

Wolf in White Van

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A New York Times Bestseller

Nominated for the National Book Award, Finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize for First Fiction, and Winner of the Alex Award, "One of the Most Compelling Books of the Year" (Blake Butler, Vice)

Isolated by a disfiguring injury since the age of seventeen, Sean Phillips crafts imaginary worlds for strangers to explore. As the creator of "Trace Italian"-a text-based role-playing game that's played through the mail-Sean guides subscribers through his intricately imagined terrain, turn by turn, as they search out sanctuary in a ravaged, savage future America. But when Lance and Carrie, two teenaged seekers of the Trace, take their play outside the game, disaster strikes, and Sean is called on to account for it. In the process, he is pulled back through time, toward the beginning and the climax: the moment of his own self-inflicted departure from the world in which most people live.

Beautifully written and unexpectedly moving, *Wolf in White Van* is "an indelible novel, a hymn for those who inhabit lonely universes, and a harbor for anyone who has sought refuge in a reality other than their own" (Patrick deWitt).

John Darnielle is a writer, composer, guitarist, and vocalist for the band the Mountain Goats; he is widely considered one of the best lyricists of his generation. He lives in Durham, North Carolina, with his wife and son.

1

My father used to carry me down the hall to my room after I came home from the hospital. By then I could walk if I had to, but the risk of falling was too great, so he carried me like a child. It's a cluster memory now: it consists of every time it happened and is recalled in a continuous loop. He did it every day, for a long time, from my first day back until what seemed like a hundred years later, and after a while, the scene blurred into innumerable interchangeable identical scenes layered one on top of the other like transparencies. On the wall to the right, as you head toward my room, there's a small bookcase with a painting above it, a western scene: hills and trees, a lake. A blue and green vista near sundown, a silent place. But if you look harder, or happen to turn your head at the right moment as you pass, you see figures, human figures, on what you might otherwise take for an empty ridge. It's like an optical illusion, this hunting party on the near hill, their curving hats dark in the orange dusk: they come out of hiding if you look at the empty scenery long enough. They were always there in my journey, popping up in the same place each time I'd drift by in my half-sleep. They never lost their power to surprise just by being there, a little smoke rising from somewhere within their three-strong party, their brushstroke rifles resting lightly on their shoulders.

Next to the bookcase, receding into the wall, there's a chest-high shelf for a rotary phone. To the left, just past the painting, on the other side of the hall, is the bathroom, the sort of open door that if the cameras found it as they passed through the house in a horror

movie would trigger a blast of synthesizers. In my many days home after the hospital, I spent long hours in there, lifetimes: in the tub, at the sink. Just getting in and out. It would be a long time before I could comfortably stand underneath a showerhead, and my parents didn't trust me to sit in the bathtub by myself, so the bathroom became a communal space of forced intimacy. Reconstructed skin is very sensitive to temperature and moisture; the pain sneaks up on you. Every other day they'd bathe me, and every time, I'd feel like it wasn't so bad for a few minutes; and then the heat would slacken the resealed flaps of my cheeks a little, and the tingling would start up, a rippling alarm traveling down confused wires. I was too generally exhausted to be able to experience fear or panic for longer than a moment, and I'd try to bear the feeling evenly, but its grip was hard and sure, and it held me. My parents' eyes on me, trying to head off the pain at the pass, to start hoisting me out before I had to ask. Several kinds of pain for several people. The portal still glows with menace in my memory.

Ahead and beyond, two further doors: mine, straight on, and to the right, my parents'. My parents' room is an uncataloged planet, a night sky presence unknown to scientists but feared by the secret faithful who trade rumors of its mystery. I stood before this door once and didn't go in: that's the extent of the legend, really, but my journey down the hall that night, down the same stream through which my father carries me now in my wheeling memory, hints at pockets in the story that are still obscure, which will never find light. What if I'd gone in? I didn't go in. I stood there a minute and then turned away. If I'd turned around: What then? There are several possibilities; they open onto their own clusters of new ones, and there's an end somewhere, I'm sure, but I'll never see it.

I feel and remember my father's arms underneath me when I've come home from the hospital; he isn't strong enough to do this, but he is forcing himself to do it; I am heavy in his arms, and I feel safe there, but I am lost, and I need constantly to be shoring up the wall that holds my emotions at bay, or I will feel something too great to contain. I see the painting, those cowboy huntsmen at dusk, and they surprise me a little, and I feel my breath catch in my chest when I scan the bathroom; and then I arc my great head a little to the right toward my parents' room, which disappears from view as my father nudges at the base of my bedroom door with his foot and then turns jaggedly on his heels so we'll both fit through the frame. He lowers me onto my new bed, the one from the hospital-supply place on White, and I feel the hot egg crate mattress underneath the sheet. Dad squeezes my hand like I remember him doing when I was very small. We look at each other. Teamwork. This happens several times a day, or it's a single thing that's always happening somewhere, a current into which I can slip when I need to remember something.

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I saw this kid playing on the big metal wheel with the soldered piping: the merry-go-round. The merry-go-round at the fair is for babies, but the playground kind can throw you into the air at high speed; they have to put wood chips around it to break your fall just in case. This happened twice while I was watching: the kid spun the wheel faster and faster, jumped on, tried to crawl in to the still hub and lost his footing, and ended up sailing into the air and coming down hard. He'd lie there and laugh, dizzy, and then punch reset on the whole scene.

At my grandparents' place, after the last fish went missing, they filled the pond in with cedar chips: I used to play out there when I was little. It was a half-hidden spot between the house and the garage, too small a space to think of as a yard—three cypresses, some rocks here and there, and the former pond. I remember the changeover from water to wood, the shift in tone: that was how I ended up conjuring the place now. I lived whole lives out there back then.

The day they drained the pond I'd gone out back by myself after dinner. This had been a lakeside clearing in a forest for me, a magic place of wizards and wandering knights. It was still magic without the water, but the magic was different now. I could sense it. I closed my eyes.

When I opened them, I felt my mind working transformations. No lake but a cave floor. Not trees but torches burning with a mystic light. Behind them: the back wall of a cave. Before them, me, enthroned, my regal seat hewn from ancient rock, immovable, imperious.

The throne was actually a single stone brought in by the crew that filled in the pond. But under the weight of my small body, I felt it sprout ornately decorated arms with claws at the ends, and a bejeweled latticework back that climbed up several feet above my head. Transformed, it now boasted four short, sturdy legs that terminated in great glowing orbs pressing hard into the earth beneath. I took control of the place, of the scene: I made it mine. Groans echoed in the cave. Brittle bones broke beneath the knees of my crawling subjects. We had moved from San Jose to Montclair a few months back; it had ruined something for me. I was having a hard time making new friends. I had grown receptive to dark dreams.

I saw animal skins running down the cave floor, skull dust rising. Everyone in my orbit would have a terrible day: the arbiter of days had decreed it. From my increasingly improbable perch I looked toward the dark heavens somewhere up beyond the imagined cave ceiling, and I pantomimed the aspect of a man thinking hard about what he might want to eat. And then I looked back down to the present moment, and I spoke: "I am King Conan," I said. "I thirst for blood."

Backyard Conan, thrown together from half-understood comic books only, took several liberties with the particulars. The Conan that the world knew didn't drink blood, wasn't ruthless and cold. In his original form, he'd lived to follow a warrior's code of honor: enemies met death at his sword, and fellow barbarians shared in the plunder, but they were all men who lived by a code. The code was cruel, but just, consistent: coherent. When I became Conan things were different; his new birth had left scars. I ruled a smoking, wrecked kingdom with a hard and deadly hand. It was dark and gory. No one liked living there, not even its king. It had a soundtrack. All screams.

Small for my age, pants still too tight, enthroned atop the lone rock near the drained pond now stuffed with cedar, I looked out into green leaves drifting down and sought the far distance. In came men carrying prisoners, their hands and ankles tied to branches like hogs

at a Hawaiian feast. They were yelling in unknown tongues. Their muscles strained. The fire pit before my throne had sprung up in full glaze. The screams of the condemned ascended to the stars.

I couldn't fill in the finer points of the plot: what anybody'd done wrong, why they had to die. It didn't matter. I opened my mouth like a great bird. I was coming down to deal death: to the guilty, to the innocent, to anyone within reach. To you, before me, trapped in the cave above the fire. Flayed and roasted and shared out among the nameless. To die screaming reduced to smoke. Lost in some kingdom found by accident and never heard from again in this world. Eaten by forgotten warriors on unremembered quests for plunder now lost forever.

I was in the park feeding squirrels when the memory crested, peeking out from behind a sort of interior immovable monument in my skull where all the old things lie. I couldn't put an exact date to it. Somewhere late in the early game, among the several moves from one house to another, my dad between jobs and trying to find his footing. The filled-in fish pond seemed like a giveaway, but it could also have been flown in from some other scene, pasted on. Still: it grew vivid. The ivy in the backyard turning to jungle vines. The ground parching itself, bleaching itself. The composite sky-Pismo, Montclair, San Jose, places we'd lived, lost transitions-cracking along its surface like an old painting in an abandoned museum. And me, in the middle, on a throne whose legs eventually solidified as human femurs bound together with thick rope. I spent several minutes in deep concentration trying to get the picture fixed, to spot clues that would give me some exact sense of when and where, but the edges kept blurring. Sometimes I have trouble finding the edges.

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Presently the kid from the merry-go-round turned up in front of me-I'd gotten distracted by the squirrels while remembering my childhood, and I ended up lost. When I looked up, there he was-five years old, I figured, possibly younger. I used to be good at guessing things. I'm not now. He sat down next to me, a little distance between us, and his eyes went from my face to my hand, still casting out peanuts for squirrels or blue jays one at a time. And then he brought his gaze back to my face, where it rested.

He was very quiet as he looked up at me: I was a kid once; I thought I recognized on this one the look of a child deliberating within himself. He pointed in the direction of his question when he finally said it: "What did you do to your face?"

Well, I told him all about it. He listened while I spoke, while I explained what I had done, and when, and how, and he nodded at all the right places in the story. And then, of course, when I was done explaining, he asked "Why?" which is a tricky question for me, since the correct answer is "I don't know": and that's a hard thing to say once all the cards are right there on the table. But he pressed me on it: "Yes you do," he said. "You do so know."

It was a surprising moment on a day I'd set aside for doing very little, in what I'd already begun to think of as the aftermath. When I'd gotten into the car to drive to the park, I'd

thought to myself: You've earned an empty moment or two. Instead, here we were. I thought how there's always more to something than I usually think there is, and I said then that he was right; that I was the only one who could know why I had done what I did, and that I couldn't think of anybody else who'd be able to come up with any kind of answer. But it was still true that I didn't have any "why" for him; I just didn't have one. I had looked for one, and it wasn't there.

I could see him starting to think, hard, during the little minute of quiet that followed. Wheels turning. I wondered if maybe something difficult was opening itself up to him that maybe people do things for no reason, that things just happen, that nobody really knows much.

"I don't believe you. You don't know," he said. He looked straight at me. "You are a fibber."

"Am I a fibber?" I said, smiling, even though I feel ugly when I smile. I feel like I might have been good with children in a different life.

He nodded his head fiercely. "You are!"

I flipped my hands palms up, hip level at either side, sitting there on what I now thought of as our bench, and I shrugged. Inside my head I could see how I might have looked to some observer standing at a few paces, me and this kid pointing, and my face; and how we might again look to another observer, stationed at some slightly greater distance. To somebody waiting at the light across the street. How we'd look on film. Or from space. In a Kodak frame. All these ways.

And I liked what I saw, when I took it all in. It was ridiculous. It had an air of the inevitable to it. My smile got bigger as I let the picture grow to occupy the fullness of the space inside my head, and I just let it happen, even though I know it looks awful. Too late to hold back now. I looked over at the kid's family, who were motioning for him to return to their fold, and I felt something inside, something fine and small and dense. I looked out across the park. Came all this way and now here I am.

* * *

At the apartment complex the Saturday gardeners were just finishing up. The grass was tight and clean. They'd trimmed back the gardenia hedge so severely in some places that the stalks looked like petrified bones, little hands reaching up from the earth.

I went inside and I pattered around on the computer, trying to finish up something I'd been working on, a little corner of a detour hardly anybody ever cared about. Most weekends I try to put my work aside, but there wasn't anything else to do. Then I checked my bank accounts, a nervous habit: I'm not rich, or even that comfortable, but my grandmother opened up a savings account for me after my accident, and she kept putting a little into it every month for ten years until she died. It's a security blanket now. I look at what's in there whenever I start to worry that my own savings or the insurance payments or my work won't be enough. It's like checking a lock on a door: just making sure no bad guys are

going to get in. And then I played some music, old music, and it sounded awful, and I loved it, I loved it so much.

Later, the nurse from the VNA came by for my sinus irrigation and let herself in-it was Vicky, who I always call "Victory," because usually by the time she shows up I need a nurse so bad that I can barely breathe. "Victory!" I'll say then, raising my weak arms up champion-style. I sound hilarious when I try to pronounce the letter r.

"Well, Sean, yes, Victory's here. Victory's here, all right," she said today, the way she does, responding to things she hears as if they were thoughts that occurred to her inside her head, volume dwindling as she goes, the folds of her neck shaking gently. She looked at me, taking stock. "And Sean's here, too. Sean's here, right? Just like always. How you doing?"

And I started to say "fine," and I meant to say "fine," but I ended up saying that I felt my life was filled like a big jug to the brim with almost indescribable joy, so much that I hardly knew how to handle ...

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