

Cormac McCarthy

Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *The Road*

NO COUNTRY FOR OLD MEN



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**NO COUNTRY
FOR OLD MEN**

Cormac McCarthy

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The author would like to express his appreciation to the Santa Fe Institute for his long association and his four-year residence. He would also like to thank Amanda Urban.

I

I sent one boy to the gaschamber at Huntsville. One and only one. My arrest and my testimony. I went up there and visited with him two or three times. Three times. The last time was the day of his execution. I didnt have to go but I did. I sure didnt want to. He'd killed a fourteen year old girl and I can tell you right now I never did have no great desire to visit with him let alone go to his execution but I done it. The papers said it was a crime of passion and he told me there wasnt no passion to it. He'd been datin this girl, young as she was. He was nineteen. And he told me that he had been plannin to kill somebody for about as long as he could remember. Said that if they turned him out he'd do it again. Said he knew he was goin to hell. Told it to me out of his own mouth. I dont know what to make of that. I surely dont. I thought I'd never seen a person like that and it got me to wonderin if maybe he was some new kind. I watched them strap him into the seat and shut the door. He might of looked a bit nervous about it but that was about all. I really believe that he knew he was goin to be in hell in fifteen minutes. I believe that. And I've thought about that a lot. He was not hard to talk to. Called me Sheriff. But I didnt know what to say to him. What do you say to a man that by his own admission has no soul? Why would you say anything? I've thought about it a good deal. But he wasnt nothin compared to what was comin down the pike.

They say the eyes are the windows to the soul. I dont know what them eyes was the windows to and I guess I'd as soon not know. But there is another view of the world out there and other eyes to see it and that's where this is goin. It has done brought me to a place in my life I would not of thought I'd of come to. Somewhere out there is a true and living prophet of destruction and I dont want to confront him. I know he's real. I have seen his work. I walked in front of those eyes once. I wont do it again. I wont push my chips forward and stand up and go out to meet him. It aint just bein older. I wish

that it was. I cant say that it's even what you are willin to do. Because I always knew that you had to be willin to die to even do this job. That was always true. Not to sound glorious about it or nothin but you do. If you aint they'll know it. They'll see it in a heartbeat. I think it is more like what you are willin to become. And I think a man would have to put his soul at hazard. And I wont do that. I think now that maybe I never would.

The deputy left Chigurh standing in the corner of the office with his hands cuffed behind him while he sat in the swivelchair and took off his hat and put his feet up and called Lamar on the mobile.

Just walked in the door. Sheriff he had some sort of thing on him like one of them oxygen tanks for emphysema or whatever. Then he had a hose that run down the inside of his sleeve and went to one of them stunguns like they use at the slaughterhouse. Yessir. Well that's what it looks like. You can see it when you get in. Yessir. I got it covered. Yessir.

When he stood up out of the chair he swung the keys off his belt and opened the locked desk drawer to get the keys to the jail. He was slightly bent over when Chigurh squatted and scooted his manacled hands beneath him to the back of his knees. In the same motion he sat and rocked backward and passed the chain under his feet and then stood instantly and effortlessly. If it looked like a thing he'd practiced many times it was. He dropped his cuffed hands over the deputy's head and leaped into the air and slammed both knees against the back of the deputy's neck and hauled back on the chain.

They went to the floor. The deputy was trying to get his hands inside the chain but he could not. Chigurh lay there pulling back on the bracelets with his knees between his arms and his face averted. The deputy was flailing wildly and he'd begun to walk sideways over the floor in a circle, kicking over the wastebasket, kicking the chair across the room. He kicked shut the door and he wrapped the throwrug in a wad about them. He was gurgling and bleeding from the mouth. He was strangling on his own blood. Chigurh only hauled the harder. The nickelplated cuffs bit to the bone. The deputy's right carotid artery burst and a jet of blood shot across the room and hit the wall and ran down it. The deputy's legs slowed and then stopped. He lay jerking. Then he stopped moving altogether. Chigurh lay breathing quietly, holding him. When he got up he took the keys from the deputy's belt and released himself and put the deputy's revolver in the waistband of his trousers and

went into the bathroom.

He ran cold water over his wrists until they stopped bleeding and he tore strips from a handtowel with his teeth and wrapped his wrists and went back into the office. He sat on the desk and fastened the toweling with tape from a dispenser, studying the dead man gaping up from the floor. When he was done he got the deputy's wallet out of his pocket and took the money and put it in the pocket of his shirt and dropped the wallet to the floor. Then he picked up his airtank and the stungun and walked out the door and got into the deputy's car and started the engine and backed around and pulled out and headed up the road.

On the interstate he picked out a late model Ford sedan with a single driver and turned on the lights and hit the siren briefly. The car pulled onto the shoulder. Chigurh pulled in behind him and shut off the engine and slung the tank across his shoulder and stepped out. The man was watching him in the rearview mirror as he walked up.

What's the problem, officer? he said.

Sir would you mind stepping out of the vehicle?

The man opened the door and stepped out. What's this about? he said.

Would you step away from the vehicle please.

The man stepped away from the vehicle. Chigurh could see the doubt come into his eyes at this bloodstained figure before him but it came too late. He placed his hand on the man's head like a faith healer. The pneumatic hiss and click of the plunger sounded like a door closing. The man slid soundlessly to the ground, a round hole in his forehead from which the blood bubbled and ran down into his eyes carrying with it his slowly uncoupling world visible to see. Chigurh wiped his hand with his handkerchief. I just didnt want you to get blood on the car, he said.

Moss sat with the heels of his boots dug into the volcanic gravel of the ridge and glassed the desert below him with a pair of twelve power german binoculars. His hat pushed back on his head. Elbows propped on his knees. The rifle strapped over his shoulder with a harness-leather sling was a heavybarreled .270 on a '98 Mauser action with a laminated stock of maple and walnut. It carried a Unertl telescopic sight of the same power as the binoculars. The antelope were a little under a mile away. The sun was up less than an hour and the shadow of the ridge and the datilla and the rocks fell far out across the floodplain below him. Somewhere out there was the shadow of Moss himself. He lowered the binoculars and sat studying the land. Far to the south the raw mountains of Mexico. The breaks of the river. To the west the baked terracotta terrain of the running borderlands. He spat dryly and wiped his mouth on the shoulder of his cotton workshirt.

The rifle would shoot half minute of angle groups. Five inch groups at one thousand yards. The spot he'd picked to shoot from lay just below a long talus of lava scree and it would put him well within that distance. Except that it would take the better part of an hour to get there and the antelope were grazing away from him. The best he could say about any of it was that there was no wind.

When he got to the foot of the talus he raised himself slowly and looked for the antelope. They'd not moved far from where he last saw them but the shot was still a good seven hundred yards. He studied the animals through the binoculars. In the compressed air motes and heat distortion. A low haze of shimmering dust and pollen. There was no other cover and there wasnt going to be any other shot.

He wallowed down in the scree and pulled off one boot and laid it over the rocks and lowered the forearm of the rifle down into the leather and pushed off the safety with his thumb and sighted through the scope.

They stood with their heads up, all of them, looking at him.

Damn, he whispered. The sun was behind him so they couldn't very well have seen light reflect off the glass of the scope. They had just flat seen him.

The rifle had a Canjar trigger set to nine ounces and he pulled the rifle and the boot toward him with great care and sighted again and jacked the crosshairs slightly up the back of the animal standing most broadly to him. He knew the exact drop of the bullet in hundred yard increments. It was the distance that was uncertain. He laid his finger in the curve of the trigger. The boar's tooth he wore on a gold chain spooled onto the rocks inside his elbow.

Even with the heavy barrel and the muzzlebrake the rifle bucked up off the rest. When he pulled the animals back into the scope he could see them all standing as before. It took the 150 grain bullet the better part of a second to get there but it took the sound twice that. They were standing looking at the plume of dust where the bullet had hit. Then they bolted. Running almost immediately at top speed out upon the barrial with the long whaang of the rifleshot rolling after them and caroming off the rocks and yawing back across the open country in the early morning solitude.

He stood and watched them go. He raised the glasses. One of the animals had dropped back and was packing one leg and he thought that the round had probably skipped off the pan and caught him in the left hindquarters. He leaned and spat. Damn, he said.

He watched them out of sight beyond the rocky headlands to the south. The pale orange dust that hung in the windless morning light grew faint and then it too was gone. The barrial stood silent and empty in the sun. As if nothing had occurred there at all. He sat and pulled on his boot and picked up the rifle and ejected the spent casing and put it in his shirtpocket and closed the bolt. Then he slung the rifle over his shoulder and set out.

It took him some forty minutes to cross the barrial. From there he made his way up a long volcanic slope and followed the crest of the ridge southeast to an overlook above the country into which the animals had vanished. He glassed the terrain slowly. Crossing that ground was a large tailless dog,

black in color. He watched it. It had a huge head and cropped ears and it was limping badly. It paused and stood. It looked behind it. Then it went on. He lowered the glasses and stood watching it go.

He hiked on along the ridge with his thumb hooked in the shoulderstrap of the rifle, his hat pushed back on his head. The back of his shirt was already wet with sweat. The rocks there were etched with pictographs perhaps a thousand years old. The men who drew them hunters like himself. Of them there was no other trace.

At the end of the ridge was a rockslide, a rough trail leading down. Candelilla and scrub catclaw. He sat in the rocks and steadied his elbows on his knees and scanned the country with the binoculars. A mile away on the floodplain sat three vehicles.

He lowered the binoculars and looked over the country at large. Then he raised them again. There looked to be men lying on the ground. He jacked his boots into the rocks and adjusted the focus. The vehicles were four wheel drive trucks or Broncos with big all-terrain tires and winches and racks of rooflights. The men appeared to be dead. He lowered the glasses. Then he raised them again. Then he lowered them and just sat there. Nothing moved. He sat there for a long time.

When he approached the trucks he had the rifle unslung and cradled at his waist with the safety off. He stopped. He studied the country and then he studied the trucks. They were all shot up. Some of the tracks of holes that ran across the sheetmetal were spaced and linear and he knew they'd been put there with automatic weapons. Most of the glass was shot out and the tires flat. He stood there. Listening.

In the first vehicle there was a man slumped dead over the wheel. Beyond were two more bodies lying in the gaunt yellow grass. Dried blood black on the ground. He stopped and listened. Nothing. The drone of flies. He walked around the end of the truck. There was a large dead dog there of the kind he'd seen crossing the floodplain. The dog was gutshot. Beyond that was a third body lying face down. He looked through the window at the man in the truck.

He was shot through the head. Blood everywhere. He walked on to the second vehicle but it was empty. He walked out to where the third body lay. There was a shotgun in the grass. The shotgun had a short barrel and it was fitted with a pistol stock and a twenty round drum magazine. He nudged the man's boot with his toe and studied the low surrounding hills.

The third vehicle was a Bronco with a lifted suspension and dark smoked windows. He reached up and opened the driver side door. There was a man sitting in the seat looking at him.

Moss stumbled back, leveling the rifle. The man's face was bloody. He moved his lips dryly. Agua, cuate, he said. Agua, por dios.

He had a shortbarreled H&K machinepistol with a black nylon shoulderstrap lying in his lap and Moss reached and got it and stepped back. Agua, the man said. Por dios.

I aint got no water.

Agua.

Moss left the door open and slung the H&K over his shoulder and stepped away. The man followed him with his eyes. Moss walked around the front of the truck and opened the door on the other side. He lifted the latch and folded the seat forward. The cargo space in the rear was covered with a metallic silver tarp. He pulled it back. A load of bricksized parcels each wrapped in plastic. He kept one eye on the man and got out his knife and cut a slit in one of the parcels. A loose brown powder dribbled out. He wet his forefinger and dipped it in the powder and smelled it. Then he wiped his finger on his jeans and pulled the tarp back over the parcels and stepped back and looked over the country again. Nothing. He walked away from the truck and stood and glassed the low hills. The lava ridge. The flat country to the south. He got out his handkerchief and walked back and wiped clean everything he'd touched. The doorhandle and the seatlatch and the tarp and the plastic package. He crossed around to the other side of the truck and wiped everything down there too. He tried to think what else he might have touched. He went back to the first truck and opened the door with his kerchief and looked in. He opened

the glovebox and closed it again. He studied the dead man at the wheel. He left the door open and walked around to the driver side. The door was full of bulletholes. The windshield. Small caliber. Six millimeter. Maybe number four buckshot. The pattern of them. He opened the door and pushed the windowbutton but the ignition was not on. He shut the door and stood there, studying the low hills.

He squatted and unslung the rifle from off his shoulder and laid it in the grass and took the H&K and pushed back the follower with the heel of his hand. There was a live round in the chamber but the magazine held only two more rounds. He sniffed at the muzzle of the piece. He ejected the clip and slung the rifle over one shoulder and the machinepistol over the other and walked back to the Bronco and held the clip up for the man to see. Otra, he said. Otra.

The man nodded. En mi bolsa.

You speak english?

He didnt answer. He was trying to gesture with his chin. Moss could see two clips sticking out of the canvas pocket of the jacket he was wearing. He reached into the cab and got them and stepped back. Smell of blood and fecal matter. He put one of the full clips into the machinepistol and the other two in his pocket. Agua, cuate, the man said.

Moss scanned the surrounding country. I told you, he said. I aint got no water.

La puerta, the man said.

Moss looked at him.

La puerta. Hay lobos.

There aint no lobos.

Sí, sí. Lobos. Leones.

Moss shut the door with his elbow.

He went back to the first truck and stood looking at the open door on the passenger side. There were no bulletholes in the door but there was blood on the seat. The key was still in the ignition and he reached in and turned it and then pushed the windowbutton. The glass ratcheted slowly up out of the channel. There were two bulletholes in it and a fine spray of dried blood on the inside of the glass. He stood there thinking about that. He looked at the ground. Stains of blood in the clay. Blood in the grass. He looked out down the track south across the caldera back the way the truck had come. There had to be a last man standing. And it wasnt the cuate in the Bronco begging for water.

He walked out on the floodplain and cut a wide circle to see where the track of the tires in the thin grass would show in the sun. He cut for sign a hundred feet to the south. He picked up the man's trail and followed it until he came to blood in the grass. Then more blood.

You aint goin far, he said. You may think you are. But you aint.

He quit the track altogether and walked out to the highest ground visible holding the H&K under his arm with the safety off. He glassed the country to the south. Nothing. He stood fingering the boar's tusk at the front of his shirt. About now, he said, you're shaded up somewheres watchin your backtrack. And the chances of me seein you fore you see me are about as close to nothin as you can get without fallin in.

He squatted and steadied his elbows on his knees and with the binoculars swept the rocks at the head of the valley. He sat and crossed his legs and went over the terrain more slowly and then lowered the glasses and just sat. Do not, he said, get your dumb ass shot out here. Do not do that.

He turned and looked at the sun. It was about eleven oclock. We dont even know that all of this went down last night. It could of been two nights ago. It might even could of been three.

Or it could of been last night.

A light wind had come up. He pushed back his hat and wiped his forehead with his bandanna and put the bandanna back in the hip pocket of his jeans. He looked across the caldera toward the low range of rock on the eastern perimeter.

Nothin wounded goes uphill, he said. It just dont happen.

It was a good hard climb to the top of the ridge and it was close to noon by the time he got there. Far off to the north he could see the shape of a tractor-trailer moving across the shimmering landscape. Ten miles. Maybe fifteen. Highway 90. He sat and swept the new country with the glasses. Then he stopped.

At the foot of a rockslide on the edge of the bajada was a small piece of something blue. He watched it for a long time through the binoculars. Nothing moved. He studied the country about. Then he watched it some more. It was the better part of an hour before he rose and started down.

The dead man was lying against a rock with a nickelplated government .45 automatic lying cocked in the grass between his legs. He'd been sitting up and had slid over sideways. His eyes were open. He looked like he was studying something small in the grass. There was blood on the ground and blood on the rock behind him. The blood was still a dark red but then it was still shaded from the sun. Moss picked up the pistol and pressed the grip safety with his thumb and lowered the hammer. He squatted and tried to wipe the blood off the grips on the leg of the man's trousers but the blood was too well congealed. He stood and stuck the gun in his belt at the small of his back and pushed back his hat and blotted the sweat from his forehead with his shirtsleeve. He turned and stood studying the countryside. There was a heavy leather document case standing upright alongside the dead man's knee and Moss absolutely knew what was in the case and he was scared in a way that he didnt even understand.

When he finally picked it up he just walked out a little ways and sat down in the grass and slid the rifle off his shoulder and laid it aside. He sat with his legs spaced and the H&K in his lap and the case standing between his knees.

Then he reached and unbuckled the two straps and unsnapped the brass latch and lifted the flap and folded it back.

It was level full of hundred dollar banknotes. They were in packets fastened with banktape stamped each with the denomination \$10,000. He didnt know what it added up to but he had a pretty good idea. He sat there looking at it and then he closed the flap and sat with his head down. His whole life was sitting there in front of him. Day after day from dawn till dark until he was dead. All of it cooked down into forty pounds of paper in a satchel.

He raised his head and looked out across the bajada. A light wind from the north. Cool. Sunny. One oclock in the afternoon. He looked at the man lying dead in the grass. His good crocodile boots that were filled with blood and turning black. The end of his life. Here in this place. The distant mountains to the south. The wind in the grass. The quiet. He latched the case and fastened the straps and buckled them and rose and shouldered the rifle and then picked up the case and the machinepistol and took his bearings by his shadow and set out.

He thought he knew how to get to his truck and he also thought about wandering through the desert in the dark. There were Mojave rattlesnakes in that country and if he got bit out here at night he would in all likelihood be joining the other members of the party and the document case and its contents would then pass on to some other owner. Weighed against these considerations was the problem of crossing open ground in broad daylight on foot with a fully automatic weapon slung across one shoulder and carrying a satchel containing several million dollars. Beyond all this was the dead certainty that someone was going to come looking for the money. Maybe several someones.

He thought about going back and getting the shotgun with the drum magazine. He was a strong believer in the shotgun. He even thought about leaving the machinepistol behind. It was a penitentiary offense to own one.

He didnt leave anything behind and he didnt go back to the trucks. He set

out across country, cutting through the gaps in the volcanic ridges and crossing the flat or rolling country between. Until late in the day he reached the ranch road he'd come down that morning in the dark so long ago. Then in about a mile he came to the truck.

He opened the door and stood the rifle in the floor. He went around and opened the driver door and pushed the lever and slid the seat forward and set the case and the machinepistol behind it. He laid the .45 and the binoculars in the seat and climbed in and pushed the seat back as far as it would go and put the key in the ignition. Then he took off his hat and leaned back and just rested his head against the cold glass behind him and closed his eyes.

When he got to the highway he slowed and rattled over the bars of the cattleguard and then pulled out onto the blacktop and turned on the headlights. He drove west toward Sanderson and he kept to the speed limit every mile of the way. He stopped at the gas station on the east end of town for cigarettes and a long drink of water and then drove on to the Desert Aire and pulled up in front of the trailer and shut off the motor. The lights were on inside. You live to be a hundred, he said, and there wont be another day like this one. As soon as he said it he was sorry.

He got his flashlight from the glovebox and climbed out and took the machinepistol and the case from behind the seat and crawled up under the trailer. He lay there in the dirt looking up at the underside of it. Cheap plastic pipe and plywood. Bits of insulation. He wedged the H&K up into a corner and pulled the insulation down over it and lay there thinking. Then he crawled back out with the case and dusted himself off and climbed the steps and went in.

She was sprawled across the sofa watching TV and drinking a Coke. She didnt even look up. Three oclock, she said.

I can come back later.

She looked at him over the back of the sofa and looked at the television again. What have you got in that satchel?

It's full of money.

Yeah. That'll be the day.

He went into the kitchen and got a beer out of the refrigerator.

Can I have the keys? she said.

Where you goin.

Get some cigarettes.

Cigarettes.

Yes, Llewelyn. Cigarettes. I been settin here all day.

What about cyanide? How are we fixed for that?

Just let me have the keys. I'll set out in the damn yard and smoke.

He took a sip of the beer and went on back into the bedroom and dropped to one knee and shoved the case under the bed. Then he came back. I got you some cigarettes, he said. Let me get em.

He left the beer on the counter and went out and got the two packs of cigarettes and the binoculars and the pistol and slung the .270 over his shoulder and shut the truck door and came back in. He handed her the cigarettes and went on back to the bedroom.

Where'd you get that pistol? she called.

At the gettin place.

Did you buy that thing?

No. I found it.

She sat up on the sofa. Llewelyn?