

Also by Dale Neal

The Half-Life of Home (Casperian Press, 2013)
Cow Across America (Novello Literary Press, 2009)

APPALACHIAN
BOOK
OF THE
DEAD

DALE NEAL

Appalachian Book of the Dead
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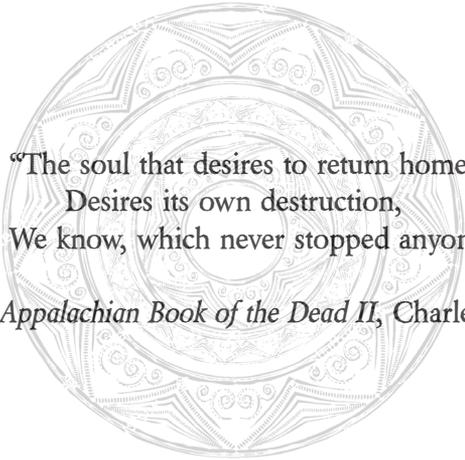
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*For Cynthia,
Ben, Daphne, and Merlin*



“The soul that desires to return home,
Desires its own destruction,
We know, which never stopped anyone.”

The Appalachian Book of the Dead II, Charles Wright

1.

With his mind so neatly made up, Richard Peabody never saw them coming. Through the miasma of overpriced petroleum wafting from the gas tank of his dusty Seville, he'd never even considered in his biblically allotted seventy years the prospect of such pure meanness crossing his path a quarter mile from the brick rancher he'd shared with his first and only wife, where last Easter they'd burned their thirty-year mortgage in the hearth. Paying no mind, pumping his premium at the Gas N Go out Highway 9, Peabody, a retired CPA, Braves fan, and Presbyterian vestryman, sniffed for his favorite vice from the boiled peanut stand at the parking lot's crumbled edge. Steam from the cast-iron kettle rose against the curtain of kudzu that choked the scrub woods, the summer's hatch of insects screamed in the imprisoned shade. Too late, he heard: "Mister, can I ask you something?"

What? Peabody could smell him before he saw him, the lanky youth in the orange jumpsuit, reeking of work crew sweat. No, he didn't think so. No good came from talking to strangers, young ones at that, who always asked Peabody to buy them beer.

He never saw the second one, only felt the blow from behind. The hose snatched from the tank and wound tight about his windpipe, the gas pumping against his pulse. Their swift hands dug through his suspended trousers for his keys, loose change, money clip, cellphone, his balls. He drifted into darkness, then came to with a splash of high-test petroleum on his face.

"Tell me, mister. You smoke?"

He couldn't see a face, only the back of a hand painstakingly tattooed to depict a naked woman struggling in a demon's claw. The inked hand loomed larger, holding a plastic butane lighter, and he heard the small scraping of the wheel before the world flashed white.

At a station too cheap for security cameras, the sole witness was the black man in the peanut shack, half-blind with glaucoma, who saw the fatal flash, a fire juggling arms and legs as the Seville fishtailed from the parking lot where what little was left of Richard Peabody lay incinerated.

A COUPLE OF STATES LATER, the Seville sped down the mountain with no headlights—no need, given the monstrous moon overhead that swallowed the stars, lending a ghostly glow to the benighted world below.

Jimmy Bray stretched his scrawny right arm out the window, grabbing fistfuls of empty air, then banged his raw knuckles against the still hot roof of the stolen car. He'd spent the first couple of hours running the electric window up and down and hollering into the fleeting woods until he was hoarse, but he still couldn't shut up: "You believe that shit? *Whumph*, man, just like that! Fucked up that fucker real bad."

All of eighteen, Jimmy Bray had never seen a man burned alive, and it was a sight that had scalded his tender eyes. He hung his head dog-like out the window and gulped free air, trying to get the burnt smell out of his nostrils. He ducked back in and drummed the dashboard. Four hours free and counting. Out of useless habit, he cocked his arm and studied his bare wrist, as if he could tell time from the happy fact that no manacle encircled him yet.

He began to wonder. "We ain't lost?"

"We ain't been found."

Angel didn't talk much, but you could see the faintest glint of the moonlight on his eyetooth. Homeboy sure had himself some tats, Bray noticed now, ink running up his arm and into the torn sleeve of the orange jumpsuit, exposed brown skin etched not in the seasick green verdigris of most jailhouse art, but a raised filigree of ghostly white welts, a line that looped the wrinkled point of Angel's elbow, but turned into the maw of a bony face.

Shuddering, Bray could swear the demon winked.

With the dashboard dark, he couldn't see the speedometer or fuel gauge, but Angel evidently could, if only by the feel of the wheel hand over hand, and the squealing complaint of the tires negotiating the corkscrew curves. They must have been running on fumes. No gas station in sight.

"Where the hell are we?" Bray wondered, and the answer flashed ahead—Yonah Fire District, N.C.—before the metal sign was swallowed in the brilliant shadows cast by the moonlight.

Oncoming high-beams flashed round the curve. Blinded, with bloody floaters across his burning field of vision, Bray craned his neck, following crimson brake lights around the bend. Angel slowed, eying the rearview mirror. One Mississippi, two Mississippi, three—and there, it returned around the rock face, racing down the road with the cobalt lights strobing, the short squawks of the siren.

"Damn, no lights! Turn on the lights!"

But Angel was braking, pulling onto the shoulder, eyes on the mirror as the State Patrol cruiser slipped behind them, then stopped, shooting the high-beams and the side spotlight into their cab. Insects flitted through shafts of white light.

Run, run, Bray was praying. He could see the trooper silhouetted by his own high beams, left hand holding the standard issue flashlight head-high, the right already unsnapping the gun holster.

"Wait, wait," Angel whispered, hands gripping the wheel, eyes glinting in the mirror. He shifted into reverse.

Bray was flung forward, banging his forehead against the dashboard, then whiplashed like a rag doll against the headrest as their Seville slammed into the grille of the Crown Vic. The advancing flashlight was lost in the crash of chrome and glass and Bray felt a deeper *thunk* beneath their chassis. The rear wheels began to spin, and a foul burning smell hung in the air. Angel jammed the stick into drive, and there was the sickening thump again, the slight, lifting roll of the tire over the torso of the state trooper.

Angel hit the lights and the tires bounced off pavement through the curve and took the opening in the trees to an overgrown logging road, descending to a cow path, narrowing into a dead creek bed, their headlights bouncing up and down over boulders, like one of the tricked-out lowriders Bray had seen on TV, hopscotching down barrio streets in L.A. But this wasn't the city, and it was like no country Bray knew. As they pitched headlong into darkness, laurel leaves slapped at the windshield, branches broke, and the glass fractured into a brilliant spiderweb in the moonlight. Angel and his demon-inked arms wrestled with the wheel until the car let out a horrendous metallic scream, the front axle snapped like a twig, and their descent at last halted.

"Fuck me, we're dead men!"

Bray fell out the door. On the mountainside above, the blue lights were still swinging through the treetops. He scrambled against the dented quarter panel, grabbing for purchase at the flattened tire. It may have been mud, maybe oil, but a warm wetness dripped on his hand from the rear wheel well. Five hours free now, he aimed to get the hell away from Angel Jones, no telling what that dude was liable to do or who next.

Bray began to run into the bright night.

TROOPER ERNEST COLBURN, scooped from the pavement with multiple fractures and the slop of ruptured organs, was airlifted into Asheville while radio traffic scrambled "Mayday!" and "Unit 17 down." At the ICU, in a mass of tubes and bandages, with his head swollen to twice a human size, the tube siphoning off the fluid dammed by the crushed cranium, he didn't remotely resemble his unsmiling, crew-cut picture that ran in the morning papers and on the TV news. When the monitors had nothing left to show beneath the yards of gauze, the trooper expired before dawn. *Both a shame and a mercy*, said the bleary-eyed doctor, who called the fateful time.

“SUSPECT CORNERED. We got him. It’s him.” After sixty-four hours of constant sweeps by one hundred and thirty-five deputies, troopers, rescue workers, forest service rangers, state intelligence agents, volunteer vigilantes, and even an FBI tactical team; after hours of flights surveilling the cove, the hovering helicopters firing infrared probes into the laurel hells, the rotor wash frisking the hemlocks along the slopes; after house-to-house searches of attics and barn lofts, crawlspaces and closets, anywhere a man might hole up, they had him pinned in a dozen crosshairs and pocked by red laser dots in a corncrib. The commotion of radio traffic and baying scent hounds, hovering helicopters, and cars gunning up and down the roads came to a hush. They lined the roads to see him breathing hard, brought to the ground, his orange jumpsuit stained with green leaves, with his own shit and piss and blood and sweat, his thin wrists pinned by plastic ties. They squeezed him into the back of the patrol car and drove slowly, respectful of the dust, crunching across the gravel as TV cameras and press photographers aimed, the silent digital capture of the B-roll and photo galleries, through the grate and through the tinted windshield, showing in endless replay the heavy head lolling on the back of the seat, as if Jimmy Bray had been decapitated.

THE FOLLOWING WEEKEND witnessed another processional through the cove, the cortege bearing the flag-draped casket of Senior Trooper Ernest Allen Colburn, thirty-eight years old, Gulf War veteran, father of two. The white-gloved salutes of two hundred state troopers snapped to their stiff, unbending brims. Returned to earth, to the arms of Jesus, the minister said, while everyone prayed that the monster who had done this to the fallen hero would be destroyed, praying God they would be the one to flush the other killer from the woods, bring him to justice, which would be served only if they could jab the state’s long needle into his tattooed arm and watch his worthless life ebb from his hooded eyes.

With the search scaled back, you no longer passed through the checkpoint with the orange and white-striped sawhorse barriers blocking Georges Gap, nor had to open the trunk of your car spilling all the sad loot from the Walmart Supercenter. The school bus lost the deputy riding shotgun as it crept through the cove, its red stop sign swinging out from its yellow side to pick up the terrified children, but then school let out for summer, and the kids stayed close to home, or went to visit relatives. Still, you kept a rifle loaded by the bedside, and perhaps pocketed a pistol when going to church or to run errands. The folks of the cove resumed a normal routine, not latching the door behind when stepping out to check the wash on the line, or to fetch a log from the woodpile as the weather turned cooler.

Angel had vanished, nowhere to be found. He ran into the woods, and disappeared into the shadow under the tall hemlocks, hiding from the full moon. The scent had grown cold, the green leaves that had hidden his passage were now about to turn red, yellow, soon emptying from the branches. The FBI fretted that he was long gone, slipped over the mountain to hitch a ride on the Interstate. With half his short life in custody, Angelberto Jones, Inmate 00337 had street smarts but no woods skills in the Southern Appalachian sticks, God's country, a hell of a place to land without a knife, with no food or shelter. Hunters figured to find his remains when the radio-collared hounds scared up the sow bears come December's killing season.

Angel was only a tale haunting Yonah. He was most likely dead, everyone kept saying, deceiving themselves that such dread can ever die.

About the Author

Dale Neal lives in Asheville, NC, heart of the Southern Appalachians and the world's most ancient mountains. He loves to wander in the footsteps of the Cherokee, a seeker of sassafras and wild ramps in spring. As a backpacker, he's prone to 50-mile circle hikes through the Nantahala Wilderness.

Neal has been doing Zen meditation for the past 15 years, achieving no enlightenment, only some willingness to entertain whatever life brings from day to day. His dharma name given by his teacher is *Honin*, meaning "Great Patience," which comes in handy with the long haul needed to write novels.

He has always made his living by words, working as a journalist and an award-winning novelist, and, currently, teaching creative writing. DALENEALBOOKS.COM



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