

JOHN
the
REVELATOR

TJ BEITELMAN



Black Lawrence Press

For my father—

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“...I have also used more personal pieces of friends and fathers. There have been some date changes, some characters brought together, and some facts have been expanded or polished to suit the truth of fiction.”

—M. Ondaatje

“Other acknowledgements to friends are too deep and intensive to tabulate.”

—J. Berger

Who's that writing? John the Revelator.

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Wrote the Book of the Seven Seals.

—Traditional

I was not born in a one-room shack. I was not barred from any public school based on the dangers I posed to myself or others. I did not have to walk miles in the snow to the general store. No bears menaced me on the way. I did not stomp my feet, slap my hands together, and yell nonsense banshee yells to shoo the dark beasts off. I did not sing hallelujah come springtime and steal myself long draughts of cool creek water, sucking it straight from the clean babble like a fawn. There was not a gang of ruffians my age—or, if there was, they did not ride ponies through the woods, “a-hootin’ and a-hollerin’.” This demitasse gang that did not exist—not in this form, at any rate—likewise it did not come upon me in a summery clearing and ride in an ever-tightening circle around me. I could not feel the slight whirlwind it made; I did not hear—intuit—the hiss and rustle of frightened, fleeing snakes. The gang did not peel off one at a time, just as their animals could no longer manage the narrowing gyre, each boy laughing like the devil as I slumped to the ground. I did not gasp like a doomed, dry fish. I did not recall the incident for the rest of my natural born days.

And if ever I, as a mere boy, set out to walk across this Great Land with only a sharp knife and a busted compass that had no East;

And if I then came to a great wide plain;

And then, after that, a great wide river;

And if, in time, I came to the very flat, very hot black mud of a delta where a buzzard befriended me, told me, Young man, that compass won’t do, even I can see that;

And if I followed him as he flew in a slow slump eastward and eastward to a Swirling Place of Mad Green Thickets and Running Streams;

And if that great black Buzzard told me, Every prophet needs a home where they can hate him. Behold: you've found yours.

And if I then sat dumb in the cool water of a natural pool and watched that old hulk of a bird labor back into the westward sky;

If any of that had happened, I would have known from very near the beginning of everything that my life would include an inordinate share of magic and heart-ache. Miracles. Dark visions that only I could see. I would have known not to think I could cheat these essential circumstances. And, yes, I might have thought to finish it there, knowing—as I now do—that such a man as me can come to no good end.

But none of that happened.

Or if it did, I did not think to end it there.

I came to the end that was meant for me.

BOOKS OF THE LAW

History and Apocrypha

I

His sources:

—The ramshackle house where he once lived with his mother and father, far out in the green and vacant countryside, where not even a river would go. His mother still lived there—or he believed she did. He knew his father did not. He knew the man was dead in the ground.

The floor of the home was alive with vipers. Genuine vipers that ordinarily you might trip on in the woods. The ones with dry and dusty black backs. Outside was the decrepit shed. He could smell its thick must. At night, with the door shut, nowhere in the windowless world was blacker. Not even his wild-eyed father would think to look for him there.

—The back of Mrs. Beverly’s English classroom in the seventh grade. Mrs. Beverly had an enormous behind and the thinly veiled bigotries of any self-respecting provincial school teacher. She was not bad or good. She was just what anybody might expect: her back to the class as she chalked up half-truths on the board: *I before E (except after C)*. He sat tucked in a corner of the very back row. From directly in front of him, Rebecca Cantrell’s face presented itself in the pretty, puzzled scowl she so often aimed his way. The girl watched the black-haired boy hold his palm in the continuous flame of a plastic cigarette lighter. The sight or the smell or both caused Becky Cantrell to scream and scream and scream.

—Underneath the metal basin in the 6-x-9 cell at the Morris T. Duckworthy Juvenile Detention Center. They sent him there when he was thirteen years old, right after he took a thirty-ought and shot his mean father in the face.

The drip-after-drip of the faucet marking time.

The snakes are the stuff of later nightmares. All the rest is real.

II

The next-door bed pounded against the wall of his week-to-week room. A call and response. Moan. Yelp. Moan. Epithet. And rhythmic pounding (*headboard, wall*) to punctuate it. For the distraction, he made shapes with a stubby No. 2 on a blank page in a worn out composition book.

His default forms were these: house, fish, serpentine dead trees and rivers.

This was a habit his mother had started in him when he was very young, a way to ignore the noise around him, and he had kept it up through the many storms of noise that had passed through him. The silent white page a place to put the muddy river of his mind.

Of course, sometimes the outside world was too insistent.

This was one of those times.

He put the pencil down and closed the book.

It was almost ten o'clock, time to leave for the evening, so he walked to the sink. He ran the water and splashed his face and buried it in a towel. The amorous noises next door built and built.

"Nasty-ass people," he said to no one. His mother would have said they had lost their God-given shame, and she would have been right.

To drown out the sound, he turned on the television and sat at the foot of the bed. A bright new source of light. A cacophony of late local news, home-shopping, insignificant sporting contests, laugh tracks. Nothing. The young man switched off

the television and sat there on the bed in the dark. Silence, then one loud crash from next door, then venomous cursing. The loud slam of a door. He went to the window. The bright fluorescence of the store dominated the street outside. The faint tinkling sound of a bell on the jamb echoed in the dark. A hunched-over figure emerged from the store banging a pack of cigarettes against its open palm. It coughed and spat on the shiny black road. This is the world he was going out into.

III

Outside the sky still roiled from a passing summer storm. Monster black-and-blue clouds sped past. A fat white moon peeked out at odd intervals. The town smelled like it always did: rubber on fire. The young man jogged across the street even though there was nothing coming that he needed to dodge. Nothing moved but the restless sky above him. His stomach grumbled—he had not eaten all day. It seemed the sound of it echoed forth, announcing his empty insides as something much larger and louder than what he showed the world.

IV

Inside was a wall of buzzing white light. Unrelenting. He squinted and pushed through it. It took him some time to get his bearings, but when he did, he made his way to the rotating wheel of brick-colored links. They were wrinkled up and thin. Sorry sustenance.

“Them dogs ain’t no good, Boy Wonder,” said the counter man. “They been under the lamp since four o’ clock this afternoon.” The man was fortyish, strapping, with small, mean eyes. His name tag announced him to the world as KARL.

The young man dug his fists into his pockets.

“And don’t ask me to put no more on because I won’t,” said Karl. “Now’s the time to eat anyhow. We got places to go and people to see.”

Karl advanced on the franks and picked up a pair of tongs on his side of the counter. He tossed them one by one into the trash.

“Doesn’t seem right,” said the young man, “throwing food away.”

“Since when did you get to be the authority on right from wrong?” asked Karl. “Somebody like you best stick with what little he knows.”

Karl trashed the last dog from the rack. He flipped a switch, and the heat lamp went dark. He tied up the trash liner and plucked it from the bin in a giant heave.

“Almost time for me to close this shithole up. Go on out to the car. I’ll be out in a minute.”

The hungry young man eyed the trash bag. Plump with coffee grounds and cans and ashes and dried up wieners.

“I said,”—Karl’s little eyes flashed their easy meanness—
“get your sorry ass out of here while I close up shop. Christ
Almighty, John-John. Don’t you fucking hear neither? Ain’t
you but a fucking piece of work. I swear to God, it’s a good
thing you’re halfway pretty.”

Karl took him by the elbow like a disobedient little boy and
ushered him out on his way to the alley with the dumpster in
the back.