

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

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

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

SAMANTHA SIMPSON

Saga 1, 2017

Ink and watercolor on paper, 92 x 51 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST