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STRIPES OF THE SIDE STEP WOLF



SONYA HARTNETT

INTERNATIONAL AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR



WALKER
BOOKS

The epigraph on page vii comes from “Proverbs of Hell” in
The Marriage of Heaven and Hell by William Blake

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*For my mother, Virginia,
roaming wolf country*

*Every thing possible to be
believ'd is an image of truth.*

WILLIAM BLAKE

The animal woke before dawn. Its body was curled tight against the frost that spiked the foot of the mountain and, except for the deep eyes that blinked and closed and blinked again, the creature made no move, as if the cold had frozen it through. It lay in a shallow pocket of rock and the parts of its body that touched the mountain were warmer than those parts exposed to the wet morning air. In time, a shiver ran along its muscles, and it rumped itself into a tenser ball. Its coat was thick but short and did not seem an adequate covering to see the animal through these chilly resting hours, yet every dawn it woke again, blinking and yawning, and the breath billowing out between its great wide jaws would take form and swirl, an echo like a memory of the animal itself.

A black-winged peewee arched across the clearing, so low to the ground that its white breast feathers disturbed the tips of the grass. It saw the animal in time to alter its course sharply, jerking into the sky as if caught on the end of a string, its wings

folding under its belly and flashing into a spire above its head. The animal's eyes were closed, but it opened them when the bird chattered in rage and alarm, the tiny body ducking up and down, a flurry of black and white and noise. The animal considered the bird momentarily, its ears swivelling a reluctant degree. The bird rushed forwards and immediately backwards, seeing its reflection skim the animal's eyes. It changed direction without effort, as though turning itself inside out, and shot away into the trees. The animal watched it perch and plump and launch again, and in a second it was gone. Awake now, the creature scanned the branches, the rocks, the tangled random smatterings of scrub. Its damp nose angled, detecting everything and nothing. The short whiskers that lay flat along its muzzle flexed as it stretched open its mouth suddenly; the tongue curled between the canines and lazily swiped the nose. Then the animal settled its chin into the nook between its ribs and thigh and closed its eyes once more.

As on every other day now, he woke up at dawn. One moment he was sleeping and the next he was awake, and nothing had disturbed him to cause the difference but he was awake and alert as if an alarm had rung or he'd felt some knife-like pain. It seemed to him that sleep and wake were extreme things that should ease gently into each other, but that was never how it was for him. He was awake, his eyes were open, he knew

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where he was and who he was and what he had to do that day. He lay in bed only minutes before swinging his feet from under the bedclothes and placing first one, then the other, on the floor; he pushed back the blankets that pressed about his shoulders and sat up, wiping the night from his face with the heel of a hand. He took his dressing-gown from its hook and slipped his arms through the sleeves as he padded down the hall, and he was in the kitchen coaxing a flame in the fire-place before the shape of his head had smoothed away from his pillow. Mornings were like this even on days when he woke knowing he had nothing to do: he was up and active and ignoring the cold. Usually his dog would be beside him, a golden-eyed familiar overseeing his every move, but this morning Moke was not around and when he whistled she did not come. Everything he did was geared to silence and his whistling was soft, but if she was anywhere in the house she would have heard, and come.

He filled the kettle high so he had time to dress before it boiled, sliding his cold legs into colder jeans and his feet into boots of hard, scuffed leather, and when he had made the tea he took his mug outside, to see the day and to look for Moke. The night had been frosty but the ice was melting under the sunrise, leaving the yard glistening and drenched. A row of sheds and stables enclosed the garden and the orchard and blocked his view of what lay beyond, but he knew. He knew

that if he skirted the empty stables and the pockmarked swaying sheds he would see land, land that could be called nothing more than that because there was nothing more to it. It was not flat land – it rose and fell into half-hearted humps and gullies – and apart from the occasional stand of evergreens it was empty land, infested with a tough silvery grass that grew as high as his kneecaps and could shear skin from a finger with its edges, could puncture flesh with its points. Sometimes the wind barrelled across the land like a hurricane and flattened completely the grass on the crest of each lolling, weak-willed hill and the sight of this would fill him with a kind of smirking glee, like a child who sees its brother make short work of a bully.

The land beyond the rust-riddled sheds was a dirty brown, silver shimmering desert: what grew on it needed no water, and what water fell on it soaked only deep enough to turn the topsoil into slime. If you were lost in this place, you would die as surely as if you were lost in a desert of sand.

He tipped the tea leaves on the garden and went inside for the car keys, expecting to see Moke standing on the linoleum with her tail wagging sheepishly, but the kitchen was as empty as before. He set the guard before the fireplace, collected the keys and went out again, detouring to the chicken run and scooping a tinful of grain from the barrel. The hens were waiting for him, clustered close to the wire, silenced

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by anticipation. He muttered words to them, but their round bright eyes watched the tin in his hands and when a single brown grain fell to the ground they squabbled against the wire, stretching their necks to reach it. He smiled: he liked the way they were so thoroughly self-absorbed. He, or a shape like his, would enter their thoughts at dawn, and they would watch for his appearance like fanatics promised a visitation – then he would feed them, and they would instantly forget him. He swung his arm and the grain swept into the air and over the fencing, raining down on heads and sloping backs.

The station wagon was cold and the sound of the engine struggling was harsh and loud and seemed to rattle the surrounds like marbles in a drum. He let the motor idle longer than it needed, and cast a glance guiltily at his father's bedroom window, but Moke did not come bounding to the seat beside him and eventually he released the brake. He let the wagon coast down the driveway and when it reached the road he pressed the accelerator and turned the car uphill, towards the shagginess of the mountain.

The sun rose around the sleeping animal and pricked out the colour in its coat, the sooty tip of each dun-brown hair, the rim of whiteness on the brink of each neat ear. The frost vanished quickly once the thaw had begun, sliding down the gutters of the grass to form a ball of water that soon seeped into the

dirt. Birds came down in their hundreds and strutted across the balding earth, wattlebirds and soldierbirds and wagtails and crows, the biggest watching the smallest and striding in to snatch what those smaller eyes found.

The animal, too, was a thief and an opportunist. If given the chance it would take a duck or a lamb, loping through a farmyard on its large, sure-placed paws. But most often it stayed true to its nature, a wild thing hunting wild things, its success grounded not in quickness but in a tremendous slow patience. It was not fast, but it could track its prey for hours, and this capacity for endurance was as fatal as its jaws.

Something moved, and the breeze caught the scent of it as sure as it catches a feather, lifting it, carrying it. An opportunist, the animal flashed open its eyes.

The mountain always looked to him like the handiwork of something suffering and enraged – an earthbound god or monster with a broken heart it hated to have, punching its fist into the rocky orb that caged it. But the mountain was, in truth, a volcano, standing massively alone, so long inactive and so fiercely weathered that its once-angular summit had been blunted like a nib. The years had chiselled the mountain a different shape and, if its slopes had once been tidily conical, it now had a thousand different peaks and plateaux and boulders that clung perilously to its countless blackened sides, casting

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shadows where dirt could gather and wildflowers grow. It had no crater, having suffocated itself with lava until the cavern had filled in and closed over like a wound. On its flattened top and all over its sides it jarred without reason in and out of itself, and it cried, too: water ran constantly down slick gutters on its hide and great towers of moss grew in the path of this wetness and linked the earth greenly to the sky. Parts of its bulk had been tamed, signposts hammered into fissures and walking tracks painted on its scarred ancient rump, but much of the mountain's knuckled mass was unconquered, picturesque and treacherous, and people came not to walk it but to scatter ashes at its base. He had seen the mountain so often that sometimes he would forget to see it, but at other times he would be awed by it, amazed by the way it rose so colossal and bad-tempered out of the thin bleached countryside around it. And, at other times, he would think of it as a gate that never opened to reveal what lay beyond, a barrier that forced him to turn back towards the ceaseless land.

When the track ended abruptly he left the wagon and continued on foot along a surging, slippery path, the little chainsaw he carried bumping regularly against his thigh. The breeze had lost the edge of its burning coldness and his breath had stopped coming out as fog; the sky was white with morning haze but the day itself would be fine. When he reached the clearing he put down the chainsaw and took off the coat

that bunched in folds around his wrists, slinging it safely in the crook of a tree. He had come to the wild side of the volcano where there was a graveyard of trees, redgum trunks and heavy branches that had cracked in the summer warmth or shattered with the winter chill. Here too were the victims of fires swept through in previous years, trees in random pieces with charry chewed outlines. The frost had left the wood moist and spongy, but beneath the bark would be a dry heart where slaters would be curled like raindrops and crumbs would mark the paths of borers. It would take an hour or more to cut the wood into wedges and stack it in the wagon and it would be lonely work: he was sorry he had not waited longer, called louder, for his dog.

He set the chainsaw against the cutting stump and pulled its starter cord: the tiny machine rumbled and the cord went rattling to its housing. The engine gagged and stopped. He yanked the cord again, and the engine bucked and fell mute. Again, and the sound was like the peculiar cry of some mythical beast, a loud brittle yowl that was there and gone, the beast instantly slain. He shook the chainsaw and heard the petrol slosh inside it. He tried the cord once more and this time the engine did not even sigh.

He took his hands from the machine and pondered it. He touched a finger to its set of hooked teeth. It was not his way to fly into a fury, to clench his fists or shout in frustration and

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slam the saw to the ground. Instead he strode to the battered wagon, the grass catching at him as he went and the mud suctioning his heels, and searched the car for an axe he knew was not there. He tramped back to the chainsaw and tried the cord hopefully. The silence stayed everywhere and there was grease under his nails. He gazed at the more portable branches on the ground, gauging if there were enough of them to salvage something for his effort.

Movement flickered on the edge of his vision and he turned to locate it. A wallaby launched itself through the clearing, its pace even and unhurried, its chunky grey body sprung on two narrow, pointed legs. It came quite close to him and looked at him as it did so, the boat-shaped ears rotating in unison, but it did not quicken its pace and continued steadily on: it pushed through the vegetation and disappeared, the grass sweeping back together like curtains at the end of a scene.

He lifted the chainsaw and a big twisting branch and carried both to the wagon. He traced his steps and collected three more branches and the dampness of them soaked through his sleeves as he took them to the car, the muck they had been sunk in smeared his boots and jeans. A spotted slug clung to his wrist and he flicked it away as he headed once more for the clearing. He carted another load and by now his shirt was grubby and wet and his journeys back and forth were marked out in the grass and broken fernery, his feet were sliding in

overturned wads of leaves. He stopped to push the hair from his eyes and glanced at the car, at the vast space inside it that he was meant to fill. He sniffed and sat down on the cutting stump. The breeze was blowing in his face and the haze in the sky had burned away. The birds that had been here when he arrived were gone, offended by the sight of him. The clearing was quiet enough for him to hear a falling leaf collide with the trunk that had supported it before hitting the ground softly, skidding a moment along a slant of buried rock.

The animal trotted into the clearing, its head low, its shoulders jutting and vanishing with each footstep. It stood tall enough to see above the grass but it veered around the blades when it could, plunging over the spikes in elegant leaps when it could not find bare earth. He stared at it and, quite suddenly, it saw him: it paused, one foreleg lifted, and jerked its head in his direction. He squinted back at it, the sun bright in his eyes.

“Hey,” he said. “Hey, dog.”

It didn’t move, not even lowering the raised leg. It was a handsome, tawny-coloured creature, sinewy but not thin, larger than his own dog but not by much. Its eyes were a strange triangular shape, set in muted patches of white. On its back and over its flanks were distinct black markings, like shivers running down its spine. He knew all the dogs that lived in the surrounding country but he had never seen this

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dog before, and he wondered if it had strayed, turned feral, become dangerous.

“You want that wallaby?” he asked. “It went that way.”

He lifted an arm and pointed and the animal swerved into the bracken, its smooth long tail slipping away. He listened a minute for any sign of it but it was gone utterly as soon as it was gone from sight. He wondered what its name had been, who had owned it, what hard history had left it alone here, at the feet of the hanging volcano.

He made four more trips from the wagon to the clearing and then there was no more wood he could carry without help, so he cleaned his hands on the rough surface of the chopping stump and drove back to town.