

TREES

THE

A NOVEL

PERCIVAL EVERETT

BY THE AUTHOR OF TELEPHONE AND SO MUCH BLUE

THE TREES



Also by Percival Everett

Telephone

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THE TREES

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PERCIVAL EVERETT

Graywolf Press

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This publication is made possible, in part, by the voters of Minnesota through a Minnesota State Arts Board Operating Support grant, thanks to a legislative appropriation from the arts and cultural heritage fund. Significant support has also been provided by Target Foundation, the McKnight Foundation, the Lannan Foundation, the Amazon Literary Partnership, and other generous contributions from foundations, corporations, and individuals. To these organizations and individuals we offer our heartfelt thanks.



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Published by Graywolf Press
250 Third Avenue North, Suite 600
Minneapolis, Minnesota 55401

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www.graywolfpress.org

Published in the United States of America

ISBN 978-1-64445-064-2

Ebook ISBN 978-1-64445-156-4

2 4 6 8 9 7 5 3 1

First Graywolf Printing, 2021

Library of Congress Control Number: 2020951427

Cover design: Kapo Ng

For Steve, Katie, Marisa, Caroline, Anitra, and Fiona

The art of war is simple enough. Find out where your enemy is. Get at him as soon as you can. Strike at him as hard as you can and as often as you can, and keep moving on.

—U. S. Grant

THE TREES

RISE

1

Money, Mississippi, looks exactly like it sounds. Named in that persistent Southern tradition of irony and with the attendant tradition of nescience, the name becomes slightly sad, a marker of self-conscious ignorance that might as well be embraced because, let's face it, it isn't going away.

Just outside Money, there was what might have loosely been considered a suburb, perhaps even called a neighborhood, a not-so-small collection of vinyl-sided, split-level ranch and shotgun houses called, unofficially, Small Change. In one of the dying grass backyards, around the fraying edges of an empty aboveground pool, one adorned with faded mermaids, a small family gathering was happening. The gathering was neither festive nor special, but usual.

It was the home of Wheat Bryant and his wife, Charlene. Wheat was between jobs, was constantly, ever, always between jobs. Charlene was always quick to point out that the word *between* usually suggested something at either end, two somethings, or destinations, and that Wheat had held only one job in his whole life, so he wasn't between anything. Charlene worked as a receptionist at the Money Tractor Exchange J. Edgar Price Proprietor (the official business name, no commas), for both sales and service, though the business had not exchanged many tractors of late, or even repaired many. Times were hard in and around the town of Money. Charlene always wore a yellow halter top the same color as her dyed and poofed hair, and she did this because it made Wheat angry. Wheat chain-drunk cans of Falstaff beer and chain-smoked Virginia Slims cigarettes, claiming to be one of those feminists because he did, telling his children that the drinks were necessary to keep his big belly properly inflated, and the smokes

were important to his bowel regularity.

When outside, Wheat's mother—Granny Carolyn, or Granny C—wheeled herself around in one of those wide-tired electric buggies from Sam's Club. It was not simply like the buggies from Sam's Club; it was, in fact, permanently borrowed from the Sam's Club down in Greenwood. It was red and had white letters that spelled *am's Clu*. The hardworking electric motor emitted a constant, loud whir that made conversation with the old woman more than a bit of a challenge.

Granny C always looked a little sad. And why not? Wheat was her son. Charlene hated the woman nearly as much as she hated Wheat, but never showed it; she was an old woman, and in the South you respect your elders. Her four grandchildren, three years to ten, looked nothing like each other, but couldn't possibly have belonged anywhere else or to anyone else. They called their father by his first name, and they called their mother Hot Mama Yeller, the CB handle she used when she chatted with truckers late at night after the family was asleep, and occasionally while she cooked.

That CB chatter made Wheat angry, partly because it reminded him of the one job he'd had: driving a semitrailer truck full of fruits and vegetables for the Piggly Wiggly chain of grocery markets. He lost that job when he fell asleep and drove his truck off the Tallahatchie Bridge. Not completely off, as the cab dangled over the Little Tallahatchie River for many hours before he was rescued. He was saved by climbing into the bucket of an excavator brought over from Leflore. He might actually have held on to his job had the truck not held on, had simply and quickly plunged immediately and anticlimactically off the bridge and into the muddy river below. But as it happened, there was ample time for the story to blow up and show up on CNN and Fox and YouTube, repeated every twelve minutes and going viral. The killing image was the clip of some forty empty cans of Falstaff beer spilling from the cab and raining into the current below. Even that might not have been so bad had he not been clutching a can in his fat fist as he climbed through the teeth off the excavator bucket.

Also at the gathering was Granny C's brother's youngest boy, Junior Junior. His father, J. W. Milam, was called Junior, and so

his son was Junior Junior, never J. Junior, never Junior J., never J. J., but Junior Junior. The older, called Just Junior after the birth of his son, had died of “the cancer” as Granny C called it some ten years earlier. He passed away within a month of Roy, her husband and Wheat’s daddy. She considered it somehow important that they died of the same thing.

“Granny C, ain’t you hot in that ridiculous hat?” Charlene shouted at the old woman over the whir of her buggy.

“What say?”

“I mean, that hat ain’t even straw. It’s like a vinyl tarp or something. And it ain’t got no breathing holes in it.”

“What?”

“She cain’t hear you, Hot Mama Yeller,” her ten-year-old said. “She cain’t hear nothing. She’s deaf as a post.”

“Hell, Lulabelle, I know that. But you cain’t say I didn’t tell her about that hat when she up and keels over from heatstroke.” She looked down at Granny C again. “And that contraption she rolls around in gets all hot too. That makes you even hotter!” she yelled at the woman. “How does she keep living? That’s what I want to know.”

“Leave my mama alone,” Wheat said, half-laughing. He might have been half-laughing. Who could tell? His mouth was twisted in a permanent lopsided sneer. Many believed he’d suffered a mild stroke while eating ribs months before.

“She’s wearing that ridiculous hot hat again,” Charlene said. “Gonna make herself sick.”

“So? She don’t mind. The hell you care, anyway?” Wheat said.

Junior Junior screwed the cap back onto his paper bag-wrapped bottle and said, “Why the fuck y’all ain’t got no water in this pool?”

“Damn thing leaks,” Wheat said. “Got a crack in the wall from where Mavis Dill fell into the side of it with her fat ass. She weren’t even tryin’ to go swimming, just walkin’ by and fell on it.”

“How did she manage to fall?”

“She’s just fat, Junior Junior,” Charlene said. “The load gets leanin’ one way and that’s the way it’s gotta go. Gravity. Wheat can tell you all about that. Ain’t that right, Wheat? You know all about gravity.”

“Fuck you,” Wheat said.

“I won’t have that kind of talk around my grands,” Granny C said.

“And how the hell did she hear that?” Charlene said. “She cain’t hear screaming, but she can hear that.”

“I hear plenty,” the old woman said. “Don’t I hear plenty, Lulabelle?”

“Y’all sure do,” the girl said. She had climbed onto her grandmother’s lap. “You can hear just about anything. Cain’t you, Granny C? Y’all is damn near dead, but y’all can hear just fine. Right, Granny C?”

“Sho ’nuff, baby doll.”

“So, what you gonna do with this pool?” Junior Junior asked.

“Why?” Wheat asked. “You want to buy it? I’ll sell it to you in a heartbeat. Make me an offer.”

“I can put me some pigs in this thing. Just carve out the bottom and stick them pigs in there.”

“Take it away,” Wheat said.

“I could just bring them pigs here. That would be easier, don’t you think?”

Wheat shook his head. “But then we’d be smelling your hogs. I don’t want to be smelling your hogs.”

“But you got it all set up and staked out so nice-like. Gonna be a lot of work to move it.” Junior Junior lit a skinny green cigar. “You can keep one of them hogs for yourself. How about that?”

“I don’t need no fucking hog,” Wheat said.

“Language!” Granny C shouted.

“If I want bacon, I go to the store,” Wheat said.

“And buy it with my money,” Charlene said. “Bring them pigs on over, Junior Junior, but I want to keep two of ’em, big ones, and you butcher ’em.”

“Deal.”

Wheat didn’t say anything. He walked across the yard and helped the four-year-old climb into her pink plastic car.

Granny C stared off into space. Charlene studied her for a minute. “Granny C, you okay?”

The old woman didn’t reply.

“Granny C?”

“What’s wrong with her?” Junior Junior asked, leaning in. “She

havin' a stroke or something?"

Granny C startled them. "No, you rednecked talking turnip, I ain't havin' no stroke. I swear, a person cain't reflect on her life around here without some fool accusing her of havin' a stroke. Are *you* havin' a stroke? You the one show symptoms."

"How come you jumpin' on me?" Junior Junior asked. "Charlene was staring at you first."

"Never mind him," Charlene said. "What was you thinking on, Granny C?"

Granny C stared off again. "About something I wished I hadn't done. About the lie I told all them years back on that nigger boy."

"Oh Lawd," Charlene said. "We on that again."

"I wronged that little pickaninny. Like it say in the good book, what goes around comes around."

"What good book is that?" Charlene asked. "*Guns and Ammo?*"

"No, the Bible, you heathen."

The yard became quiet. The old woman went on. "I didn't say he said something to me, but Bob and J. W., they insisted he did, and so I went along with it. I wish to Jesus I hadn't. J. W. hated him some niggers."

"Well, it's all done and past history now, Granny C. So you just relax. Ain't nothing can change what happened. You cain't bring the boy back."

2

Deputy Sheriff Delroy Digby was driving his twelve-year-old Crown Victoria squad car across the Tallahatchie Bridge when he received a call to go to Small Change. He pulled into the front yard of Junior Junior Milam and saw the man's wife, Daisy, pacing and crying, gesticulating wildly. Delroy had dated Daisy briefly in high school, and it had stopped when she actually bit his tongue. Then he went into the army and became a clerk in the quartermaster's corp. He returned home to Mississippi to find Daisy married to Junior Junior and pregnant with her fourth child. That child was on her hip as she paced now, and the other three were sitting like zombies on the first step of the porch.

"What's goin' on, Daisy?" Delroy asked.

Daisy stopped waving her arms and stared at him. Her face was crunched from crying, her eyes red and sunken.

"What is it? What happened, Daisy?" he asked.

"The room all the way in the back," she said. "It's Junior Junior. Oh Lawd, I think he's dead," she whispered so the children couldn't hear. "He got to be dead. We all just got back from the big swap meet in the Sam's Club parking lot. The babies ain't seen nothing. Lawd, it's just awful."

"Okay, Daisy. You stay here."

"There's something else back there too," she said.

Delroy put his hand on his pistol. "What?"

"Somebody. He's dead too. Must be dead. Oh, he's dead. Gotta be dead. You'll see."

Delroy was confused and now more than a little scared. All he ever did in the service was count rolls of toilet paper. He went back to his patrol car and grabbed the radio. "Hattie, this here is Delroy. I'm out at Junior Junior Milam's place and I think I'm gonna need

me some backup.”

“Brady’s not far from there. I’ll send him over.”

“Thank you, Hattie, ma’am. Tell him I’ll be in the back of the house.” Delroy put down the handset and returned to Daisy. “I’m gonna take me a little look-see. You send Brady back there when he arrives.”

“The room is just off the kitchen,” she said. “Delroy.” She put her hand gently on his arm. “You know, I always liked you when we was in high school. I didn’t mean to bite your tongue, and I’m awfully sorry about that. Fast Phyllis Tucker told me all the boys liked that and so I did it. You didn’t like it. I guess I did it too hard.”

“Okay, Daisy.” He started away and then turned back to the woman. “Daisy, you didn’t kill him, did you?”

“Delroy, I’m the one who called the police.”

Delroy stared at her.

“No, I did not kill him. Either one of them.”

Delroy didn’t draw his weapon as he entered the house, but he kept his hand heavy on it. He walked slowly through the front room. It was dark because the windows were so remarkably small. There was a line of small bowling trophies on the mantel. The fireplace was filled with stacks of brightly colored plastic bowls, plates, and cups. The house was so still and quiet he got more frightened and pulled his pistol. What if the killer was still there? Should he go back outside and wait for Brady? If he did that, Daisy might think he was a coward. Brady would certainly laugh at him and call him a yellow chicken. So, he kept moving forward. He gave each bedroom a cursory look, then stood in the kitchen for a long while before pushing on into the back room. His boots made a lot of noise on the buckled linoleum.

He stopped in his tracks once inside the room. He couldn’t move. He had never seen two people so dead in his entire life. And he’d been in a goddamn war. Who or what he took to be Junior Junior had a bloody, bashed-in skull. He could see part of his brain. A long length of rusty barbed wire was wrapped several times around his neck. One of his eyes had been either gouged out or carved out and lay next to his thigh, looking up at him. There was blood everywhere. One of his arms was twisted at an impossible angle

behind his back. His pants were undone and pulled down to below his knees. His groin was covered with matted blood, and it looked like his scrotum was missing. Some ten feet from Junior Junior was the body of a small Black man. His face was horribly beaten, his head swollen, his neck scarred and seemingly stitched together. He was not bleeding, it seemed, but there was no doubt that he was dead. The Black man wore a dark blue suit. Delroy looked again at Junior Junior. The man's exposed legs looked strangely alive.

Delroy jumped a little when Brady appeared behind him.

"Good Lord Almighty!" Brady said. "Goddamn! Is that Junior Junior?"

"I think so," Delroy said.

"Any idea who the nigger is?"

"None."

"What a mess," Brady said. "Lord, Lordy, Lord, Lord, Jesus. Looky at that. His balls ain't on him!"

"I see that."

"I think they're in the nigger's hand," Brady said.

"You're right." Delroy leaned in for a closer look.

"Don't touch nothing. Don't touch a gawddamn thing. We got ourselves some kind of crime here. Lordy."

3

“Goddamnit, I hate murder more than just about anything,” said Sheriff Red Jetty. “It can just ruin a day.”

“Because it’s such a waste of life?” the coroner, Reverend Cad Fondle, asked. He had just pronounced Junior Junior and the unidentified Black man dead without so much as touching them.

“No, it’s because it’s a mess.”

“It is a lot of blood,” Fondle said.

“I don’t give a shit about the blood. It’s the goddamn paperwork.” Jetty pointed at the floor. “What you gonna do about Milam’s balls there?”

“Tell your boys to bag ’em. Can’t see there’s much point in sewin’ them back on him. But the mortician can decide that with the family.”

Sheriff Jetty squatted, being careful not to land on a knee, and studied the Black corpse, tilted his head.

“What you seein’, Red?” Fondle asked.

“Don’t he look familiar?”

“I can’t tell what he looks like. That’s a lot of damage. Besides, they all look alike to me.”

“You think Junior Junior did that to him?”

Fondle shook his head. “None of it looks fresh.”

“Well, let’s get ’em in the wagon and take them to the morgue.” Jetty looked back into the kitchen. “Delroy! Get the bags.”

“You want we should dust for prints?” Delroy asked. “We ain’t touched nothing. In this room, anyway.”

“Why bother? Oh sure, why the hell not. You and Brady do that. Then help clean up all this blood.”

“That ain’t in my job description,” Brady said.

“You want to keep a job to describe?” Jetty asked.

“Clean up the blood,” Brady repeated. “Come on, Delroy.”