

**KIND ONE**



# Kind One

A NOVEL

LAIRD HUNT



COFFEE HOUSE PRESS  
MINNEAPOLIS  
2012

COPYRIGHT © 2012 by Laird Hunt  
COVER AND BOOK DESIGN by Linda Koutsky

Coffee House Press books are available to the trade through our primary distributor, Consortium Book Sales & Distribution, cbsd.com or (800) 283-3572. For personal orders, catalogs, or other information, write to: info@coffeehousepress.org.

Coffee House Press is a nonprofit literary publishing house. Support from private foundations, corporate giving programs, government programs, and generous individuals helps make the publication of our books possible. We gratefully acknowledge their support in detail in the back of this book.

Good books are brewing at [coffeehousepress.org](http://coffeehousepress.org)

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CIP INFORMATION

Hunt, Laird.

Kind one : (a novel) / by Laird Hunt.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-1-56689-311-4 (alk. paper)

1. Title.

PS3608.U58K56 2012

813'.6—dc23

2011046602

FIRST EDITION | FIRST PRINTING

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author would like to acknowledge the particular inspiration he derived from reading *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet A. Jacobs; *The Known World* (not limited to but in particular its eleventh page), by Edward P. Jones; *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, by Amos Tutuola; and Marguerite Yourcenar's "Reflections on the Composition" of *Memoirs of Hadrian*. He would also like to note that the long-germinating seed for this novel of revolt was planted in 1990 in a seminar he took with Professor Richard Blackett at Indiana University, which addressed, among other slavery-related subjects, the causes and consequences of the Haitian Revolution.

Crucial support in the writing of *Kind One* was received from the division of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Denver.

*for Lorna, sister and friend*



*In the evening she would tell it. In the dusk light, when the candles were lit and the fire was low, she would clear her throat. When the windows were closed and the curtains drawn and the children tucked, she would set in to speak. When we had all gathered close, when our shoulders had touched, when we had taken her hands, when we had drawn in our breath. When we had shut tight our eyes, when we had thought of our days, the years of our suffering, our joy in the sunshine, that time by the water, cool drops on our foreheads, warm bread in our mouths. When we had all been spared, when our crops had come in, when the storm had stepped past, when we had said all our prayers. When the night stretched before us, she would open her tale.*





# **OVERTURE**

**(THE DEEP WELL)**

**1830**



*Sometime like apes that howl and chatter at me  
And after bite me,*



**I SET A MARKER** one hundred paces from the stream, gathered my tools, and began to dig. The earth was soft at first, and I worked fast and had dug the hole past my waist by mid-day when my wife called on me to wash and come into the house. We ate salt beef and cold meal cakes and drank cloudy water from the stream. After dinner I stood a time over our daughter's basket, picked her up when she started to cry, then went back out to my hole. I dug quickly until I hit a gathering of rocks that I fought for most of the afternoon. I had dug during the war and liked to dig but the rocks were wearisome, and when I came up out of the hole in the evening the pick and shovel had cut through the heavy calluses on my hands.

We ate more salt beef and more meal cakes but this time dipped them in honey. We spoke of the cloudy water, which came from the stream. It was good, but the water we would pull up from the well would be clear and always cool and delicious. Speaking of the water to come made me want to return to the hole straight after supper, but my wife

told me that I must rest. So instead of returning to my picks and shovels, I went to look at the stock—three pigs, two goats, a cow—then came back to the house and played a few minutes with our daughter. She was learning to stand by pulling herself up on the chairs. I held her hands and helped her to her feet. I let her stand, teetering, by herself for a moment. She fell and rolled backwards onto her head but didn't cry. When I held out my hands she stood again. My wife came after a time and picked her up, and I took off my boots and lay down on our bed.

In the morning, while my wife and our daughter were still sleeping, I went back to the hole and picked up my shovel. I had been on a digging detail in the latter months of the second war against the English and had found it easy work. I and the men I had worked with had dug trenches and ditches and wells much like this one. I had learned from these men how to lay a filter at the bottom of the well and how to shore its walls with brick so it would hold. Some of the men had sung while they worked, and I had liked to listen to them. I was not, myself, much for singing, but my wife could sing, and after she had woken and fed the baby she came and sat near the hole and sang as she mended a pair of shoes. I liked to hear my wife sing while I worked. She would stop for a time then start up again. She liked to sing to the baby when she brought her out to sit beside her and let her play with a rattle I had made from a gourd or pull up grass in the yard. There were bees buzzing around in the air, and I liked to think of going out to search for honey. I had watched men who kept bees, and as I dug I liked to think of

building hives to have in my own yard. I had seen children help tend the hives, and I liked to think of my own daughter someday helping me to tend bees when she was older.

The walls of the well-to-be grew higher around me and I went deeper into the earth. On the evening of the third day I built a mechanism to remove the dirt and rock. I was not as good at building mechanisms as I was at digging, but the windlass I contrived was strong enough. My wife offered to haul up the dirt I put into the bucket. At first I declined. I would fill the bucket then climb out of the hole to pull it up. But the bucket was not large and pulling it up would be much less work for my wife than climbing in and out would be for me. We spoke of it over our supper of fresh milk and corn cakes fried in bacon fat. My wife said she could do it and I said I didn't like for her to have to. It was just the two of us with the baby, she said. Who else in the wide world was going to help me as the hole grew deeper? Someday we'll have all the help we'll need, I said. Someday isn't today, she said. I thought of climbing in and out of the hole each time I had a bucket to pull up. I was going to hit water soon and would be wet each time. Our daughter had begun to cry, and by the time she had quieted I had nodded my head.

The next morning my wife brought the baby's basket out into the yard, and each time I had a bucket filled she pulled it up. She sang as she did this work and I, in the shade of the hole, felt very happy. I was happy when I could hear the baby laughing or crying. Once my wife came and held the baby over the mouth of the hole so that she could see her father. The baby laughed but I could not see

her face, only her curly-haired silhouette. I was standing in cool mud when my wife held our daughter over the mouth of the hole, and I shivered and after a while climbed up out of the hole and into the sun.

The next day we gathered pebbles from the streambed. I plucked them from the water and tossed them onto the bank. My wife separated them into piles by color. There were blue pebbles and pink pebbles and green pebbles and white pebbles. There were brown pebbles and yellow pebbles. The baby liked to put her hand into the piles and to put the pebbles into her mouth. She seemed to like the blue ones best. I told my wife that it wouldn't matter what their color was where they were headed, but my wife said that it would matter to her. That it mattered to her was enough for me, and I took to calling out some of the colors I pulled up from the mud. It was pleasant to be out in the sunlight, in the warmth, in the gentle stream by my wife and our child. We had our dinner by the stream. I held my feet out of the water as we ate, but my wife let hers dangle in the wet. The baby cried a little then laughed and pulled herself aloft by grabbing onto my back.

I had hoped it would be time for the pebbles but found there was still a good deal of digging to be done. Twice I came out of my hole and breathed the warm air and let the sun bake the chill out of my bones. As I sat resting I considered the mound of dirt they had made. It was taller than my head. My wife had had to walk up its side in places. I could see her footprints. I knew that if our daughter was older, she would like to play on that pile. She would finish



her chores and play at climbing to the top. I was tired, but I thought of climbing to the top of the pile myself. Of jumping down to its bottom. When I was a boy, far away from this Kentucky hill country, I had once jumped off the side of my father's barn and broken my arm. None of the other boys had dared to do it. My father had whipped me until the switch broke. I did not plan to use a switch on my daughter. Even if the memory of jumping off the barn and of my father whipping me now, in the wet and dark of the hole, made me smile.

That evening I took my rifle out into the trees over the rise. The woods were quiet. I sat still for a long time. I did not know why the birds weren't singing. It was too early for them to have gone to sleep. Nothing stirred. I both liked and did not like it. We had chosen our place, far away from anyone, but not from anything. Once, as I sat, the wind shifted and I could smell the fire from our chimney. I had grown lonely in the well. I did not understand this. I had worked alone for long hours in dark places during the war and had never grown lonely. Once I had just missed being buried alive under the enemy's fortifications. I had stopped breathing when another man grabbed my boots and pulled me free. I was eager to take the pebbles down into the hole I had dug. I would do that the next day. I was glad my wife had made such pretty piles with them.

I dug again in the mud all the next long day. I had been worried about the walls of the well, but the earth was rich in clay and held firm. Roots dangled from the walls I had made, and every now and again an earthworm shivered

itself free and dropped into the water I now had to put my shovel through. At first I tried to save these worms, as I had when I had dug wells during the war. I picked them up with my hands or with my shovel. I picked them up if I could see them. Often they were just gone into the swirling water. Soon I stopped trying to save them. I knew I would want to be saved if I fell out of my home of earth and into an unexpected pool of water, some wet cavern in the dark. The light from the sunny day above came down and lit me in my labors. The buckets I sent up were heavier than they had been before, but the windlass held and my wife did not complain even as the dirt pile grew and grew.

It rained the next day and the one after that. At first I tried to continue my work, deep below the earth, but the rain grew strong and the walls slick, and I knew I had lowered myself into a foolishness I might not emerge from. We built a fire and sat by it. The livestock were secure and the roof of our house did not leak. Our daughter giggled in her basket or on our laps. My wife did her mending and we spoke of the labors to come. I meant next to clear a fresh field beyond the stream. I meant to erect a barn. I meant for our stock to multiply. It rained and we spoke of days past. My wife had lived by the sea during her youth, and she liked to think of ways that the world around her was like the world that lived on in her mind. She also liked the differences between this world and that one, and I loved her for that. When our daughter had fallen asleep and the fire had settled into itself, we lay down together on the bed.

I waited two days after the rain had stopped and the waters had receded before returning to the bottom of the well. All that day my wife lowered buckets of colored pebbles down to me. She sent the blue ones first, then the green ones, then the white ones, then a mixture of yellow and brown. Last, she sent down the pinks. I set the pebbles down in the water by the fistful and did my best to spread them out as I thought she had imagined them. Layers of hard color the water could rise through.

That afternoon a man and a woman dressed in buckskin came out of the woods. They both wore bright feathers and pieces of colored string in their hair. They came across the field and stepped onto the yard and went to the lip of the well and looked down. Then they looked over to the house where I stood ready with my gun, but they just nodded at me and looked down the well and walked on.

As I fell asleep that night, I thought of the brick I would line the sides of my well with, but when I slept I dreamt of colored stones. Once I thought I woke during the night and called out, but I did not wake, did not call out. It seemed to me as I dug deeper into my sleep that a chink opened in the side of the house and moonlight crept in. Even though there was no moon that night and no chink for it to creep through.

I was slow to wake in the morning and slower to set to piling up bricks by the mouth of the well. I had no hod so I carried the bricks two at a time, one in each hand. I made a neat pile and checked the pulley. I considered aloud just dropping them down into the dark and following afterward,

but my wife said she wouldn't like that. There was a way to dig a well, and that was the way I had been digging it. During the war I had watched men drop what they needed into wells and had no quarrel with the approach, but followed my wife's wishes. We saw that the bucket could hold three bricks at a time and she brought our daughter out and set her on the ground and told me she was ready. I was ready too and turned to climb down into the hole.

I saw the bear when I turned. It was standing beside an oak sapling, sniffing at the air. It lifted one of its paws a little as it sniffed. It looked at us, then sniffed the air in our direction. It took two steps toward us then turned and ambled slowly over to the stock pen. It set some of its weight into its haunches then swept out a forepaw and quietly stove in the fence. I could not remember afterward how it had happened, but I suddenly had the rifle in my hands. I shot the bear as it was considering the pigs. The ball did nothing and the bear continued its work. It killed two pigs, sniffed their carcasses carefully, then took the third. The other stock had pressed themselves against the fence walls, mad with fear. I was still reloading as the bear walked off into the woods with its prize. I was still reloading when my wife started to scream.

The baby had been hurt in falling, and when I carried her up out of the well she was dead. I gave her to my wife then went and leaned against the side of the house. The wood was warm from the afternoon sun. Everything below my chest was dripping. I knew our daughter was dripping too. She had struck her head in falling and had a crescent mark above her

eyebrow. I turned to look and saw that my wife had not moved. I could see my daughter's leg, the soft skin above the small, wet boot. We buried her near the stream. We sat together for a long time next to the small grave. Then we went back to our house. I came back out of the house as quickly as I had entered it. I could not stand to see the baby's basket, the rattle I had made for her, the bowl I had carved. My wife asked me to come back in but I didn't. Instead I climbed down into the well. There were fresh earthworms floating in the water, but I did not save them. Instead I reached down and pulled up handfuls of pebbles and put them in my pockets. Instead I moaned and tore at my beard.

Later, although my wife asked me not to, I filled in the well. Our baby must be properly buried, I told my wife. She must be safe. And it did seem to me, during my labors and long after them, that my child was still down there, that she was crying and clenching her fists above the colored pebbles, that she was not buried safe and dry in the loamy dirt beside the stream.

Some years hence I dug another well, but I would not drink from it, nor sit at table beside any who would.



# **KIND ONE**

**(FIELD AND FLOWER)**

**1911 / 1850s / 1861**





*Sometime am I*

*All wound with adders who with cloven tongues*

*Do hiss me into madness.*



**1.**



**ONCE I LIVED IN A PLACE** where demons dwelled. I was one of them. I am old and I was young then, but truth is this was not so long ago, time just took the shackle it had on me and gave it a twist. I live in Indiana now, if you can call these days I spend in this house *living*. I might as well be hobbled. A thing that lurches across the earth. One bright morning of the world I was in Kentucky. I remember it all. The citizens of the ring of hell I have already planted my flag in do not forget.

Charlotte County. Ninety miles from nowhere. It was four hundred acres, varied as to elevation, with good drainage to a slow-running creek. There was a deep well, fine pasture for the horses. Much of the land never went under cultivation, and there were always frogs and owls for the night and foxes to trot bloody-jawed through the dawn. Birds must have liked its airs, because the airs were full of them. A firearm went off independently and we had half a flock for supper. In season, we had fresh corn and beans and tomatoes and squash. There was a boy who kept it all

in shape. Two more looked to the pigs. The girls cooked and kept house and kept me.

It was a pretty country. Greens were greens. There was snow for Christmas and holly bushes to make sure it looked white. Breezes and flowers for the summer. Trees in autumntime stuffed with red and yellow leaves. Bulbs to crack open the earth when it came up on spring. It has been my whole excuse for a life since I held my breath and pointed my back at that place, but my mind has never learned to hold what transpired there against it. The land is the land and the land washes itself clean. I had a father who had been through battles who told me that.

Still, even if they are all gone, even if they are all scattered or dead, I would not want to come over the rise and across the stone bridge and arrive there again. No, I would not want that.