

"Symphonic and suspenseful." —Geraldine Brooks

WE  
BURN  
DAYLIGHT

A NOVEL

BRET ANTHONY  
JOHNSTON

BY BRET ANTHONY JOHNSTON

*Corpus Christi: Stories*

*Naming the World: And Other Exercises for the Creative Writer*

*Remember Me Like This*

*We Burn Daylight*



# We Burn Daylight



*a novel*

Bret Anthony Johnston



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*We Burn Daylight* is a work of fiction. Apart from the well-known actual people, events, and locales that figure in the narrative, all names, characters, places, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to current events or locales, or to living persons, is entirely coincidental. Copyright © 2024 by Bret Anthony Johnston All rights reserved.

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For Bill—worth slightly more\* than a gold-plated Susan B. Anthony dollar

*We think the fire eats the wood.  
We are wrong. The wood reaches out to the flame.*  
—Jack Gilbert, “Harm and Boon in the Meetings”

*We burn daylight... —Romeo and Juliet*

*Hidy there, everybody. Good afternoon. Or evening. Sorry to be tardy, but we've had ourselves a dustup at the ranch. As you've heard by now, people have taken to calling me the Lamb, which is sure nicer than other names I've been called. Anyway we've had these pork choppers flying at us. I don't mean to tease. I appreciate y'all tuning in, I do. Well so, okay, it's the eighteenth day of February 1993, the year of our Lord, and I'm talking at you, through your radios, in your homes and cars and places of commerce, about the revelation of Jesus Christ. That's the big to-do. All y'all listening know the standard of God's righteousness is law. It's a system of cause and effect that's always been. When a man broke the law of God, he had to shed an innocent lamb's blood. There were other sacrifices—turtle doves, goats, oxen, red heifers, and so forth. Not a good day at the office, I'll tell you what. But such sacrifices could keep a man from sinning, couldn't they? Elsewise he'd lose all his livestock mighty fast, and then what? Lights out. Well that's about where we are now: The suffering's here, the wait is gone. We recognize it. We've been preparing, checking our timepieces. How will it all end? you ask. Who's going to donate his most precious blood? Well, let's see. Let's just get that sorted out once and for all, okay?*

*Part One*

The White Horse



January  
1993

In those raw first weeks of 1993, before my family broke apart and before the March fires, before the world turned its lurid attention our way and before her and before everything else that changed me, I was fourteen years old and learning to pick locks. I could open car doors with wire hangers, school lockers with a pocketknife, and almost anything else with tools my brother had sent me. Mason had been an infantry corporal in the marines, but he'd stayed in Iraq after the war to work as a contractor. He'd just turned twenty-one. We hadn't seen him in years, and although he was supposed to return home in the fall, I couldn't stop myself from imagining a future without him. Occasionally, when I struggled with a difficult lock, I'd pretend Mason was trapped on the other side of the door and his safety depended on my opening it in time. Sometimes I saved him, sometimes not.

My parents didn't know about Mason's tools or the pillowcase full of locks under my bed or the hours I spent picking when I should have been sleeping or studying. My mother was a hospice nurse then and my father was the high sheriff of McLennan County. Their minds were on graver subjects. At supper, one of us would say grace and then we'd tell a little bit about our days, hers tending to the infirm and his at the sheriff's office and mine at school. We weren't a family of bean-spillers or bucket-mouths. We curated our lives, gave each other wide berths. They knew Rosie had dumped me over Christmas vacation, but not that I'd stopped catching the bus from school to avoid seeing her on Isaac Garza's lap the whole ride. And I knew my parents, who claimed not to smoke, shared cigarettes in the backyard when something rattled them at their jobs or with Mason. But none of this came up at the table. We just listened to the sounds of our forks and knives, our glasses being lifted and put down. We asked each other to pass the fried okra or the jar of tartar sauce. We said how good it would be when Mason came home, speculated on what he'd want to eat and do first. We made plans for the happier times ahead. This was how innocent we were, how gullible. This was Waco.

Roy

## **ON THE LAMB**

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### **PODCAST EPISODE 12**

**GUEST:** Sheriff Elias "Eli" Moreland (retired)

**RECORDED:** July 2024

Waco–McLennan County

Central Library Waco, Texas

**Thank you for coming on. Ever since starting the podcast, I've wanted my listeners to hear your perspective. You were sheriff of McLennan County until 1993. Sammy Gregson was your deputy. Your son was—**

Sammy had a bead on what was coming before I did. I'll give him that. I'll keep

the rest of my opinions to myself. **Understood.**

I've been away some thirty years. Down in Camp Verde now. Most days it's still too close.

**I don't think you're allowed to smoke in the library.**

If you want to hear what all I have to say, I'm going to smoke. I'm just as pleased to get back on the road and miss the traffic. Your call.

**I'll see if I can scare  
you up an ashtray.**

See if you can scare  
up a couple.

We lived on the western edge of town where the Blackland Prairie gave way to wetlands. Acres of scrub brush and bluestem grass stretched between us and our neighbors. Our house was a two-bedroom ranch with a sagging fence. Root-buckled driveway, wood paneling, an avocado-green kitchen counter and matching phone mounted to the wall. My room was in the back corner of the house, north-facing, with matted brown carpet. Mason and I had shared it, but after he enlisted, I just used his bed as a place for my folded clothes because my dresser drawers were stuck shut. I had two windows and a television my parents bought cheap from the Olde Towne Motel when it went under. On my walls were posters of the Houston Oilers and *The Terminator* and a monster truck doing a backflip; Mason's wall was covered by a huge Semper Fi banner. I'd been planning to change my side up over Christmas vacation, to hang manlier posters and rearrange my furniture, but after Rosie broke things off, it didn't seem worth the bother.

Mason called on holidays and, if he could, every third Sunday; he used a satellite phone that made him sound even farther away than he was, like his words were echoing toward us from the past. He rarely sent photographs and letters, but when a new one arrived, my mother pinned it to the fridge with fruit-shaped magnets. More than once I'd come into the kitchen to find her rereading what he'd written. She seemed to be searching for a hidden meaning, some clue she'd overlooked. That Mason stayed in-country after his deployment had wounded her. She saw it as tempting fate, but also an affront: He'd had the opportunity to return to us, and he'd declined. I viewed it that way, too, and despite the tacit silences in our house, I worried one of us would cop to our bitterness. Or one of us would say something we'd regret if he didn't come home. If she hadn't heard me behind her in the kitchen, I'd ease out of the doorway and close myself in my room; I'd pull a random lock from the pillowcase and make myself crack it before venturing back into the kitchen. If she did hear me, we'd pretend she was upset about one of her patients.

"Mr. Raybourn might be glory bound soon," she said one evening in early January. I'd come into the kitchen for some milk and found her wiping her eyes. She opened the fridge and squatted behind the door to gather herself.

"He has the wiener dog," I said. "That's him."

"We've never had one of those."

Our pets always came from my mother's patients. Sometimes their owners wrote her into their wills, sometimes the surviving family guilted her into taking the animal. We'd had as many as four dogs and three cats at one time. We'd had a blue macaw and a pair of box turtles. When she wasn't working, my mother was finding homes for left-behind creatures. Forever homes, she called them. She placed ads in the paper, contacted veterinarians and ranchers, cajoled friends. She'd given goats to the 4-H club at my school, an aquarium of impossibly bright fish to the museum downtown, and an elderly hound to my friend Coop's mother, though it didn't last long. If she couldn't find homes for the animals, we carted them out to my grandparents. They had land near San Saba and took in what others wouldn't. That January, we were down to a black-



Roy

and-white cat named Panda. She disappeared for days on end, and though we hadn't had her long, her absence made the house feel lifeless.

"Mason likes wiener dogs," I said, not because it was true but because hearing my brother's name could buoy my mother's spirits.

"Does he?" She took a beer from the fridge and started hunting for the bottle opener in the drawer. The clock on the wall ticked, ticked, ticked. My mother had gotten it as a grocery store promotion a while back; it had songbirds in place of numbers. She said, "Then he'll be tickled come September.

Yes, sir, he'll be happy as a puppy with two tails."

## **ON THE LAMB**

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### **PODCAST EPISODE 12**

**GUEST:** Sheriff Elias "Eli" Moreland (retired)

**RECORDED:** July 2024

Waco–McLennan County Central Library

Waco, Texas

**They don't have any ashtrays. I'll make do. If someone from the library—**

I was good to those people, even-handed. If there was word of some trouble, I'd call Perry and tell him to come in and we'd get it sorted. Civil-like. Aboveboard. I sent CPS out there, too. Clean reports. Those folks had their beliefs, but laws weren't broken.

We thought of them as a different country, a territory with its own customs. They kept to themselves mostly. When they ventured into town, they were courteous and quiet. Never panhandled or pestered you with leaflets or spoke in tongues. They were friendly. I was trying to stop the raid right up until it happened.

My father had been sheriff since before Mason was born. Grandpa Huey had worn the badge before that. The clear plan was for Mason to come home, be deputized, and run for the office when my father retired. Part of why he'd enlisted in the marines was because Huey had fought in Korea. War heroes won elections. Not that anyone would run against him. Voters in McLennan County equated the name Moreland with the sheriff's office. My father had gone unopposed in his last two bids. He wore a pager on his belt, along with his sidearm, which was a Colt Python. People liked him, considered him fair, courted his approval. He rarely paid for meals at restaurants or to have his uniforms pressed. The office occupied the drab basement of the old limestone courthouse, but every Christmas it turned bright and crowded with wrapped gifts from strangers.

Sometimes he took me with him to serve warrants. They were mostly quiet affairs, but I'd seen him get sliced at with steak knives and tackled down a knoll that dropped into Cypress Creek. He wanted me to see how people we knew—grocery store cashiers, parishioners from church—could turn unrecognizable if things went sideways in their lives. Men who were mean as water moccasins fell to their knees weeping. Women who served on the PTA cursed and punched walls. "The difference between a night at home and a night in jail is usually a bad day," my father said every time we drove to someone's house. I listened to criminals plead, invent alibis, hurl threats like bricks. He always kept calm, his voice low and tight. Even when he got into scrapes, he stayed composed. "You're all right," he'd say to whoever was coming at him. "Get all that out now. You're okay there."

With each warrant, I tried to see myself handcuffing a man in front of his family or reading Miranda rights to a kid my age while his parents stood by without hope or power. Even in my mind, I caved. The man rushed me before I snapped the cuffs; the teenager pleaded, and like a fool, I let him off with a warning. By the time we arrived back at the office, I'd tallied a hundred ways I would disappoint my father. I didn't know what I wanted to be, had no idea where I wanted to work or live, but I knew my father's life—and my brother's and grandfather's—wouldn't be mine. I didn't pray as often as I should, but when I did, I asked to be less afraid.

So on the second Friday in January when I was walking home from school and my father's Bronco pulled to the curb, I steeled myself. The afternoon was slate gray, the drizzle soaking through my jacket and staying there. He said, "Need a lift, detective?"

His cream Stetson was pulled low on his head, the band dark with years of sweat; he kept a picture of each of us—my brother, my mother, and me—tucked into the lining. His thermos was knocking around my floorboard. The heater chugged.

"Was the bus full up today?"

"I just felt like walking," I said. I rubbed my hands together between my knees. "In freezing rain."

"I don't know," I said.

We passed the boarded-up Live Oak Mall. It had been bustling when I was young—a two-level building with a glass elevator and mosaic fountains. My mother used to take Mason and me there for school clothes, and my father had liked the Salisbury steak at Woolworths. But once the outlet shops opened on the interstate, the mall went belly-up. After it shuttered, my father was called

out because a group of bums had started a campfire inside. Another time someone broke in and graffitied the walls. Now a hurricane fence surrounded the property.

A turkey vulture was perched atop a telephone pole, black feathers plumed thick against the wind and its ugly red head turreting the fields. If my mother had been with us, she'd have said, "He's looking for supper." Every time I saw a hawk or vulture, whether she was with me or not, I heard her say it. Probably my father did, too. The sun had an hour left, maybe less. We were heading east, away from home.

"There's a gun show this weekend," my father said. "Tonight's the early bird bit. I figured we'd have a look-see."

"We can get Mason something. Mom's putting together another care package."

"The snack bar should be open," he said. "They make those Frito Pies."

"I had a big lunch," I said. Really, I'd spent lunch period roaming the halls. I'd picked into a few lockers only to find predictable stashes of candy and cigarettes.

"Your mother thinks you've lost weight since you and Rosie called it," he said. The Brazos River was high and frothy from days of rain. The junipers and ash on its banks had thinned, bare branches like hatch marks against the sky. Everything wet and dripping and rinsed of color. "A hunger strike won't bring her back."

"I know," I said. To our left spread the small airfield and its single runway. A few Cessnas were parked by the hangar. My parents used to take Mason and me out there to watch pilots practice their touch-and-go landings.

"Sammy called a little bit ago," he said. "Sounds like there was some static."

"With the Lamb?"

"I reckon," he said.

Sammy Gregson was a righteous, short-tempered man. He was a Catholic who went to Mass three times a week and crossed himself often and worked as a part-time deputy. Winters were busy for the sheriff's department—people had more or less money than usual, found themselves in close quarters with family they avoided the rest of the year, drank too much—so Sammy'd been getting extra shifts.

The drizzle had almost completely obscured our windshield, but my father waited to flip on the wipers. He always held off as long as possible. Maybe it felt like giving in to him. He was a man who valued willfulness—"He's got the patience of a buzzard circling a sick calf," my mother liked to say—and he often seemed to be testing himself, exercising the muscles of his resolve.

"Did you hear me, detective?" my father said.

I turned to him. The windshield was water-streaked and blurry. "Do what?" "I said it won't hurt forever. You'll survive this." "Okay," I said.

"Trust me," he said, flipping on the wipers, "before too long, this will all be a long time ago."

## ON THE LAMB

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### PODCAST EPISODE 7

GUEST: Sammy Gregson

RECORDED: January 2024

Keller-Williams

Specialty Realtor San

Antonio, Texas

#### **You served as Sheriff Moreland's deputy.**

Eli's a good man. Even when we disagreed, I saw that. You could argue

I got what I deserved, but not him. **You're no longer in law**

**enforcement.**

That chapter of my life ended in May of '93.

#### **Are you surprised some of the survivors still maintain their beliefs?**

They're brainwashed, son. They're always going to paint him with the angel brush. Perry could scramble people, twist their ups and downs.