
ALL
BY OUR
LONE
SOME
stories
MARK WADLEY


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for my family

He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth.

In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.

PSALM 72:6-7

You never live an inch without involvement and hurting people and fucking yourself everlastingly.

JAMES AGEE

STORIES

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE MOON

I have this memory from when I was so young I can't decide whether it's a memory or just a dream. I know I was real little because my mama is in it, and she died before I started kindergarten. She's talking about the moon, and about the god who lives there. Not like the church god—a one-and-only, creator of everything kind of deal—just a god, the moon god. She says he built his house into that massive rock so he could watch the whole world's dreaming projected through a little window in a dark room, a pinhole camera the size of an above-ground swimming pool. She says that's the only way you can watch a dream if you're not the one

having it—a blurry, upside-down projection. But the god in the moon is smart, she says; he knows how to grind huge focusing lenses that sharpen the image and widen the angle, taking in a whole night's dreams as he glides across the sky. He makes prints and keeps them in enormous file cabinets, spending his off hours rifling through his collection, looking for things he might have never noticed before—memories, images, bits of songs, unspeakable feelings. Stories.

I ask her what the sub-satellites are for, how come the moon got eight little moons of its own? She says the god put them there as waypoints on the road to his house, set his kids up with their own domains and set them loose. And like their father, they're all collectors. Not of dreams, but other objects—dark matter and orbital trash, scraps of old satellites and spacecraft, rocks and radiation and stardust. She tells me about one satellite god devoted to collecting moon cheese, and even as an impressionable kid I laugh it away.

Maybe that memory and everything in it is dogshit. But ever since, all I've wanted to do is get up there and figure it out. I do know that people go up there and experience something, and if they

come back down they're different. Better, sometimes. Always smarter and stronger and with this weird look in their eyes like they're about to land a punchline. Sometimes I wonder if my mama ended up there instead of in the ground, if maybe my whole life since she died has just been a joke. And if it is, I want in on it, you know?

I can't know what it's really like up there because I haven't been yet. But I heard plenty of shit. I mean, I know this one guy who went up there, Lincoln Barber, but we haven't really talked since like middle school. But he definitely did go, all the way to the moon itself—I read about it. He said that it was huge and terrifying, like entering the foyer of a house with infinite rooms, unending hallways. That he lost and gained many things in the process of exploring it. Called it the crucible of true knowledge. Came back to Earth a changed man, wiser. Don't know why he came back at all; sure as hell sounds like a better place to spend the end of the world than Hale County, Alabama.

STARS FALLING ON ALABAMA

At the end of Lee's gravel driveway there's a barbed-wire fence. I used to tease her about it, countriest fucking thing, but she quit caring, says she likes the vines that grow on it, their thistley blossoms brittle and grey but still hanging in there. I kick a rock over into the grass and set off up the road towards the Citgo, walking on the crumbling shoulder with the fence on my left, Lee's big mutt Harris zigging and zagging all over the place in front of me, looking for any smells he can find that aren't just smoke. Hasn't rained in at least eight months. Half the trees are already bare, the other half split between shriveled browns and pines

holding fast to their green, even as their dried-out needles shake down with every touch of the breeze. It's quiet, no birds or squirrels making their noises. No one's seen many animals out, not for a long time. Think most of them left with the rain, or got chased out by the fires.

This morning I woke up on Lee's couch in Lee's dim living room with Lee's TV flickering in and out. Yesterday was Thanksgiving; not even sure what that means at this point. I mean, spending the day smoking ditch weed and watching whatever the TV will pick up, waiting for your ex to come back from her mama's with a doggie bag isn't bad, you know—but I wouldn't exactly call it festive. And Lee didn't even come back, only called to make sure I was taking care of the dog.

She said, Waylon, you still awake?

Lee, it's barely dark out.

You sound like I woke you up. You stoned?

Not really, I said. I was a little high, to be honest, but I hate admitting that to her. Not that she judges me for it; she'd still smoke if they didn't piss test at her job. But I didn't want her to think I'd been sitting around all day with my thumb up my ass—which I had been.

Uh-huh, she said. Well look, I'm staying at Mama's tonight. Punch was strong this year. Can you look after Harris?

Yeah, sure. Already fed him dinner, I said. I could hear her family clattering around in the background, her mama shouting something—at one of her racist uncles, probably. Only thing I missed about spending holidays over there was the food.

And let him out? You know he'll piss on the carpet if he doesn't get out before bed.

You got it, Lee, I said, and she hung up before I could so much as wish her a happy Thanksgiving. I've been helping her out with that dog since she picked him up from the shelter, but now that we're split up she treats me like I'm just an acquaintance passing through. She loves that big mutt more than she ever loved me. I get it; he's a great dog—and I was a shitty boyfriend.

It's midday, but the moon's already out, clear as anything else in this hazy air. Closer than it used to be, too, like a silver apple I could reach out and pick. Harris finds a spot to do his business and I stop to stare up at it. On a blue day like this you can sometimes make out the eight sub-satellites,

glinting like knife slashes as they cross the pocked face. Today I only count six, but from here they're specks, orbital gnats. I blink my eyes, sore from the sun and smoke.

While I'm spacing out Harris starts scrabbling around stiff-legged at the end of his leash, the hairs on his back raised like he's about to either fight something or run away, whining and panting up at the sky. I look back up and see a white streak appear, then expand into a bright ball that grows and grows as it heads for the horizon, filling the air with impossible light. I stand there with my mouth open, Harris barking and straining to get away, till the sonic boom hits me like a wave. The dry branches above my head shake and release clouds of dead needles. Harris is barking and pulling, barking and pulling—then I feel the leash slip from my hand and he's just gone. I look over and through all the brightness I can see an impression of him bounding back down the road toward Lee's house, leash dragging behind him like the string on an escaped balloon. The flash disappears and I think it's all over, a freak meteor or something—till the impact shakes the ground beneath my feet and a second boom comes, louder and heavier.

When the aftershock rumbles to nothing I realize I'm crouched on the ground with my hands covering my head, the ghost of the bright light only just beginning to fade from the inside of my screwed-shut eyelids and the sound of my own heartbeat pounding in my ears over a high-pitched ring. I stand up slowly, blinking hard in the daylight, wiggling my fingers and toes to make sure I'm not dead. Then I feel the burn Harris's leash left on my palms and my pulse switches to double-time.

I look back toward the boom and see black smoke crawling up from the treeline, thick and oily. Must be a quarter mile away. Could be the Citgo, the one where my buddy Francis works—the only gas station in this part of Hale County. I take a step toward the smoke. As far as I know I'm the only person within a mile of it. But then I turn and shield my eyes from the sun, looking for Harris again. I can't see him anymore. Probably already under Lee's house, whimpering; he's always been scared of loud noises—thunder, fireworks, gunshots—and he crams himself into confined spaces to wait it out. Most of the time, anyway. Sometimes he runs, hard and fast, with no clear

direction. I know Lee would murder me if I lost him. I reckon he went back to the place that smells the most like her—I hope he did, anyway. I think about going back to check, just to be sure, but I turn my head to the smell of burning gas and head on up the road.

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Four months ago, on the dot—and not three weeks after Lee dumped me—my house burned down. I still can't decide which is worse, honestly. Francis asked me what it was like to wake up in a burning house. Mostly hot, I told him—and that's the truth, though I'm sure he was looking for something more sensational. Well, it's hot at first. And I guess it still is when you're out on the roadside watching it go—like the world's shittiest bonfire, catching fast on whatever memories you've got then smoldering itself out. It might not've hurt so much if I weren't still sore about Lee. Might not've burned to black sticks and ash, either, if the Hale County Fire Department still existed.

Lee's number was the first I called because I couldn't remember any others, and she was nice enough to let me stay at her place—out of the goodness of her heart for the first week, then the

rest in exchange for me taking care of Harris while she's at work, keeping her house clean, saving up the twelve hundred dollars bail money I owe her mama, staying out of trouble, and leaving her the fuck alone. She's been real understanding, but I can tell she won't mind at all when I clear out. She comes home from her reception job up in Moundville and I see that look in her eye when she realizes I'm still there—I know I can't hang around much longer.

Her little brother Tyler left his old dirt bike out back when he skipped town and she says I can have it if I fix it up. And I can fix a goddamn dirt bike—pretty much got it running already. I'll sell whatever shit I have left in Hale County, ride up to Tuscaloosa, find a job somewhere on the Strip, or wherever, really. Tending bar, if I can swing it; folks aren't going to stop drinking anytime soon. I've got a cousin up there who'll let me sleep in his half-finished basement for a while. Then I'll sell the bike, save a little bit and stock up: couple changes of clothes, few days' worth of freeze-dried rations, compressed sleeping bag, a knife, a backpack to put it all in. Last time I was up at the gas station I told Francis about it and he laughed at

me, said I was ambitious. He sure knows which buttons to push: You're what, forty? You're never gonna leave here. Waylon, you're gonna sleep on your ex-girlfriend's couch 'til you're dead.

First off, I'm only thirty-two. Second, I'm going. Further than Tuscaloosa, too—I'm trying to get all the way up to the moon. I'm thinking I'll get up off the planet in the space elevator, the one out over the Caribbean. Going lunar, they call it, and it's cheaper than you'd expect. Just a few things I've got to square away down here first—debts to settle. And I promised Miss Ann—that's Lee's mama—I'd fix her screen door, but she won't let me onto her property on account of me being—as she puts it—a drug-addled reprobate. So that might take a minute. But I figure if I can get myself out to the elevator with a little change to spare I can ride that black ribbon straight up into the sky. There's no wildfire in orbit, no houses to burn down and no Lee, neither. Not sure how I feel about that last part.

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I can see the flames coming off the Citgo before I even crest the hill, thirty-foot gouts torching the overhanging trees. I start to run, and from

the top I see the little convenience store, red-orange panelling already burned to a black mess, the whole left side caved in like a giant took a hammer to it. The heat slaps me in the face and I approach slowly, wincing against the glare.

Francis paces back and forth on the roadside, a dark silhouette against the blaze, wringing his hands and looking into the fire and hyperventilating. I get close and grab him and he looks at me like I'm a ghost. I ask him if he's hurt. He stammers out a no and then starts babbling, his hands shaking as he points at the station. I try to calm him down, get him to sit on the curb and take a few gulps of the hot, greasy air.

Pop, he says. Pop's in there.

Pop's the old guy who owns the place, Francis's granddad. I look up and see the lawn chair Pop usually sits in by the door, plastic seat melted and metal frame starting to twist. Can't even see the door through the the fire. I'm sorry, Francis, I say.

I have to go in there, he says. I have to get him out.

I plant my hands on his shoulders to keep him from getting up and running into the worst idea he's ever had. You can't do that, man. I'm sorry, I

say. And that's when the cop pulls up, siren barely audible above the roaring fire.

I know his face, pitted and jowly like a rubber mask even though he's not quite thirty-five. Deputy Sheriff Jim Dunavant, the guy who'd arrested me last time, and who'd put Francis in the tank for a couple nights just for being a black kid with a joint in his pocket. Fire department's gone, but they sure didn't take the racist cops with them. Dunavant graduated a year or two ahead of me and even in high school he acted like a fucking cop, ratting kids out for having cigarettes or putting vodka in their water bottles or listening to music too loud in the parking lot. And here he is again, walking toward me real slow, hand at his hip. He calls out my full name like it's a question: Waylon Douglas? I look over at Francis and he's sitting there in shock, wide eyes staring straight ahead.

You know who I am, Dunavant. You come here to help or just to wave your dick around?

You're coming with me, he says, and draws his pistol.

I'm not really one to run when a man with a gun is telling me what to do, even when it's Jim Dunavant. So he gets me down on my knees and

cuffs me. Says he's taking me in on suspicion of arson. Doesn't even read me my rights—I guess they don't have to do that anymore. Not like anyone is keeping track. He just drags me to his Crown Vic, eyes cold. He crams me into the hard plastic backseat of the cruiser and shuts the door in my face. Then, almost like it's an afterthought, he goes back and gets Francis, too.

I shout at him through the window. His granddad's in there, man! You think this is helping? Look at him, you think he'd blow up his own blood?

Dunavant opens the door and shoves Francis in before he peels out, leaving the Citgo to burn. I look back and see the dried-out trees starting to catch; this one won't burn out easy.

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Listen, I know why I got arrested. I didn't blow up the Citgo, obviously. But Dunavant knows that it was my house that'd burned down a few months back, and he thinks I set the fire myself, on purpose. And the truth is, he's right. Couldn't find the evidence to prove anything—cops don't know shit about fires—but he was right. I'd been drinking a lot that night and listening to old Hank Sr. records and feeling real sorry for myself and

real pissed off about everything else. Not that that's an excuse, it's just the truth. The embarrassing fucking truth.

Anyway, I'd started pacing around the perfectly rectangular inside of my little house, a prefab I'd claimed for myself when the owners packed up and went without a word to anybody. They'd left a futon behind, though, and stereo equipment comes cheap at the thrift store in Eutaw. Didn't need much. And it was mine, dammit, even if it felt like a dim, double-wide prison cell sometimes. So I marked the edges of my cell and raged and punched holes in the thin walls and broke bottles and carved up the soft linoleum with the glass.

Eventually I decided to set something on fire; you know the rest. I don't even remember that part, but I do remember thinking—at an earlier, slightly more sober point in the night—about insurance fraud, the way it works in movies, how you can just burn your house down and collect. I guess I didn't think about the fact that folks who do that usually get caught, or that I didn't actually own the house, or that insurance companies have about as much of a presence in Hale County as the goddamn fire department. But I was only three

weeks removed from my unceremonious dumping and I was fucked up and I was thinking a lot about the wrong things and not enough about anything else. Shit, that's why Lee dumped me to begin with, and she sure as hell let me know it when I showed up at her place, skin smoked black and half my hair singed off. Even still, she let me in.

Like I said, I was a pretty shitty boyfriend. I didn't cheat or anything; my mind was just somewhere else a lot of the time. On the moon, I guess. Lee knew I was trying to go lunar as soon as I got myself together because I talked about it all the damn time, but we never talked about what that meant for us. She's got a real job, her mama's alive, and she likes it here, feet planted in the red dirt. On the weekends she likes to go out to weird little junk shops and flea markets, see what kind of old garbage she can find and flip. I didn't like going with her; thought it was boring. I'd beg off, saying I had shit to do, or I would go with her—acting like it was some big hassle—and fuck around outside, smoking cigarettes and hollering at people for the fun of it. Being a shithead, really.

I probably shouldn't have done that while I was carrying—just weed, honest—because eventually

someone called the cops and I got busted. Lee came out of the shop to see me cuffed and sitting on the curb. She didn't say a word, just walked off to her car and that was it. Dumped my ass. I had to call Miss Ann to bail me out that time. And she did it, too, saint of a woman. But she'd never forgive me for wasting her daughter's time. I guess I wouldn't, either.

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Lee picks up her phone on the eighth ring, and I try to roll into my explanation before she can get her jabs in. Hey, Lee? Hey. It's Waylon. Listen, I got arrested. But you've got to believe me—just listen for a minute, Lee, I'm innocent. No, really, I am this time. They're trying to stick me and Francis with arson because the Citgo blew up.

Well, did you do it? Wouldn't be your first, she says.

I didn't, for real. I was half a mile down the road with Harris when it happened.

Then she asks where Harris is now. Shit. I hem and haw for a minute before I brace myself and tell her what happened.

She says god damn it, Waylon, you fuck up more often than most folks take a piss, but this

is beyond the fucking pale. You're like the Jimi fucking Hendrix of incompetent shitheads.

I say I'm sorry, that I'm sure he's back at her house. That I just wanted to make sure Francis was all right.

Well I can't get back to my house now because everything is on fire. I hope you like that jail cell because if I get back home and Harris isn't there waiting for me you're just going to rot in it, you spongy piece of shit.

Didn't feel like I was worth all that much before, but by the time she slams down the phone I'm about ready to fall throat-first onto the sharpest thing I can find. But I'll tell you, it wasn't the bombardment of insults that got to me; it was the ragged edge on her voice, like she was just one step from the line between shouting and sobbing.

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I wake up inside my burning house again, smoke like burning oil in my lungs and flames hot against my eyelids. But when I open them it's not my house anymore, just the drunk tank at the jail. Francis is sitting on the bunk across from me, staring at the floor and clutching at his frizzy hair. Dunavant is sitting outside the cell at a little table.

He turns on the radio and scans stations, a couple of old hits surfacing from a sea of FM static. I try talking to him without running my mouth too much, but he doesn't say anything, just hums along to the fuzzed-out radio. I ask him whether they'd figured out what happened at the Citgo, whether they'd found Pop, and he looks up to fix me with a sunken glare.

Can't tell yet, he says, it's still burning.

I ask him if he's even going to ask me what I saw, and he just turns up the static. I turn to Francis. What'd you see, man?

It takes a minute for him to realize I'm talking to him, and when he does he looks up at me, tears rolling down his cheeks. I didn't see anything, he says, choking out the words. I was out by the road smoking a cigarette. Pop won't let me smoke close to the pumps, you know? I only heard this big boom and there was a flash of light and then another boom and then everything was on fire and shit, Waylon, I hope he didn't suffer. That's all I can think about, Pop alone in that building on fire.

I nod, then look over at Dunavant. You hear that, Jim? You still think we blew up the only gas

station for two miles, with Francis's own fucking granddad inside of it?

Dunavant crosses his arms. I don't know him, he says, but I know you.

I saw something, I say. And I tell him everything right then and there through the bars, even the part about Harris running off. I tell him I only counted six satellites. At the end of it Dunavant stands up and walks over to the cell, leans against the bars with his arms crossed.

He doesn't even look at me when he talks. Man, your girl's dog runs off and you decide to run toward a fire? You expect me to believe you're some goddamn boy scout? Boy scouts don't burn their houses down.

I start to argue with him, tell him nobody—least of all Deputy Sheriff Jim Dunavant—ever proved anything, and she's not my girl, anyway, but he talks over me.

I don't even care about the house, Waylon. That abandoned piece of shit—who would? But you took out an acre of old forest with it—hemlocks, beeches, white oaks that were ancient when my great-grandfather settled here. We don't get that back. And now even more of it's going up. I'll be

damned if I let it happen again. Sheriff'll be here tomorrow morning to question y'all. Don't think he's going to buy your newfound sense of morality.

He goes back to his desk and sits down. I see the moon starting to sink toward the rusty treeline through the window behind him. I ask him if he remembers Lincoln Barber, the one guy from Hale County who ever got up to the moon.

Lincoln Barber? He married my cousin. You trying to pin this shit on him now? You think he called down a satellite?

No, I say. Did you ever talk to him about going up there? What it was like?

Dunavant rolls his eyes so hard I'm surprised they don't fall out. Linc went up there with his head up his ass, he says, and when he came back down he was so full of shit his eyes had turned brown. Talked big about becoming someone different, but he was the same as ever. Moon tourism's for folks who think they're so special that they can't find their missing pieces on Earth. Assholes. Why do you want to know? You don't want to go, do you?

I can't decide whether to argue with him or not. I don't say anything. Dunavant must see it

on my face, because his stupid mouth cracks into a grin.

You do! You want to—what's it called—go lunar? Waylon Douglas, of all people. Going to be hard to get up to the moon when you're stuck in prison for arson.

I look up at the window again, see the moon disappearing into the horizon, taking its light with it.

But the light doesn't go away. In fact, it grows brighter. Dunavant, still watching me, looks around in puzzlement. That's when the sonic boom hits, just like before, and the window shatters, blowing inward. Francis and Dunavant leap to their feet. Out the window I see a searing brightness streak into the trees and when the impact shakes the ground I'm ready for it. Dunavant turns to see the woods erupt. He scrambles for his radio.

Francis starts clamoring. See? That's it! That's exactly what happened before. You have to let us out, man, we've got to take care of our people.

Dunavant comes over to the cell with his keys out, his radio spitting a panicked stream. He says, I don't trust you, Waylon, and I don't trust your boyfriend here either, but I won't see you burn

up. He throws the bolt and opens the cell. We're not finished, he says, but I'm already out the door, Francis on my heels.

We stand outside the station and look out at the hellscape erupting. The police station isn't far from everything else; I can see Lee's house down the hill, shrouded in waves of heat and smoke. Francis nudges me, points in the direction of his mama's house. I got to get home, he says. You need a place to stay tonight?

I think of Harris whimpering and pissing—under the porch, or in the woods, or in a ditch somewhere—while the fires creep close enough to singe his fur. I think of Lee returning to a burned-down house in the middle of a scorched field and finding his bones. I shake my head, tell Francis to go on, and start down toward Lee's house. I don't care what happens. Don't care if the whole county burns up to nothing. Don't care if I never make it to the moon. Don't care if my skin cooks right the hell off. I walk into the fire. I'll be damned if I won't find that fucking dog.

GETTING SPACE

The sun has risen and set over forty times since your message popped up on my terminal. That's not as bad as it sounds; objects in low earth orbit can make a round trip every 90 minutes— sixteen sunrises a day. But it's been busy. Lots of junk to haul in; the shifts have been tough. Tough enough that when I get off I just zip into my bag and sleep, bouncing gently at the end of a short tether, the small porthole in my capsule covered tightly against the intermittent glare of the sun. Tough enough that I didn't have the mental energy to send a message back until my day off. I won't mention that part in my response.

Instead I'll tell you about walking out of an airlock into nothing. It's wild, this big blue thing on one side, this big grey thing on the other, the moon swinging closer and closer—a disco ball threatening to drop and ruin the party with a cloud of glittering, jagged mirrors. And there's junk, tons of it, scraps and shards caught like fish in our carbon-mesh nets. I'll tell you what it's like to exercise twice a day just to keep my muscles from atrophying. I'll tell you about the food (not bad) and bathing with a towel (not great). I won't tell you I miss you, even though I do.

Ten months into a three-year contract and the stream of junk never ends and every time I walk out into the nothing and see the earth below I can't help but miss being on the other side of the atmosphere. I was never an outdoors person, preferring to experience nature from a window, but this stint above has left me craving a sunny day in a park with you and our son, his small weight in my arms unhindered by a clunky suit or microgravity. I find myself thinking about the little house in Alabama, how maybe now there'd be enough room in it for all of us. But I can't tell you that, not yet.

Orbital garbage detail isn't glamorous, but at least I can look down at a whole damn planet every day and feel like maybe I'm getting the distance I thought I needed.

DOG'S RUN

Dog has smelled coyote before, at the edges of his lost homes—a stringy, cloying musk at the bottom of narrow paw prints, speckled with the blood of stolen chickens. He associates the scent with a crescendo of yipping howls and the subsequent crack of a shotgun. His humans always kept him well away from the skinny carcasses.

But these coyotes smell of decay setting in before the life has even left their bodies, a whiff of mange that Dog remembers from his time in a shelter. Huddled beneath the encroaching moon at dusk, standing still and silent, their scabrous ears prick forward at the sound of Dog's approach.

Before the droughts, Dog would have gone unmolested. But they are starving, desperate, and there are five of them. Bigger by half than the alpha male, he would be a difficult kill. Dog's ribs have only just begun to show the hunger underneath his thick fur, now clotted with brambles and clay. He will be a good meal for the coyotes, sustaining them for days. The coyotes fan out from their den, surrounding Dog, one for each leg and one for his head. Dog stands firm and unmoving, tail tucked low and hackles raised, a low snarl forming in his throat. He has fought before, against strays and bobcats and drunken men. The coyotes circle, slow and cautious.

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Dog has had names, collections of syllables applied in tones ranging from harsh to lilting, chosen and drilled and reinforced with promises of affection and small treats. Dog learned how to please quickly and eagerly, coming to understand his attendant syllables in exchange for scratches behind the ears, kicks in the ribs, scraps from the table, a long day spent chained in the too-hot sun. Somethings and nothings.

But Dog was Dog first. A hard, tall man pulled him from his mother's tit and he grew to ungainly adolescence in an outdoor kennel, trained with a quick, calloused hand to retrieve rubber balls, then pinecones that tore at his gums if he bit down. Dog slept beneath the moon—so small then, so often clouded-over—on a concrete pad, skin rubbed raw where his sharp bones met the ground, the mockingbirds' calls and the coyotes' answers for company. He shuddered at the sudden, reverberating sound of the shotgun, his legs willing him to run—under the house, into the woods, wherever—but the metal links of his enclosure compelled him to remain.

Dog received the occasional treat in exchange for fetched objects, so long as he left them unmarred. More often, though, the hard man treated Dog like a car or a gun, goading him toward mechanical perfection with the steel toe of his boot or a stiff club of rolled newspaper. Dog learned to carry lightly, jaw open just enough to hold his quarry—rather, the man's quarry. Dog had nothing, kept nothing, and when he sought affection from the man he received only aggressive distance: a shove, a slap, a kick, a sharp bark of

disapproval. Early on, he mistook these actions as invitations to play and would bound around the man, jumping and pawing, biting at boot leather. He learned better after he was thrust back into the kennel, left with a limp and without dinner.

Within weeks he had become adept enough at fetching, at dropping and waiting patiently, to be taken to a field scattered with the skeletons of cornstalks. He bounded out of the truck bed into the autumn air, sending birds flying in feathery scatters. The shotgun cracked again, and this time Dog ran fast and hard, no chain to keep him from the horizon.

He would not be followed, gun-shyness reason enough to abandon him to the woods. They were lush then, leaves just beginning to turn. Dog dug moles out of their holes, outran small rabbits with his long, loping strides, found his way into backyards and trashcans and steaming carrion on highway shoulders. His awkward puppy's frame grew to fill his oversized feet, his jaw large and powerful, his muscles lean and rippling. He shed his grey fluff for coarse black and tan, which quickly became matted with mud and flea-dirt and blood.

Eventually he found himself in the back of a van, windows gridded with steel mesh.

In the shelter they put him under and took his balls, shot vaccinations into the loose skin around his neck, trimmed his claws, cut the mats from his coat, chased his fleas away with suds and water. They named him Mister and he learned it fast, motivated by food more than anything else. He learned to fight, too, after getting licked a few times. It wasn't the big, loud dogs he needed to watch out for—they wanted only to dominate and be done with it—it was the silent ones, the mangy scrappers that went straight for the throat without so much as a growl of warning. But Dog was strong and wary and he stood his ground and he suffered a few puncture wounds but not much else. He found his place in the pecking order and made peace with all but the deranged—and they never stayed long.

Then there was the wiry young woman with light, close-cropped hair and a voice that sounded like digging through soft loam. She smelled clean and safe and as soon as she got him home she changed his name to Harris, the new syllables coming with treats and toys and belly rubs and

baby talk. She held his face in her hands and repeated his name over and over and he licked any part of her that got within range of his long, pink tongue. He spent his days wallowing on an overstuffed couch and running in the field that surrounded the woman's house.

A man would come around—first for short stretches, then longer ones, then he never left—and though he was not tall and did not smell of discharged shotgun shells, Dog avoided him for weeks, leaving rooms when he entered, eyeing the leather around his toes. The man earned Dog's trust by sharing his food eagerly and often, dropping bits and pieces of his meals when he knew the woman wasn't looking. Dog loved the salty scraps, and would soon share his couch with the new man, a slouched and narrow figure that emitted thick smoke and grumbled affably at the glowing television.

It was a good life, for the most part: long, lazy days punctuated with generous meals, bouts of chasing small rodents through the field, an occasional chorus of coyote laughter. Sometimes the clouds would roll in and erupt, soaking the red dirt in sheets. Dog didn't mind the rain, didn't

mind being stuck indoors with his new humans, but the thunder would crack, loud and low, and Dog would bolt for the nearest hideaway he could find, cowering his bulky frame into the smallest spaces—underneath a bed, the back of a cluttered closet, the space between the couch and the wall. He would whimper until the storm passed, the woman asleep on the floor next to him, one safe-smelling hand outstretched.

Seasons passed and the space between storms lengthened; the grass in the field kept growing through a warm winter, but browned and died in the cloudless spring. Dog nearly forgot the terror of thunder and gunshots, until an evening he spent in the dry grass with the woman and the man, scouring the ground for scant signs of quarry while the humans sat on a blanket and ate off paper plates. When the sun had fully descended, the man stood and held a flame to a small bundle at the end of a long, thin stick, the woman making low sounds of dissent as the flame caught. The man let the bundle sizzle for a few seconds before tossing the stick into the air; at its apex the bundle spewed sparks and shot into the sky with a whistle, resolving with a loud pop. Dog hunkered down

beside the woman, who threw her arms around his neck and directed scolding syllables toward the man. The man shrugged, waved away her protest, and set a cardboard tube on the ground, dropped a round something into it, and lit a long string. He retreated to the blanket and all three of them waited, watching. When the mortar exploded in the air, Dog let out a long whine and the woman held on too tightly for him to run. Sparks fell into the grass to smoke and smoulder.

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For a while the man disappeared, his departure marked by little more than some extra legroom on the couch. He eventually returned, reeking of smoke—not the sticky redolence he used to exhale, but the acrid reek of things burnt and burning. Dog sniffed at his sooty hands and recoiled, the harsh smell overriding everything else. Things were different, then; the man no longer went to bed in the woman's room, instead spending his nights on the couch, Dog relegated to the rug. During the day the woman would leave and the man would take Dog on long, aimless walks.

Before the harsh waves of the huge sound hit him, Dog smelled something coming, felt it in the

raised hairs along his spine, heard the whistling of an object falling from miles away. And even before the impact, before the shockwave, before the smoke and the fire, he was ready to run. With the first boom, he ran down the road toward the woman's house, the cool safety of the crawlspace beneath it. With the second, he changed course and sprinted for the trees. Nothing was safe anymore.

He travelled for a long time, chased by the overwhelming thunder and fire at his back, unable to smell his way home through the smoke—like the smell of the man's hands, but tougher and lingering, stinging Dog's nose into uselessness. He crossed dry riverbeds and licked dewdrops from the undersides of a few stubborn ferns. He ate whatever he could find—brown grasses, dried-up grubs, long-dead mammals picked over and sun-baked into long, tough fibers. The woods were beyond dry, crackling underfoot and devoid of prey. He licked his muzzle, remembering the rusty taste of blood there, sticky in the humid air. There were no moles, no rabbits. Even the birds and squirrels—always too fast, too elevated for him to catch—were silent, and the brown leaves in the trees ahead waved dully in the hot breeze. The sun

set long and slow, its heat remaining in the air and dirt through the night. Dog scratched a trough in the earth, digging through the warm topsoil to the red clay underneath, cool enough against his belly. He tried to sleep with his eyes open, head resting on an upraised root.

Dog had never been the type to howl at the moon, but still felt its pull in his bones as it soared across the night sky. Recently the cycles had grown more frequent, the moon showing its face in broad daylight more often than not, growing larger with each pass. In its fullness it seemed too large to hide behind any tree's branches, filling the sky, and the dog began to feel—for the first time—a lonesome cry rising from his chest, a question for the celestial object he did not understand. He sang a dirge for his vanished prey, for the moisture in the air, for the home he could not find his way back to. The moonlit landscape answered with deafening silence; even the cicadas had left, the absence of their once-incessant chatter felt as keenly as a shotgun blast.

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Dog does not wait for the coyotes to attack, instead runs headlong at the largest of them—young

and rangy, with a grey coat and some bush still left in his tail—snarling as he bares his long teeth, searching for his opponent's throat. The grey rears back, striking at Dog's face with his clawed feet, and Dog responds in kind, reaching outward and catching the grey in a grappler's embrace, big paws swinging and jaws wide open. The other coyotes move in fast, snapping at his legs and whining as they circle him, watching for chances to pull him over onto his side, exposing soft belly and days of food. But Dog stands steady, hind legs planted in the dusty soil as he attempts to force the grey into submission, throwing his forelegs up to the coyote's ears and pulling down, locking his jaws around the narrow muzzle. The coyote yelps in pain as Dog's teeth break skin, tearing at the papery, malnourished flesh. The grey cannot maintain its balance, and quickly falls to the ground with the weight and force of a bundle of sticks. It snaps upward and kicks out hard with its hind legs, digging its claws into Dog's belly, but Dog bites, twists, and tears at the coyote's throat, warm blood spouting from between his white teeth. The coyote thrashes feebly and dies, its life dribbling from it like a dried-up stream.

The remaining coyotes redouble their efforts, tearing at Dog's ears and tail as he spins to meet their attacks, blood and slaver streaming from his black lips. But the warm blood of their fallen brother draws one away, then another. The coyotes surround the carcass and tear in. Dog stands just feet away, heart racing. He tastes the blood on his snout, feels the emptiness that comes with starvation. He inches toward the feast, smelling the stink of lacerated bowel. The alpha coyote turns to him, muzzle black and wet, and snarls. Dog raises his hackles once more, then bolts.

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Dog limps past the treeline into a field of long, dry grasses. His belly shudders blood, a sticky black shadow stretching back into the dark woods. The moon—so close, so gleaming—pulls at his body, lightening his frame just enough for his weary paws to take the weight. Ahead: a house. Not the home where he had been Harris; that was gone, lost in a haze of smoke. But a house all the same, small and white in the moonlight, a single window warm. Dog makes it to the edge of a cracked brick patio, ringed by a few persistent shrubs ridged with

spines. He drags himself underneath a bush and collapses, breath coming shallow and fast.

In the early hours of the morning, between moonrises and before sunrise, a human will come striding through the dark—a teenage girl smelling of sweat and lilac, pale skin over sharp bones, eyes and hair dark as the dried blood she spots streaking toward her mother's house. She will follow Dog's shadow and find him near the brink of death, eyes rimed with rheum and a few expectant insects, long tongue lolling on the dry dirt. She will clean and bandage his wounds according to the instructions she finds in books; she will feed him thin gruel. He will live, and she will give him a new name, intoned in soft twangs beneath the encroaching moon.

TAKING UP SERPENTS

Daddy'd never been much of a churchgoer, not even when Mama was alive. With the drought and the fires, though, and the moon coming down and satellites falling from the sky, I suppose he started to feel like he needed to get right with the Lord before the great beast rose up out of the sea. When he asked me to go with him I hemmed and hawed—disinterested in shovelling religion into my deep well of Southern Guilt—but he'd taken me in and I figured I owed him at least an hour of sitting and zoning out; not like I'd be doing anything different at home on a Sunday. I knew what to expect: boring choral music, an awkward

meet-and-greet, your run-of-the-mill sermon on repentance and forgiveness, and lunch on Daddy after. But the service at Holiness Church of the Valley was anything but dull, and I sure as Hell didn't expect to skip lunch in favor of speeding toward Birmingham with my dad gasping for breath in the passenger seat, the snake that bit him writhing in a toolbox in the truck bed.

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When I was a kid we'd go to a Baptist church some Christmases; it was big like a stadium and packed about as tight as the Iron Bowl. They had a twenty-piece choir singing the longest, slowest hymns you ever heard, and even when the preacher was raining fire and brimstone the whole congregation looked like they were just watching reruns on TV—which they kind of were, considering the place was so big you couldn't see the pulpit from halfway back and the only way to watch the preacher was to keep your eyes glued to the big projection screens. I guess feeling like you're in Hell for an hour a week is better than actually going there.

But this church Daddy had started going to was different. It was right off Highway 31 but I'd

have missed it without him navigating—an old warehouse attached to what must've been a business park at some point, all squat buildings covered in vinyl siding the color of sun-bleached asphalt. The inside was pretty plain. There weren't any pews, just rows of beat-to-shit aluminum folding chairs—fifty, maybe sixty in all—and the pulpit had clearly been assembled by someone with a couple shipping pallets and the barest understanding of carpentry. They had some folding tables in the back covered with plastic gingham tablecloths, trays of rock-hard cookies and orange coolers full of watery lemonade. When Daddy and I walked in I saw a drum kit and some electric guitars set up along the back wall behind the pulpit, which got me worrying that I'd be subjected to some tepid-ass praise and worship music—like the Christians had just got around to deciding that soft rock wasn't an instrument of the devil, after all.

Daddy definitely wasn't the only born-again in the bunch, and though I didn't know anyone else there I recognized types of folks I never expected to see within a hundred yards of a pulpit: the dude who sold pills in high school, the girl who danced topless a couple nights a week, the kid who I'd

swear was a Satanist up until the droughts came. And me, ol' fuckup Waylon, trying to look as penitent as all the rest. I probably had more to be sorry for than the rest of them. Jail time, accidental arson, losing my girl's dog and skipping town rather than face her—I hadn't done much to keep in God's good graces. But I'd been trying to do better since I showed up at the house in Helena where Daddy'd moved when the work in Hale County dried up. I'd found a job in construction, throwing up little cinderblock houses for folks who'd lost theirs in the fires and relocated. It wasn't bad, but maybe I said yes to Daddy's invitation because I was looking for some forgiveness.

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I don't remember Mama's funeral, but I do remember the church ladies coming by the house with a plate of brownies and a children's Bible, one that had all the stories illustrated in color. They invited us to join them on Sunday mornings and Wednesday nights, told Daddy I needed some strong guidance if I was to make it through a World of Sin without a mother. I don't remember what he said to them, only his face—weary and lined even though he'd just turned thirty, flushed

with drink and maybe a little embarrassment. He turned them out of the house so quick it plays like a cartoon in my head, their blue-rinsed coifs flapping in the wind as they hustled back down the driveway.

We ate the brownies like they were manna and Daddy let me keep the Bible. I flipped through it over and over until I could tell Daddy the stories without any help. My favorite was the one where Moses went back into Egypt and had to prove to Pharaoh he'd been sent by God, so he threw his staff down and it turned into a snake. Daddy'd put the TV on mute and let me rattle it off, sipping a Bud with his eyes on the game or some movie or commercials—or maybe just a blank spot on the wall, somewhere up and a little to the left of the screen. Sometimes I'd go out back and throw sticks at the ground, hoping they'd coil up and hiss. I think that Bible got ruined during one of the bad hurricanes—back before the droughts—when a tree came through the roof and everything we owned got soaked. An act of God, according to the insurance company.

We weren't bad people, me and Daddy. Sure, he'd hit the bottle pretty hard after Mama died,

and I picked up some bad habits over years of living in a little house with a man who drank more than he talked. There wasn't much to do in Hale County besides get in trouble, anyway, and I did my share—grew weed on the sides of dirt roads, gave myself bad tattoos with a pin and ballpoint ink, set shit on fire until the droughts came and I wised up a little bit. One time I had to fight this jock after he found out I'd slashed the tires on his lifted F-250 and I fucked him up pretty bad before his friends stepped in and handed me my ass. I never killed anybody, though, never sold anything harder than ditch weed, never stole anything bigger than a cellphone—and I only did that once.

Daddy served in the Gulf War before I was even born. He got his Purple Heart and discharge papers at the same time, unable to serve any longer on account of an inch-long piece of Iraqi shell lodged right near his spine. He could get around just fine, took an easy job as a corrections officer at the Farquhar Cattle Ranch and rode a horse around with the convicts. But some days the pain hit him so bad he wouldn't move off the couch. I think that's when he started drinking like it was his first job, his work coming in close second and being

a father bringing up the rear. I'm not real sure where being a husband slotted in, but that didn't much matter once Mama passed and it was just us.

Don't get me wrong, Daddy took care of me as best he could. He made sure I got to school and took a couple baths a week and once a month he'd buzz my hair down to ginger stubble with some electric clippers that'd shock you if you looked at them wrong. He'd take me to flea markets and junk shops on weekends; he'd dig for old paperbacks and let me pick out a few banged-up action figures or baseball cards. But our house was about as clean as a landfill and sometimes it felt like he treated me more like a roommate than his kid. I couldn't have been older than twelve when I cracked open my first beer. It was one of his Bud Lights and I was standing right in front of the TV when I did it. Daddy just shrugged.

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The preacher was a skinny guy in his late 40s, forearms covered in blurry sailor tattoos and greying hair slicked up into the tightest pompadour I'd ever seen. He wore a soft old work shirt buttoned all the way up and tucked into high-waisted jeans, turquoise and silver jewelry on his fingers and

wrists. Daddy said his name was Dan but that's about all I heard before the man started hollering to get everybody to come together.

"Good morning, folks! Come have a seat, rest your heels a bit before the Spirit moves you to kick 'em up. Hallelujah, people! Come on and say it with me now, hallelujah! That's it, people, thank you. I'll start us off with a prayer and then Brother Jim over here will strap on his guitar and lead us in some singing. Now if y'all don't mind bowing your heads and joining me—"

Reverend Dan had a fine voice, rumbling low and loud like a V8 from his narrow chest. He praised the Lord up and down, calling on Him to bring peace to them who deserved it and fire to them who needed cleansing. I peeked at Daddy and he had his head bowed low, eyes screwed up tight and an amen on his lips. A few old ladies punctuated the Reverend's exhortations with glory glories and hallelujahs and when I looked up it was a tiny sea of necks and shoulders, heads bobbing their approval in waves.

Once it started up, the music was way better than I'd expected, like gospel shot through with some early 60s rock and roll, and folks sure got

into it, hopping up out of their chairs, singing hard and loud and beating their chests to keep the rhythm. And when they were really feeling it they'd start dancing and spinning in circles, like it was a contest to see who was more full of the Holy Spirit. The songs were simple but catchy and right away Daddy was clapping his hands and singing along, answering Brother Jim's question, "What do you think about Jee-sus?" with "He's all right!" He put his arm around my back and patted my shoulder in time with the music; we'd never been huggers and I didn't know whether to shrug him off or lean into it. I guess I didn't do anything.

I knew about the speaking in tongues and faith healing business since high school; my friend Jimmy Colvin's folks would make him go to Hale Pentecostal with them and he'd come in on Mondays with stories about his aunt getting all glazed-over and babbling something fierce, shit he couldn't understand. Over stolen cigarettes in the parking lot he'd tell me about the time the Rev cured a cripple just by laying hands on their bum leg, or cast out the demons of alcoholism from a lady with a slap to her face. He didn't really believe any of it, of course, but he told me that sometimes

when his folks were starting to suspect that he was getting into drugs or messing around with girls he'd go in there and slip a seltzer tablet so he'd foam at the mouth while he fell to the ground and shook, the fake seizure enough to keep his parents convinced he was quickening with the Holy Spirit.

And there was some of that at this service, too—not the seizures, really, but some folks spoke in tongues when the music hit emotional highs, shouting out ecstatic nothings at the top of their lungs. Might as well have been shouting Roll Tide; at least that's what it felt like. I guess when a church service feels like a football game folks get more invested; Daddy sure was. He didn't break into any tongues but I could feel the excitement coming off him in waves.

A few songs in Reverend Dan took hold of the mic again and started whooping to the music like he was God's hype man. He started preaching, belting out words of praise to the rhythm of the music. Then the music died down and he started to pace around in front of the pulpit, mic held close enough to swallow. "Today, folks," he said, "We're here today to get sanctified, am I right? We're here to get anointed with God's love. Now

I've took cocaine and I've smoked marijuana and drunk whiskey and been high on all that, but this high you get on Jesus—there's nothing greater. Amen! Now people say they're saved and sanctified. But tell me, do they know of the signs following? The Gospel of Mark says the disciples went forth everywhere preaching the gospel, and God went with them and worked with them, confirmed the word with signs a-following. You can do the same thing, because why? Because why? It's the Word! It's the same today, yesterday, and forever more. And it changeth not—you're gonna die and leave this earth, but the Word will abide forever."

I leaned over to Daddy and asked him where all this was going. He grinned at me, murmured, "Just wait, son. They're about to bring out the snakes."

"Shit, Dad, it ain't a three-ring circus."

His grin turned to a grimace and he popped me on the arm. "Watch your mouth, Waylon. This is a house of God. And watch—I wasn't kidding about the snakes."

I wasn't scared of snakes; I'd grown up throwing rocks at water moccasins and copperheads and had even caught a coral snake or two before I knew

the red-touching-yellow rhyme. Once I found a baby one and Mama knocked it out of my hands and I was mostly just mad that she'd made me give up my new friend. I liked them—the way they felt crawling up my arm, the flick of their tongue like an eyelash or a whisper against my skin. But when Reverend Dan went back behind the pulpit and came out with a full-grown rattlesnake wrapped around his wrist I felt like somebody had just dumped ice water all over me.

"Now, I'm scared of this serpent," Dan said, holding the rattler up into the air. "He's a bad spirit. The scripture don't say he won't bite. In fact, it says he will. I want to tell you something from medical science. Once the rattlesnake bites you've got forty-five minutes to live without medical attention—unless God takes over. Have faith! These are the end times, people; just step outside and feel it. When the Lord comes back again, how would you be judged? Will you follow the signs?" With that, Brother Jim started up a new song, a damn barn-burner if I'd ever heard one, and Reverend Dan started to dance, all flailing knees and elbows, keeping his eyes on that rattlesnake the whole time. And the congregation started kicking

it up, too, and surging toward the pulpit where the rest of the snakes were kept.

Look, I'm not going to say anybody's wrong for believing in something. I don't have anything figured out; up until a few months ago I truly believed I was going to figure out a way to get myself up to the moon. Granted, that's a real thing folks were doing up until the satellites started dropping, but it was still a longshot for somebody like me. Beliefs can change; I didn't think Daddy believed in much of anything besides the numbing power of a thirty-rack but there he was, six months sober and praising the Lord with the best of them. But this thing with the snakes—I don't know. If God wanted us to dance around with rattlesnakes maybe He'd have given them legs instead of fangs.

Daddy started up to the front himself, and I grabbed his shoulder, hissing into his ear, "You're not going to handle a Goddamn snake, are you? This is crazy."

Daddy turned and looked me in the eye, gripped my hand. "Waylon," he said, "I don't know. I'm scared of them, but I want to believe God's protecting me. I want to feel anointed, even once." I let him go; I didn't know what else to do.

He moved up closer to the pulpit, but stayed on the outer edge of the folks who were starting to pull moccasins and copperheads up out of their boxes and hold them up, locking eyes with their very own portable demons.

Reverend Dan stopped his whirling to shout out to his roiling congregation, "My Bible says to try the Spirit to see whether or not they be of God, and when the Lord bids you to take up a serpent, stand back! Wait on the anointing of God to come upon you, and when that anointing comes, all fear leaves. The Bible says perfect love casteth out fear."

I watched Daddy carefully, trying to read his movements. He stood with his face upturned to the ceiling and his eyes shut, bobbing to the music. His lips twitched. He looked happy, for maybe the first time I remember since I was a kid. Like all the lines kind of fell from his face and he looked ten, fifteen years younger. And then he opened his eyes, smiled at me, and started toward the pulpit.

Maybe I should have let him have his moment, let him go to the boxes and gently lift a serpent up into the air like his newfound God was telling him to do. But instead I chased after him, knocking back a few whirling Christians. When I saw

him reach into a box I felt ice-coldness run down my shoulders into my hands and I grabbed at him, trying to pull him back, the soft bulk of his arm warm against my skin. He shuddered as the copperhead sunk its fangs into his wrist. A wail went up from the folks around us and I couldn't tell whether it was fear, ecstasy, or both. A few of them moved to put their hands on him, unintelligible prayers falling from their wide-open mouths. I slapped them away, wrapping my arms around Daddy's thick torso and pulling him out.

As I hauled him to the truck, Daddy just kept saying, "Waylon, Waylon. It'll be all right. Waylon, they're praying for me," and the Reverend followed us, telling me that he'd be saved, that God's grace eliminated all need for medicine. But I got Daddy into the passenger seat anyway, buckled him in and turned around to stare Reverend Dan in the face. I was so worked up I'd have decked him right then and there if he weren't a preacher.

"Kid, your daddy made his choice and you tried to stop him. This is the Lord's work. Don't stand in the way of his salvation."

"You're a fucking nut, you know that?"

"It may seem that way to you, son, but I've been bit nine times or more. I died a couple times. There was a hundred people there praying and seeking the Lord for me. That's what brought me through. If it hadn't been for that I'd be in the graveyard. And we're praying for your daddy now. Let us lay hands on him and heal him. Bring him back inside. Ain't any hospitals til you get to Birmingham. Ain't time to take him anywhere else."

He reached out to me with his left hand, put it on my shoulder. He held the copperhead that bit Daddy in his right. I looked him in the eye, saw the kindness there. He was earnest enough, believed every word he said. And maybe there was something to it; I didn't have any more or better answers than he did.

But then again, he was in there telling a bunch of desperate people to let themselves get bit in Jesus' name, and that didn't sit right with me. Preacher's supposed to tend to his flock, not feed them poison and then tell them he's got the only antidote. I knocked his hand aside and put my fist in his gut, hard. He doubled up, coughing and gasping for air, and dropped the snake.

It squirmed and hissed on the ground, uncoiling and recoiling on itself. It could have bit me, but it didn't. Could have just as easily slithered off, escaped into the closest patch of dried-up grass, but it didn't do that, either. I looked at it and it looked at me, its slitty pupils meeting mine. And I felt that ice-coldness again, washing from my head to my toes, and for some reason I wasn't scared. I grabbed that snake right behind its head, threw it into the rusted-out toolbox Daddy kept in his truck bed and shut the lid.

I peeled out of the parking lot and watched Dan in the rearview, straightening up and shaking his head. Maybe he went back into the church, maybe he didn't; I turned north on 31, the moon big and full in the blue sky, and I never saw him again.

I don't know what it feels like to be sanctified; I don't know that I even deserve God's forgiveness, if He's there to give it. But when I grabbed that copperhead it felt like I was doing something right, and maybe if I drive fast enough I can get to the hospital up in Birmingham before the poison hits Daddy's heart.

BURNING UP

Seemed like the end of the world would be drawn out and drier than hell, punctuated by the occasional crashing satellite and dashes of fire along the interstate. Mother Nature didn't need much help in her fierce retaliation for a century or two of what must've felt like all-out, unprovoked warfare waged by her dumbest children. Maybe she didn't rain down fire and brimstone, but she sure did make it easy for people to fuck themselves right up: a truck's clacking brakes, an unwatched barbecue pit or turkey fryer, a careless cigarette—any little spark could catch. Cindy couldn't figure out why folks didn't think for just two seconds before dropping a piece of heat out their windows, and she

made sure Barb carefully ground out every one of her Misty Lights on hard asphalt.

"You've got to get out of this place," she'd tell Barb. "You're too smart to burn up here."

Barb would just shrug and light another cig. "There are worse ways to go," she'd say.

Cindy and Barb first met because Barb's big black and tan mutt had wandered into Cindy's yard and laid his big ass down in a patch of sun, right on her front stoop. Cindy came out to check the mail, nearly stepped on him, and shouted louder than she had in decades. She didn't normally mind dogs—had even seen this one nosing around her neighbor's dry-ass shrubs a few times—but a big dog you don't expect is still a big dog you don't expect. She looked up to see a teenage girl whipping around the corner of the house, eyes wild and surrounded by a metric fuckton of liquid liner, spaghetti strap dangling off a scrawny shoulder, a beat-up paperback in her hand. The girl stopped when she saw the dog—who hadn't so much as lifted his head—and looked at Cindy like she'd been shouting at a cloud.

"What're you hollering for?" she asked. "Shitboy's harmless."

It took Cindy a few seconds to realize she was talking about the mutt. "You named your dog Shitboy?"

The girl shrugged. "He shits a lot."

Cindy laughed hard, the scare forgotten. The dog's tail thumped hard on the wood steps. She lifted a hand to shield her eyes from the sun and sized the kid up right then and there: old for her age, and probably smart too. The kind who didn't pay much attention in school but got good grades anyway, who spent her lunch periods smoking in the parking lot and her weekends making bad decisions.

"What's your name?"

"Barb."

"Short for Barbara?"

The girl grimaced, shook her head. "Short for Barbie."

"And I'll bet you hate that," Cindy said. The glower in the kid's eyes said it all. "All right, Barb it is. I'm Cindy. What you reading?"

Barb looked down at the book she was carrying and flushed dirt-red. It was an old pulp magazine, with a big-titted lady on the cover getting chased by a square-jawed, mustachioed man. She

gulped air and exhaled an explanation: it belonged to Cindy's neighbor, Dyl—a relic from the time before he'd quit drinking and got some Jesus. She'd found it in a box of sinful stuff he'd pulled together to trade off at the flea market over in Harpersville.

"Relax, darlin', I've read too many Harlequins to pass judgement, but if you've been around Dyl at all you know he's got shit taste." The kid looked relieved. "You ever feel like reading something better, I've got more books than God. Want to come in? Got some sweet tea brewing."

Barb nodded, went inside, and that was that.

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It'd been fifteen years since Cindy got fed up with her East Coast Ph.D. program, packed her books and come back home, full of the righteous anger of the overeducated, underwhelmed, and sexually harassed. Fuck a doctorate; all she wanted to do was read and think, not fend off smarmy associates or argue with rich shits in their twenties who thought her accent meant she couldn't run circles around them. She didn't especially like Shelby County, but at least the idiots here knew they didn't know anything and kept their hands to themselves. The living was cheap enough she

could afford a little 70s rancher on the edge of Helena that she didn't have to share with anybody, with enough distance from the road she got as much quiet as she could handle and enough room inside to hold just about every book she could put her hands on.

Dyl was her only neighbor and good enough company when she needed to hear a human voice, even if he didn't talk all that much. He spent whatever time he wasn't trawling flea markets and thrift stores on his bigass tractor, bush hogging his acre-and-a-half to close-cropped perfection. He'd mow Cindy's yard two or three times a month, whenever the tall Bermuda started to offend his sensibilities. Not that he put it that way; she'd just look out her kitchen window and see him out there mowing, shirtless and wearing an ancient trucker hat, faded tattoos and bone-white scars stretched across his red skin. She'd bring him out a cold Coors and a baloney sandwich with Miracle Whip on white wrapped in a paper towel. He'd nobly refuse once or twice before wolfing the sandwich down in a couple bites and throwing back the beer like it was water.

The grass hadn't grown much since the droughts had turned everything brown and crispy, though, and after years of hard drinking Dyl had cleaned up. He'd dated Barb's mama back in their wilder days, and even after he got dumped he'd still watch Barb the nights her mama had to work at the hospital. She could watch herself at this point, but she'd got into the habit of walking Shitboy over by his house to check out all the weird junk he'd picked up. So many folks were leaving for wetter climates and ditching as much old garbage as they could in the process that his hoard had grown pretty flush.

After that first afternoon, Barb would drop by Cindy's house a few times a week, Shitboy in tow. At first she'd say she was passing through the neighborhood, or she'd come to see Dyl and he wasn't home. Cindy didn't say anything about it, even when it was late at night or in the middle of a school day. She'd just open the door and let the kid in.

Barb started talking the minute she walked inside Cindy's house and it didn't seem like she'd stop anytime soon. Cindy would watch her wander while she chattered, rifling through the

overburdened shelves and teetering piles—novels, philosophy, poetry, psychology and climate science, a few tattered Bibles right next to a couple of nice Korans. Cindy didn't mind the kid poking through her stuff, but she followed behind, putting away each book Barb would pick up, examine, then carry a few feet before swapping out for another. On almost every expedition through the stacks she'd pull out a book Cindy had intended to read and never got to—or given up on halfway through—and ask what she thought about it.

Cindy was in awe of the kid. Barb had read half the books in the Shelby County library before she'd hit puberty, remembered every word of them, and would talk your ear off about it until she went on a tear in another direction. Full of the kind of hate only a teenager can muster, Barb could barely talk without spitting venom—for her peers, for her school, for just about everything. Cindy liked that; the kid was sharp as a roofing nail and a lot harder to pull out of your foot once you'd stepped on her. Too sharp to coast through high school and get stuck in Shelby County forever, though; that's what Cindy was afraid of.

"You ever think about college, kid?" she asked.

"What for?" Barb said. "Shit's expensive."

"Not for you, if you get it together. You could go out of state, maybe even get a full ride to a decent private school."

"What am I going to do at a private school, Cind? Wear sundresses? Fuck rich kids and spend my breaks at their beach houses?"

"You could probably learn a few things while you're at it," Cindy said.

Standing in the mostly-empty spare room, Barb shrugged and reached up to touch the curling edge of an old photograph wedged between a mirror and its frame.

"This you?" she said.

"It was," Cindy said, resigned to continue the college conversation later.

"You look great. Real skinny." She looked over at Cindy, and Cindy felt fifteen years and forty-five pounds weighing on her like a pile of rotten textbooks.

"I mean, I'm not saying—"

"You're saying plenty," Cindy said. "No books in here." She nudged the kid out into the hallway.

"When was it?" Barb asked.

"Grad school. I was real skinny because I wasn't eating. Worst I've ever felt."

The kid gaped at her. Cindy knew she wasn't used to adults coming through with the real shit. She asked why Cindy'd kept the photo.

"Because I look real skinny in it," Cindy said, and shut the door.

Sometimes they'd leave the book-lined confines of the house and go walking—through the dried-up grass along Highway 52, down to the trickling mudslide that used to be the river, over to this one old Zaxby's where a twenty-something burnout with a neck tattoo and a crush on Barb would sometimes toss them a couple free chicken sandwiches—Shitboy off-leash but stuck to them like flypaper. Barb smoked the Misty Lights she stole from her mama's stockpile and mostly they'd argue. Not angry arguing, the kind you hear through thin walls at one in the morning; more like two dogs jumping all over each other because they'd finally found somebody who could play the way they always wanted.

"Fuck, Cindy, I just don't see the point. The world is burning up and getting some degree isn't going to change that."

"There are better places to spend the end of the world, kid. Might as well learn something, be around smart folks."

"You hated school so much you quit. Why would I do better?" Barb asked.

"Because you're too young and too smart to give up on trying. And maybe it's different now. Sometimes I wish I hadn't quit, either."

"Why'd you come back, then?"

Cindy was quiet for a long time. Before Barb could repeat the question she said, "Because I thought I'd rather live with books and rivers and ghosts than people. They can't disappoint you."

"Not much of a river anymore."

"There was when I left, and it was still there when I came back," Cindy said. "Still plenty of ghosts."

She remembered Shelby green, lush and swaying in the breeze. Tall grass rippling and yellowhammers clacking in the pines. She told Barb about the chestnut trees that used to be all over the place, big hardwoods dropping nuts like hailstones. They all died from the blight, though—one in every four trees around here—and no one could get them to come back.

"But all those trees were dead before you were even born, Cind."

"My grandma told me so much about them I can feel their absence," Cindy said, looking up at the dried-out pines. She blinked back the reverie. "But you got me off track, dammit. Just because I'm a misanthropic old bitch doesn't mean you should be, too."

"But you like Dyl, don't you?" Barb said. "And me?" Cindy heard a quiver in her voice.

"Shit, darlin'. Of course I like you. And Dyl." She thought for a minute. "And if I can like two folks as dumb as y'all are, there's hope yet for you." She gave Barb's shoulder a little shove, felt the bones underneath her skin. Barb looked at her and there were tears in her eyes and she hugged Cindy harder than anyone would've thought possible—thin arms like steel bands—and Cindy might have let out some tears of her own.

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Cindy didn't know Dyl even had a kid until she saw him poking around the yard, smoking joints out by the shed. She went right out with an aluminum can and handed it to him, insisting he ash into something that couldn't catch fire. They

talked for a while; his name was Waylon and he'd left Hale County for Helena after the fires and crashing satellites had got to be too much. He seemed all right, if a little haunted—like he was always looking over his shoulder waiting for the next bad thing. He had a job in town, but when he was home he spent his time just staring up at the sky.

Cindy wasn't all that impressed, but Barb was completely moony over him. Cindy would catch her watching him through the kitchen window, twirling a strand of hair.

"You know he's like twice your age, right?" she'd say, startling the kid out of her fantasy.

"Aw, he doesn't look that old. And he seems nice. You've talked to him, right?"

"He's nice enough, but a man moving in with his daddy at thirty ain't a good sign, honey."

"He just had a run of bad luck, didn't he? Fires were real bad out in Hale County."

"They were. But I get the feeling bad luck is the only kind he's got."

"I'm gonna talk to him." Barb ran to the back door, stopped to compose herself, and walked out

slow. Shitboy jumped down off the couch to follow her.

Cindy watched through the window as Barb and the dog approached Waylon. He must have been too distracted to even hear them coming because he startled when they got close. Cindy understood it when folks were scared of Shitboy, but he looked more like he'd seen a ghost. She saw Barb flip her hair over her shoulder, pull her shoulders forward—probably trying to squeeze her little boobs together—but Waylon only had eyes for the dog. He crouched down to scratch his ears, said something to Barb, and the next thing Cindy knew the kid was back inside, red-faced and angry.

"What'd he say to you? If he said something gross I'll go out there and kick his ass right now."

"He said Shitboy belongs to someone else. His girlfriend, his ex or something. I don't know. He said he's been looking for him forever. Cindy, he can't take my dog, can he?"

"Of course not," she said, and walked out the back door herself. Waylon was still standing there, thumbing his smoldered-out roach.

"You think you can just tell that kid you're trying to take her dog away? Barb found that dog

bleeding out in her backyard and figured out how to nurse him back to health herself because she sure as shit can't afford the one vet that still lives around here."

"I wasn't trying to, I just—that dog belongs to Lee. He got lost after the first satellite crash and I told her I'd find him—"

"That was months ago, dumbass. Whoever Lee is, she's clearly not too invested in having you around anymore. That dog's name is Shitboy now, and if you lay a finger on him I'll have a talk with your Daddy right after he picks you up from the hospital."

"I just—"

"You just nothing, Waylon. Get your shit together. And while we're out here, I'll tell you this—that girl might be sticking her titties out at you trying to get noticed, but she's half your age and five times smarter than you. If you even think about having an impure thought about her I swear I'll find a way to make sure the next satellite that drops lands on your goddamn head."

After that, Waylon kept his distance. He didn't say anything else about the dog.

•

On the day of the explosion Cindy and Barb had been arguing about the usual shit and Barb had started revving up to leave in a huff, pulling on her jacket and tugging at Shitboy's collar to get him up off the couch. But when she stood up and looked out the window she said, "I think I have to stay here."

"We've been over this, dumbass," Cindy said, her voice ragged with exasperation. "Staying here is the worst thing you could do."

"Ain't nobody leaving right now, Cindy. Look." Barb pointed out the window at a column of black smoke billowing like death on the horizon.

Cindy got up and stumbled out the front door into the lawn, Barb close on her heels. Shitboy stuck his nose out the door but he must've been able to smell the smoke already because he sucked it right back in and went whining to curl up under the kitchen table. The column stretched across a full third of their field of vision, a surging behemoth. Cindy saw the flames licking up from the trees and reached back for Barb's hand.

"What happened?" Barb asked, her grip tightening.

"Lord knows, kid, but it's catching."

Later, they'd find out some poor bastards working for the county were just trying to repair a gas pipeline so it wouldn't burst and leak out into what was left of the rivers, turning the muddy waters black and iridescent in turns. But they hit the damn thing with their excavator, and before any of them knew it they'd all burned to death, flaming oil melting their skin into black gum and popping their eyeballs like water balloons. Later they'd hear about the containment measures, the attempt to just let all that gas burn up on its own. But for now all they saw was the smoke, then the flames.

"Cindy, grab a rake or something," a voice said, breaking her attention. She dropped Barb's hand and looked over to see Dyl walking up the slope to her house, Waylon trailing behind, shovels resting on their shoulders. Dyl spat into the dry grass. "Quick, now. We've got a firebreak to dig."

The men picked a spot halfway between the trees and Cindy's house and sunk their shovels into the ground. Even the red clay dirt was dry as hell, and it came up easy, like little piles of powdered rust. Dyl set about the work with a calm vigor, head down as he began to form the shallow trench.

Cindy tried to take the shovel from him, only to be swatted away.

"I'm fine, woman. You and Barb pull out some garden tools and rake away as much grass as you can."

"But Dyl, your back—"

"I said I'm fine. Go on now."

Waylon didn't share his father's focus, shoveling instead with his eyes on the encroaching fire, or glancing upward to the moon. Cindy hadn't paid it much mind, but what bit of it she could see through the haze looked enormous, bigger than it'd ever been. She went into her little garden shed and dug around in the dark, coming out brandishing a hoe and a rake, each rusted metal at the end of a splintered shaft. She handed the rake to Barb.

"Well, you heard Dyl," she said. "Shake a leg, kid."

Cindy and Barb worked alongside the men, scraping the ground to clear away the brush. Between the four of them they managed to scratch out a firebreak—a narrow, shallow trench that ran across Cindy's back yard and down the hill to Dyl's house, outlined on either side by three feet of bald earth.

As the fires grew closer, sparks flew in advance like mosquitoes swirling in the hot wind. After grinding out two or three with the heel of her boot, Cindy went into the house, pulled a few towels from their hooks in the bathroom, and soaked them down in the tub. Waylon helped her carry out the sodden, heavy masses, and they used them to smother each small wildfire-in-waiting, watching the yard for telltale tendrils of smoke unfurling. Eventually Cindy felt Dyl's hand on her shoulder, weighty as the towel she was white-knuckling.

"Cind, look—" he pointed at the trees. "It'll be here any minute. With this wind I don't think a ditch'll be enough. We need to leave, and quick."

Cindy looked up at him, then over to Barb and Waylon, who were tag-teaming a patch of burning grass with towel and shovel, smothering and stamping the little flames into nothing. They stopped and looked up, too—first to Cindy and Dyl, then to the blackening woods.

"Waylon," Dyl shouted over his shoulder, "we're leaving. Bring the truck around. Barb, go get Shitboy."

Waylon dropped his shovel and ran down the hill; Barb ran into the house to find the dog. When

she came out Dyl and Cindy were still standing there, watching the blaze roll in like the tide. "Almost pretty, ain't it?" Cindy said.

Waylon pulled up in Dyl's four-by-four and shouted for them to get in. Dyl opened the back door and Shitboy jumped right up, eager to get away. Dyl pulled himself into the passenger seat and waited on the women with the door open, one foot on the running board.

"Go on, Barb," Cindy said, pushing the kid toward the truck.

Barb dug her feet in. "Aren't you coming?"

"I can't leave," she said.

Barb looked at her in shock, mouth gaped. "The fuck you're not," she said.

"I just can't, all right? Y'all go on."

Dyl looked at her long and hard—his mouth set in a grim, grey-stubbled line—then nodded once. He pulled his leg in and shut his door.

Barb didn't move. "I'm not going anywhere without you."

"I'll be all right. You can come help me fix things up once the fires die down."

They went back and forth, getting closer and louder with each volley. Barb

couldn't—wouldn't—understand, wouldn't budge an inch without Cindy. Shitboy whined at her from the open door and sparks flew overhead. She squatted down and sobbed into her hands. Cindy got down next to her, put her arms around those skinny shoulders and talked low into the tangled, sweat-damp hair.

"Barb, all I've got is this little house. I have to protect it."

"With what? A hoe and some wet towels? Shit, Cindy, what about me?" the girl said. "I'm not a house. You've got me. And Dyl, and Shitboy. I'll do anything you want. I'll go to college. Just don't leave me."

Cindy stood, pulling Barb up with her. She kept her arms around the kid's shoulders, and Barb leaned into her hard, putting all the weight of her bony teenage frame into an embrace that felt more like a death grip. They were both crying and Shitboy was crying and Dyl—silent saint that he was—leaned out the window to put his hand on them.

Cindy was about to let go and climb into the truck when they heard a loud noise overhead, a heavy buzz in the sky. She looked up and around,

worried it was another explosion—or something worse—and she saw the airtanker just as it opened its reservoirs and let loose a torrent of water, dumping thousands of gallons onto the fire and the surrounding area, drenching the house and the yard and the people in it. It was almost like rain.

GETTING LOST

And so you gave or packed away nearly everything you owned, keeping only a few battered paperbacks, a white cotton shirt that had belonged to your deceased mother, a ring your son had given you. You packed a tiny bag, slung it over your shoulder, and rode an elevator into the night sky. You'd heard the god in the moon was hiring.

You got a job collecting stardust at one of the eight lunar waypoints. The work was hard, but you enjoyed being up above the world. There were other people there, too, men and women from all over. You made friends, you worked hard, and—for the most part—you enjoyed herself. But you missed

the boy. Sometimes—against your better judgment—you even missed his father. You started to convince yourself that maybe he was smarter, more romantic, more caring than you'd given him credit for. Maybe you'd left because running was easier. But you didn't go running back; you had a job to do, a life to live. And that was okay.

One day, as you were hauling in your glimmering net, you came across a door. It was unlike anything you'd ever seen—a shifting, flickering thing, beautiful in its own way. You didn't even know it was a door until it opened wide, beckoning you into an unknown; you had no choice but to enter.

On the other side of the door lay something like a forest. In the night sky you left behind, everything had moved like dust particles suspended in water—weightless, groundless. But here, in this new forest, you stepped and felt the soil beneath you soften under your weight. You looked up and saw the sky, but the stars were all in different places. You looked behind, expecting the shifting door swinging open, and saw only more forest, more rearranged sky—the door was gone. The new world blurred; you were crying.

You thought of your job, the friends you'd left behind, the dogeared paperbacks still floating in your bunk. You thought about whether the boy and his father would wonder what had happened if you didn't ever come back down. But when you put your hand to your chest to ease your shuddering breaths you felt your mother's shirt, soft against your shaking hand—and on your forefinger, the ring. You hadn't lost everything, not yet.

And so you embarked on a journey you hadn't intended to take, walking through the trees—tall, thin stalks reaching upward from the ground like arms in praise. They swayed as you brushed past, the brittle fingers of their canopy rustling as they interlaced. The stars streaked across the sky in endless, undulating patterns; the sun never rose, but you could still see everything, as if the atmosphere itself were phosphorescent. You didn't know where you were headed, had no idea what you might find, but you had your ring and your shirt and a head full of stories, and that was enough to keep your feet moving.

You had always loved books—their reassuring weight in your hands, the texture of their endpapers against your fingertips, the sound and smell

of flipping pages—and as much as you treasured your small collection of first-edition hardcovers, kept safely from prying fingers in a locked, glass front cabinet, it was the old paperbacks you loved the most—their old covers beaten into pulpy softness, the spines cracked and re-cracked to the point of illegibility. The boy's father didn't understand why you'd rather re-read your same old copy of a book he'd found in hand-bound hardcover, a well-meant present inadequately appreciated and then tucked away. Your favorite book was a collection of folk tales illustrated with etchings, and though you'd memorized every one of them you delighted in reading them to your son, drawing your finger along each line as he dozed to the sound of your voice.

Before long the forest opened into a field covered in tiny, rust-red flowers. You bent down to examine them, reaching out with one finger to touch a rectangular petal. You gasped and recoiled when its edge cut into your skin. You looked left and right and could see only the razor-flowers spreading from your feet to the feet of the mountains rising in the distance, needle-pointed spires crowned with a mass of gelatinous clouds, shifting

and flickering like the door that had brought you here. You were afraid, but you twisted the ring around your finger and stepped into the field, determined to make your way through this fairy tale.

The flowers made ribbons of your boots, gridded your feet and ankles with bright red lacerations. Still you walked, your eyes on the mountains as you inched closer. You spoke to yourself, the sound of your own voice carrying you forward as you told every story you could remember, recounting every word of your old paperbacks. You found yourself among a host of heroines, each making their way through their own treacherous field, each losing and gaining themselves along the way.

When you reached the edge of the field at the foot of the black mountain your throat was raw as your feet, and your fellow travellers had all faded away, the words that formed them dissipated with your breath into the alien air. But you had made it across all the same; your story was far from finished. You pulled off your shirt and ripped it in two, wrapping your wounds with the white cotton, knowing your mother would forgive

the stains. Ahead, the sheer face of the mountain shifted, its vertical rise extruding a staircase.

The narrow steps wound around the precipice, slippery as graphite. You pressed your hand to the mountain's surface as you trod upward, the soft rock leaving its slick black powder on your skin. The mountain was a pencil's lead, sharpened to a cruel point, and you kept climbing—step by step, hour by hour. You watched the stars spin, watched the ground drop away in increments. The story drawing you up the mountain was stronger than sleep, more powerful than hunger. You imagined your son huddled beneath his covers with an old penlight you'd left behind, unable to put down this book until he'd reached the end.

The climb took many years. Your feet healed and scarred, the bloodied rags falling away. Your remaining clothing dissolved into wisps, blew like smoke into the night air; your hair grew long and wrapped around your legs. When you reached the top you had grown old, your creviced skin black with mountain dust. But there the gelatinous clouds still roiled, waiting for you.

You've come a long way, they said, myriad voices blending into one. You looked all around,

bewildered. The voices shook like a crowd laughing and crying all at once. You felt it in your joints, in the depths of your tired eye sockets. Up close, you could see their surface: a churning, prismatic net of polygons, countless angles and straight lines coming together in divots and curves. You reached out to touch them and they oozed over your hand, a kneaded eraser rubbing away decades of black dust to reveal the pale and wrinkled skin beneath, the ring shining on your finger.

What are you? you asked, throat still as raw as it had been at the base of the mountain.

What are you? they asked in return, and you tried to remember. You looked down at your naked body, at the ring.

I was a mother, you said. But that was a long time ago. I had a name.

We were like you, once, they said. Millions of us—mothers and fathers and children, too. But we left our names and our bodies behind in search of pure, uninhibited perspective. These mountains are our ashes.

Can you help me get home? you asked. You hadn't known it at the beginning of this story, but now you did: you wanted to go home. Not to the

boy's father—a lifetime of wandering had rendered him a distant, unpleasant memory—but to the boy himself, dozing on your lap and shivering beneath his covers. He was home.

The million minds churned, their peaks and valleys rippling around you in swirls and eddies. Why go back? they asked. Everything you loved has grown as old as you have. Older, even. They offered you their transcendence, their oblivion.

Did you make the door that brought me here? Can you make another?

We didn't make the door. You did.

You stared backward in time. You tried to remember finding the door, or making it. But all you could remember was the way it looked against the night sky, the bright blue of the world—your world, home—shining up from beneath. You suddenly felt the age in your bones, the disintegration of your carbon frame. You sat down in a black drift of mountain dust. You sat there for a long time. You curled into a ball, twisting the ring around your finger, trying to disappear into it.

The multitimbral whisper covered you like a blanket. They tried to draw you out, to separate your voice from your decrepit body, to bring you

into their many folds. What is that? they asked. The thing around your finger? They prodded at your hand, seeking the information of the ring. You balled your hand into a fist, determined not to lose it.

It was a gift, you said. From my son. Please, it's all I have left.

Why did you leave him behind? Tell us the story.

You tried to remember, then to make it up, but you had spent most of your life climbing this black mountain, and there was nothing about it that would get you home. Your son's face had faded in your memory, fluttering away from the mountainside with your bandages. Your books were far away, their stories used up in your trek across the field of sharp flowers. You pulled the ring from your finger and held it up, looking through its golden loop like a lens. There, somewhere between the ring and the alien sky, was a memory of a story: the faintest outline of the moon you had left behind.

You began to speak and the voices surrounded you, lifting you from the drift and erasing the dust and creases and years from your skin. The ring slipped from your fingers; you felt its sharp absence

like a thousand flower cuts, but instead of reaching for it you screamed your story into the seething, endless polygons, and they scintillated with each word. You wrapped the story around yourself and the voices followed, gaining faces and facets. They grew and grew, subsuming the mountains and the flowers and the trees, billowing outward into a sphere, a ship, a satellite—a moon. Your moon.

Out of a porthole you could see the blue world below you once again, and you knew you had made it home. Maybe you'd never left.

COME DOWN LIKE RAIN

It happened slow, forecasts calling for rain, finally rain after years of drought and fire and bad air hazed with smoke. But when the rain came the dirt was so dried out and hard all the water just rolled right off into the streams and rivers, little trickles swiftly turning to shit-brown whitewater. I was sitting in Daddy's living room when the sky went dark and opened up, and he looked up from his Bible to the drops spattering the window. Praise Be, he said, and went back to reading. He didn't know it wasn't going to stop, that it was just going to keep on raining until his little house was underwater. Thought his god had finally answered our prayers

to stop the fires, but I suppose if He had, He was trying out an old method of cleansing.

The water splashed up on his front stoop like the tides coming in, and though I couldn't see it through the clouds I knew the moon was up there, closer than ever, pulling up on that water. I could feel it pulling on my bones, too; last time I weighed myself I was five pounds lighter, but if anything I should've gained weight eating good from Daddy's stockpile.

I said to him, Daddy, we need to get to higher ground. This shit ain't letting up anytime soon. He didn't even look up, said Waylon we're fine, the Lord will provide, we got enough supplies to last us through Judgment Day.

Of course, a well-laid and sealed bunker'll keep out the floods, but it won't do you a lick of good if the door is underwater and you're swimming around outside it. I leaned hard on the back door, fighting the wind and rain to open it, and water splashed onto the kitchen linoleum. I waded out into the back yard, boots flooding with each squishy step. The entrance to the bunker was in an old tool shed, a banked aluminum cellar door shining like a secret amongst all Daddy's old,

rusty shovels and rakes. A few inches of water had covered the dirt floor, but hadn't yet breached the raised lip of the door. I pulled it open and hurried down the steep stairs.

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I'd heard that the voices of the dead are the first thing you forget, but not me—I remember Mama's voice better than anything, low and sweet with a little rasp to it. When I was still a kid I found a microcassette recorder in a box of her things that Daddy'd stashed away, a pile of clothes and old notebooks that still smelled like her underneath a musty layer of attic and cardboard. She'd kept the recorder in her car for when she had ideas for stories or songs, and I listened to them over and over until they wore out. I don't remember the words, just the timbre of her voice spread like honey across the fizz of worn-out tape.

At some point Daddy drank a fifth of whiskey, took all the pictures he had of her and burned them in a pile in the back yard. I don't know why. I just remember smoke curling up from a glossy page, a spray of curly hair and a yellow sweater. When I think about her I don't remember her face, just her voice emanating from a bright, fuzzy void.

Later, when I asked Daddy why he'd burned all the photos, he just said he couldn't bear the pain of remembering, that it was like trying to sew a severed limb back onto his body and hope that it would work right. Better to leave it off and live with the phantom. When I asked him what she looked like he just told me to look in the mirror, that I had her eyes and her cheekbones and nose and the only thing I got from him was a weak chin. I don't think he could even really look at me after that, but I spent hours looking at myself in her clamshell compact, listening to her voice, trying to fit my mouth around the words. It never quite worked.

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The bunker was big enough for two people to move around inside of it without touching each other, like Daddy'd built it with me in mind as his co-inhabitant. There were bunk beds along the wall opposite the stairs, a wooden table with two chairs, a tiny bathroom, and a wall of shelves filled with cans and jars of food. And that was it. No books, no TV, no playing cards, nothing. I don't know what Daddy planned on doing if he got stuck down here, but I imagine he'd die of boredom

before he starved. I wasn't planning on getting stuck in a bunker, though. I started pulling cans off the shelves and piling them up on the narrow table. I heard a trickling sound and looked over at the stairs to see the first streams of water beginning to cascade down.

•

Once, back before I moved in with him, I was visiting Daddy on Christmas Day when a hurricane hit the Gulf Coast pretty hard. It wasn't anything new at that point—seemed like there was a new one every other week—and the most we saw up in central Alabama was torrential rain and the occasional spun-off tornado. Daddy hadn't lived there long—the bunker was just a gleam in his eye—but he had a safe spot set up beneath his basement stairs. Lots of blankets, couple of sleeping bags, a hand-cranked radio/lantern combo and a cooler full of beer. So we spent Christmas getting drunk together in the dark, listening to the radio and doing our best to avoid talking. When the sirens stopped we stumbled upstairs to survey the damage.

The house was fine, but the yard was a mess. A bolt of lightning had struck down one of

Daddy's cypress trees—a gnarly old thing, trunk the circumference of four men reluctantly holding hands. After we sobered up, Daddy backed his four-by-four truck into the muddy grass and strapped the stump to his winch, pulled the whole blasted thing out of the red dirt by inches until it groaned free. I remember him running a blunt fingertip over the rings, examining the wood like an old photograph.

Turned out he had a war buddy up in Childersburg with a portable sawmill, and they milled the trunk into some real nice-looking planks and then built an even nicer-looking jonboat with them before selling off the extra lumber. Sometimes he'd strap an outboard motor to it and take it out on the Coosa, casting for bass and drinking beer. Sometimes he'd take me with him and we'd sit in silence, watching our bobbers.

Then the droughts came, the Coosa started dwindling, and Daddy dried up himself—quit drinking cold turkey, with a little help from Jesus. He left the boat turned over in the dead-brown grass, covered in cypress needles.

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By the time I'd pulled enough food off the shelves to last us a week or two, the water in the bunker had reached the tops of my boots and my jeans were soaked up to the knees. I tried lifting the table, then dragging it, but the cans started falling off into the rising water. They didn't float. I peeled off my damp shirt to use like a sack, bundling as many cans as I could into it before slogging to the stairs.

They weren't really stairs anymore—more like a waterfall, a dirty cascade pulling at my ankles with each step I took. I looked up at the eight feet to the door, breathed deep, and staggered upward, clutching my sodden shirt tight and cussing whenever another can fell out. By the time I got to the top I only had a few left.

The shed was wet and dark but the door was open and through it I could see Daddy's silhouette, bent up but still strong, holding onto the jonboat with one hand and reaching out to me with the other. Come on, he said—looks like the Lord provided us an ark.

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Daddy had managed to haul the outboard onto the boat before the shed totally filled up, but

the gas can was lost and we didn't have oars so we just floated and waited. The water rose and rose, and we drifted with its currents past rooftops and floating wreckage. We saw other people floating and waiting, too, in boats of their own or on doors or just treading water, but we couldn't reach any of them; the currents had minds of their own.

The rain didn't stop for days. Eventually we couldn't even see the roofs or chimneys below us. The whole world was the same shade of grey.

We took shifts bailing out the boat, carefully rationing each can of okra or potted chicken between the two of us. We were cold and hungry and waterlogged and I don't think we said two words to each other the whole time.

When Daddy scraped the bottom of the last can he licked his fingers and looked me in the eye. Maybe it was hunger or maybe it was hypothermia setting in, but it was the same look he'd had when he set Mama's pictures on fire. You look just like her, he said. You always did. I asked him where he thought she was, and he looked at me like I'd just punched him in the gut. You know she wasn't saved, he said.

In a different life I wouldn't have said anything to him after that, and we'd have just shivered at each other until we both starved. But this wasn't that kind of apocalypse. I looked my daddy in the eye and told him to fuck off. Not like a teenager tells his parents when he's trying to piss them off, but like a man tells another man who's wronged him—simple, quiet, and truthful.

Why, Waylon? You want me to tell you she went to heaven?

If your heaven wouldn't take her, it's not much of a heaven, is it? You loved her, too, didn't you?

Daddy's eyes hid themselves beneath his creviced brow. I couldn't hear his breath through the rain, but his shoulders shook just a little with each exhale. He looked up at me, wiped the dripping water from his nose. She left us, Waylon.

I know that. I was there, too, I said. And then I saw Daddy take the deepest breath he could, hold it a minute, and let it out slow.

No, Waylon, I mean she left us—not died. She up and left and didn't come back. Took a three year contract to work in orbit and didn't come back down.

I'm not sure what I'd look like if I got hit by a bus, but I imagine that's not far off from how I looked right then. Before I could even collect my thoughts, Daddy started talking, more words than I'd heard him speak in the whole last year of living with him, the weight coming off his chest in rivulets.

I maybe shouldn't have told you she'd died, he said. That's a lot to pile onto a kid. I remember telling you, seeing your little shoulders sag and your sticky lip quiver, and I knew that I'd messed up. Fucked up—forgive me, Lord, but it's true. All I wanted was to take it back, to tell you I didn't mean it—she'd just left, is all. But even that seemed too cruel—look kid, your mama left us so she could go float around and find herself, and I don't know when or if she'll ever come back. So I guess it was just easier to kill her off, then and there, forever. And if she ever came back it'd be a miracle, God answering our prayers. But she didn't come back. We'd sent messages back and forth for a while; I even thought for a minute that she'd had enough space, was ready to come home. But the messages stopped, and she didn't come back, and that was it.

We were silent for a long time after that. The rain poured down and we stared at each other, the water rising around our ankles. I couldn't tell whether he was crying.

Why'd she leave? I asked. Daddy shrugged and bent down to start bailing out the boat.

Why does anybody leave somebody else? Why'd that last girl dump you? Lee, was it? You've got to listen more than you talk, kid—that way you can hear them when they're telling you what they want.

We kept talking after that, bailing ourselves out over and over. We told each other the stories we'd never seen fit to mention before: how I'd burned my house down, how he'd got injured in Iraq, how I'd stolen his car to drive to Atlanta for a punk show when I was thirteen, how he and Mama had eloped because her parents didn't think he was good enough for her. With each story the rain lessened, until our voices were hoarse and it wasn't raining at all.

When the clouds cleared, all we could see was the moon. It filled the sky from treeline to treeline, the water rising to meet it, lapping against its rocky underside. As we drew closer I saw a door open,

perfectly round and cut clean as glass, and light streamed out of it. A silhouette filled the doorway, one I remembered like an old song, and her arms reached out for me.

THANK YOU

To Madison, for encouragement, laughter, and bearing with me while I made this thing.

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ABOUT

Mark Wadley is an Alabamian living in Baltimore. He is the editor of *Deterritorial Audio Magazine*. He has been known to play abrasive music in dirty basements, engineer audio, troubleshoot all manner of technological quandary, and love his wife.

This is his first book.

"Exciting for those of us who seek smart new voices for understanding the world we now inhabit in this uneasy meantime, there is the irrefutable truth that Mark Wadley can spin a story that feels just like an old-time prophecy."

TJ Beitelman, author of *John the Revelator*

Seemed like the end of the world would be drawn out and drier than hell, punctuated by the occasional crashing satellite and dashes of fire along the interstate. Mother Nature didn't need much help in her fierce retaliation for a century or two of what must've felt like all-out, unprovoked warfare waged by her dumbest children. Maybe she didn't rain down fire and brimstone, but she sure did make it easy for people to fuck themselves right up: a truck's clacking brakes, an unwatched barbecue pit or turkey fryer, a careless cigarette—any little spark could catch.

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WADLEY

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