rag, a sack, or an abandoned life jacket.

Netherwood was pulled after him, staring, blinking in disbelief. His legs had gone numb from the cold. He could feel the presence of the falls; a sudden, sucking upward current in front of them.

“Grandfather!” he cried. “Great-grandfather! Where have you taken me? Where am I going?”

Netherwood reached out, and it seemed to him, clouded as his senses were by sickness, that this was all an innocent bit of sport, that in a moment they would get up and, once they had caught their breath, stroll peacefully toward the river bank, empty the canoe, and continue on toward the hills, to some shady place with long filaments of water spilling over a ledge. But suddenly, he realized that what was taking place around him was not the trick of an imagination that had been carried away, not the workings of a fever, through which hostile glimpses – the fleshy rocks, the apples, the smashed colors – were trying to show. He realized the boundaries of the scene were fictitious, since everything beyond his own immediate senses was, at best, fictitious, an imitation of life hastily slathered across a surface in an attempt to remind us that all we have to confirm our reality is the deceitful landscape that surrounds us. He knew that fiction – the landscape of nonexistence – was here in the rushing, mad, merry white water, and having realized this, he found within him the strength to grasp for Hartshorn’s hand, whose fingers were plucking the air.

“Here I am,” Hartshorn shouted. “You were right! Ain’t this gorgeous?” His eyes had rolled back into his head. Netherwood saw him distinctively, consciously, his arms flailing wildly, his fingers stretched wide.

How Netherwood suddenly hated this scene above which God was announcing Himself through spectacular cloud formations flamboyantly lit up with cadmium reds and oranges. If he could only define the wilderness by deliberately refusing to allow himself to be included within its boundaries, he might avoid its stupefying extravagance. Was he there or not? Was he trapped in this life, or was he being forced to leave it? Under the burning sky, this corner of wilderness, a place of mirage and illusion, waited patiently for him to go away.

... The landscapes of Netherwood are said to contain the unmistakable signature of the artist, as if each were a self-portrait. Although the viewer cannot see him exactly, Netherwood is there, his face formed from a clump of bushes or blurred by a cascade of falling water. In the dark woods he might be peering out from the intertwined branches of fallen trees, his eyes formed from the milky pebbles of shoreline. If you could reach into the picture and scoop up a handful of the pebbles, they would appear quite ordinary. The artist could be anywhere, and, at the same time, nowhere in particular.

From the catalogue □