

*Between two  
Valleys*

*Nathan Young*



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# 1. Valley

*The girl and the wolf*



## Wolf in the Field

..and anyway, how far have we been walking? I'm so tired...

I want to die. I want to die. I want to die!

So says the deer!

Look at how close it's getting to us. No fear in its eyes-- hey,  
why are you speaking for the deer?

oh, I don't know  
something about the stars tonight.

*Today, while we were searching for his old home I made  
the mistake of telling the wolf I spotted deer, lots of them on  
the valley floor--*

They always do that!

After the rain, when there's a puddle more than 10 feet long,  
almost-circular, with an angle able to nest the moon in its  
center and the sky

--It was my mistake, not knowing  
that they'd make him nostalgic. It's an easy one to make,  
considering when I talked to them, they all

*A wolf?*

*Here! I mean, why would we be here if there were wolves?  
I think you're thinking of a different valley...*

--forgot him.

*Are you sure? He says his home is here, too, and that you  
all resemble his friend from long ago--*

*We haven't seen any*

*homes here! Sorry. we're just here for today, too. So—I'm not sure how any of us can make your friend feel that way. But you're welcome to search for whatever you want here! Just—could you move a little that way*

Ha!

they said that—to you?

Probably because they smelled you on me! Why are we even bothering with them, anyhow?

The deer took turns, sipping at the puddles. Their mouths got closer, closer to the moon until their heads blocked it from the water and allowed them to see the mossy deep—a specific point they closed their eyes, keeping the moon's afterimage on their eyelids

Huh.

Huh what?

You've been staring at the moon this whole time—like you've just been waiting for it to fill up. Must love it as a human, don't you

Eh, I've missed plenty of full moons before.

It must be so beautiful to you, right?

isn't it?

well, it is annoying the fuck out of me! I can't hunt when it's beaming all on me. You know why all the deer are looking at us, right? Now's the only time I wish I had rough hair, cause all this sheen is ghastly.

Every thirty



days, I swear god made the crows white or something, and now it's hiding the stars. Which I also hate! So maybe, the moon isn't too bad?

Do you think you'll ever like  
it--

I love the moon.

really? but, but everything you

Never said I  
hated it. annoying isn't hate! Annoying is love's bad side. But  
hey, you probably think that we all love full moons

I never said  
that! Besides, I'm not the one who makes the myths...

Don't know why he's grumpy. The dirt filled with yesterday's  
rain feels so good! How can he not prance around like I do?

## Pebbles

The valley was packed with puddles; a drop more, and you could call it a flood. Between the webs of ground we tiptoed, brushed up on all the deer-ass as we struggled to find some clearing. Which was hard, given that there were so many puddles—

I thought it'd be easier  
if there were more! Or

She didn't understand deer. See, more puddles brings way, way more deer—

*We always gather here after the rain!*

*Yeah, and today's  
a meteor shower. So*

They don't need me to explain. Get it—? hey, don't let go of my tail—you'll get lost!

The steam from all our breaths  
mingled, and I couldn't even tell whose sweat this was... what did the deer see in puddles? Many of them were looking at the water's reflection; but the ones that weren't, the ones who had their head tilted up—those ones had their eyes closed. It would've been easier to get across had we been blind instead.

As we walked among the crowds of deer, we saw a deer. Or rather two large antlers, hovering over the rest of them, coming closer. Do you think he's following us—

How can he, if he's ahead of us?

*He's trying hard to look straight ahead, but his antlers tell another story.* I think you should talk to him--

(why me?)

(you're the one with four legs) (you can talk eye to eye with him)

(fine) Helb-

Hello?

I told you, I'm not lost..!--oh

Sorry! I thought you were someone else. Are you here for the meteors, too?

No! We're actually here to get to the other end of the valley. It's hard with all these other deer around us.

I'm going the same way--here, I'll help you through.

He walked with us. Being with him made the journey easier because he cleared a path past all the deer--or, his antlers did. They bowed his head so low he almost looked shy! They looked like the ones my friend had

You think? Here, come check them out--

Wow. Do be careful with those things--

Just got them off the velvet!

Maybe I am just a holster for these things. It's a lot of deer to get through, isn't it?

Do you know why so many of them close their eyes?

*It's what we do, every shower.* We're searching

for a blind deer who's always lost. Can you blame us for making it tradition?

Because he's blind, no one can follow him.  
His footsteps end as suddenly as they start.  
Where he looks, a shooting star begins--  
it ends where he closes his eyes.

Some like to imitate the one they look up to by closing their eyes to the shower and opening them every so often. Others like to look below the water, down to where they think he is--they think he holds his head down, even when he opens his eyes. If the shower starts here, why wouldn't he be on the other side of the earth?

And they think they'll find him at night

Why not? We lost him

at noon, of all times.

*He was careful not to turn his head as he spoke to us.* You two aren't looking up at the night sky, but you're also not blind to it. What's this staircase you're looking for?

We're trying to find his childhood home. There was a staircase that led to it, somewhere near this valley. Why aren't you blind to the shower like the others? You were able to see us passing through.

I'm waiting for my wife and son to get here. They got stuck on the border, so I'm heading back to see them through it.

Border?

Just a wall that all deer  
must cross to enter here.

Where's that?

Just keep up that hill—  
Who'd want to see it, though? if anything I'd love to miss it, one  
day—that's something only my son can look forward to. It does  
keep the deer from getting too crowded, though. Sorry! I should  
slow down my pace, or risk running back to you two.

He had just gotten a deer's width ahead of us before the deer began  
to choke us again and split us from him. He had to sweep his antlers  
back to us, then back again forward. From the mountains where the  
wall was, we saw them coming. As rain falls on its fallen friends, so  
the deer tumbled—

*It's hard to tell apart my family with all these  
other deer.*

want me to hunt some of them down?

*Eh..I'll pass.*

They are annoying, though! It's much more comforting to talk to  
you. Where did your friend go?

...ah.

*While I was walking beside the two,* I got distracted by a little bush  
to the side. If someone was looking from that bush down the valley,  
they'd think how nice we looked together, the three of us. I've seen  
people crossing bridges across the horizon, and

*Why are you  
grabbing that bush? We can stop if you'd like.*

Yeah, wrong way! The mountain's just up ahead.

Oh! It seemed so far before..

They called to me from the valley's end. Even though he came to meet his family here, he was more excited to see us off. After we both bowed to the deer, he almost bowed back until

*stand back?*

We got off the valley like a boat. Then from afar he bowed, and his antlers just missed us. We wanted to shake them, but by then he had drifted too far off..goodbye, my captain.

## Friend

*It's easier to travel under heavy rain than a meteor shower!*

How are we supposed to travel up a hill by looking down? We kicked all sorts of things, stopped when we thought we might get a chance to see a shooting star. The deer sipped on the ponds and shrank, either from the distance or from thirst.

The view grew slowly like a plant. We'd stare down, amazed after a long time looking at our feet until the view began to bore us. But just as we got back to hiking, checking for newts under the leaves, the view popped back in our minds and we turned again to find the ponds closer and closer to silver drops on a glass. I thought we'd been pushed aside by the deer, but..this isn't a bad way to view the stars! Even here, we were only drawn more to the bottom of it all.

Out of the grass, we reached a cliff with a puddle hanging on it like a tear. His eyes rolled down the valley again, searching for that one deer who'd ferried us across—

He reminds me of an old friend who'd watch the grass around the pond with me, at this very cliff. He'd reassure me of a lot. He was the first one to go down there. Back then, when the valley was just craters. We came here so much—after he lost his leg, I always knew where to find him until I couldn't.

How'd he get away from you with only three legs?

He went in

and in himself until I couldn't find him anymore. The steps I took were always too big, and he'd just sit between them with his head so low his skull was already growing grass out of its sockets. What he ate would kick inside, and the smoke would rise to his head. Beyond that there'd be no other life, his neck down as if he begged for a butcher to make the grass horizon last forever, past anything he felt—mushrooms, shivers, anything.

*How do I say this to someone like you? if only I could be bashed in and let my head-contents do the talking. Ever since I lost my leg, it was like I carried this cliff—or was tethered to it. It's like the future and past have folded in on me, leaving me outside my body that can only stare as I try to get back in—and each time I try and fail, I end up kneading our lifespan through some hourglass's neck, we two grains.*

*I was born, celebrating my birth; but I will never see the bullet coming out between my eyes, let alone the seconds after my death. It is too close to imagine it. I can imagine stars going out, lovers' skeletons but not my dead face and not the faces of those who'd find me dead, friends and strangers alike. The days float by, but my leg feels tethered to that one long dream that flows under those days—as if all this ticking represents a tock. Once you miss your chance to die, what's left for you to do but die—*

*Wait, how do you*

know he died?

Something in the water. It's not about him being gone—more like he's in places he normally isn't.

You



tasted him?

So it seems.

...

..what? I got a good nose!

Compared to you..

Whenever my friend went to a new place, he'd always leave behind doors--and I'd always track him down with them. But now, it's like everything's opening up--the soil, the water, everything. They don't lead anywhere no more.

Hey--what about the stars? Too far from each other, and way too far from us to have your friend or any of us in them.

What? But they're all right here--

He was blowing the stars on the water with his nose, trying to clump them together and snort them. From the water, they were climbing on him. Did I even have the right to laugh with him? Do my words reach him like the ones of his old friend? I didn't even know how to respond to his. We were just these stars in each other's sky, we These beautiful things, so far from the good and far from anyone who'd find us good. We'll just look into the water all day, hoping that beauty's next to good and that bad is good when it's upside down and we'll never get a shot at it, let alone some sort of--

Did you see that?!

what?

A green line. Above us--

A shooting star? wait,  
 how come I'm the one who missed it? I'm closer to the sky than  
 Yes,  
 but I'm looking on all fours.

You're laying on your belly.

Isn't that even better?

We waited and we waited, but we didn't see more of them. I wasn't even looking for stars as much as just making sure she wasn't distracted again--and even then, I see them. Not the shooting ones, but the ones hiding. I see the stars between two stars that she can't see, and I see stacks of stars lined up to my eye, so tight they only appear as one. Millions of them, lined up

That's a lot of stars  
 for us to cross before we get somewhere! What are they all lined up for? Are we last in line--

No, we're the ones they're getting into!  
 I've been waiting for them--hoping that when one falls, I will be present and aware and good enough to fall into its arms and glow for it.

How did he see so much? Even the deer could see more stars than me, and some of them were blind! I wonder if it really is because I only have two legs. I put my hands to the dirt, looked into the water, and--

Are you mocking me?

I have pride as a quadruped, you know..!

## Sleep

It turns out we missed the peak by a week, when there really were enough shooting stars to feed everybody--! Back then, this place was parked with all sorts of animals stretching for the showers. I imagined their faces trampled by their own feet, standing in the shallow pool, too packed for even the star's reflection. Some of them are dead now. In short, I imagined ghosts.

I haven't been noticing enough things, really. I'm cold most of the time and don't think about the seasons until they come. Predicting a meteor shower? Ha. I can't even predict when the sun will rise. How'd you expect me to do that?

We came upon a mossy rock--when we looked inside, we still couldn't see its bottom. We both forgot who laid on it first, probably were too tired. Strange yawns from both sides, we hunkered down and laid on it. And he--

Sleep?

Move over.

Hey! You're pushing  
me off--

I need some space.

No! It's fine, the bed fits us

hey--

both!

Hey. You really want to be this close? If it's ok with you! Why wouldn't it be? It just seems you'd rather sleep than talk. Well, I'm not sure--does the tail bother you? Not if it goes between my legs. Is it? Are you going to  
I swear I'll howl.

Fine, fine. I'm off!

Sorry, I really want to sleep right now. If you want, I'll get off the stump and make a pillow with my dress

No, you should stay. You're already about to sleep up there, and being on the stump alone would give me too much space to handle.

..Fine, you can come up. Just don't choke me this time

Ok! Softly, softly

There's good. Now, what was it you wanted to say?

Good night!

..good night.

...still thinking about him?

I don't know.

The best thing people have given me is the ability to live without them. So the people who help me out the most, I end up  
And he, he did so much for me that I

do you think you should have  
stayed?

No, he wanted me gone—but I wish I stayed, just  
long enough to help.

What were you to him?

The good side of hate, I  
guess—  
hey.

What?

sorry for pushing you off..

It's oka—

forgive me?

When'd

you get so—ah

Please forgive me!

Breaking my promise like that..didn't I say I'd be the lap you cry in  
and the head protecting you?

But to make good on that, first I  
have to cry. Right now, I feel so bloody right now that guilt's a better  
bedfellow for someone like me, so heavy that I can't even raise my  
head over my pillow

I'm so glad you're here. Even if you're not on  
me, because the space between this moment and the time we

actually fall asleep--there's nothing in between that. Unless I'm--  
shh.

Hm?

I'm trying to feel your  
heartbeat. It's not aligning. I'm catching up to you--Oh! Our pulses  
just touched...and now they're off--I'm winning! I'm  
Huh. asleep already..

*What could I be to you, and what could I be with you?* Ever since I  
met him, the world seemed to lose its souls until the total count was  
two. Finally, I admitted I was scared of you when, upon meeting  
anyone, I had to judge whether it was you or me in that body--  
always going to where the other one is, always switching places,  
never meeting halfway.

Each time one forgot, and each time one reminded. And now, I'm  
reminding you. I want to believe he's found a way in you--that  
used as I am, I have remained faithful to the one I met so many  
years ago and that all the times he's left me, by choice or otherwise,  
have only been the turns inside a braid. Memories can burn under  
his baths, as long as the one who's cleansed is him. The new can go  
to die for him, as long as it's you that's really him. As long as I stay a  
girl, here in your arms--

Hey, do you hear that

Shut up! Still dreaming

Drop

it! you hear that, right?

No, but I trust you something's there.

*After all, he first found me in the dark.* He was following something, so I crept as he crept until I couldn't see him, just to hear the noise Before it stopped. Then, there was

It wasn't just silence, but the silence *before something*. When it's that, even the buzzing in my ear stops. Then, under the moon, the gleam of a gun--and after all that **silence**

Birds shot out and all the beasts in bushes ran, beasts we didn't even know were watching. All this from one bullet that was chasing us then side by side with us then gone the same moment.

I don't remember much after that. Of course we ran, but what else? I got tired, and he pulled me along by the scruff. Or was it the other way around? However who did what, by the end of it we both were halfway panting, halfway shutting each other's mouths Until we hit something. I grasped for him in the shadow of it and only felt warmth. I found his paw over what I felt--and found, under both our hands, a shot doe. Her blood thrust out, looking for the culprit, unsure of where they were until it went soft on her coat. He knelt for her--

You didn't shoot her, they did! Why should you have to beg forgiveness..?

It's not about what came before. There's no way she'll survive this--if we leave her, I don't see any way out for her but pain. So

he unclasped his paws

I'm going to eat her.

We weren't sure if she was still alive, if she could see him coming closer. I thought you didn't eat deer! That they were friends..

Her body's

here in front of us. If I don't

damn

Millions of little things

will eat her! so--

Don't start with her face!

I don't want her to see

this. Is that so bad?

OK, ok. I understand. Just do it. I'm looking away. I'm looking aw--mmph

You eat, too--

Why?!

Don't you know how small I am? I can't eat that much..I've seen you eat loads before, why

People expect that smell from me. They'll avoid that smell of death on me..but if it's on you too, they might think it's a perfume, and no one'll think a thing!

Yeah, about that...

(never going to meet another deer like this. not this month, not before a month's worth of showers--mm?

The heat of the deer heart took me by surprise. If it could tell me what she felt--I'd been used to eating things cooked or from the fridge. But her raw, slight warmth made me remember meat left out for days.



I leaped over what both of us had tripped on, hid under the other side all to escape his chewing noises. It was only when I had both ears covered that I heard snoring where I had landed, the snoring of a fawn...most likely, its mother had just finished hopping over and was waiting for it to get across when--

One eye of his was open. He only sniffled, then smiled at me until closing it, he hurried back to sleep. All while the taste of his mother was still in my mouth, her scent coming out my nostrils.

After he was done with her, he looked over to me and the sleeping fawn

Hey! I didn't notice there was a

yes GOD I understand

don't point--

sorry, sorry

He pulled his paw back and felt the top of what we'd hit. It was uneven. He walked his fingers on it, back and forth. Then, he jumped on it--

Hey, I think this is it.

What--you mean the wall?

that,

and..

When I rubbed the top of it, the faintest bumps emerged. I couldn't even tell they had been steps at one point; It looked like just a fallen log to me, going on and on. It was still shiny--on its side, I thought I saw the full moon's reflection until I neared and found only the

flattened bullet that exited the deer. I peeled it off, and the dent it made was smooth like stones with decades of erosion. Like a coin, I pressed it on my palm and pressed. When I released, blood flowed into the ring.

Her child was still on the other side. Should we help it over? Maybe the others down the valley can help--

No, just let him sleep.

If I were his mother, I wouldn't want him seeing what had happened to me.

## Stairs

Yeah...we had to wash up after that one.

We walked on the ancient stairway. Did people really travel on this before? Each step was now a bump as if the whole case fell and didn't lead to higher places anymore. At times, it was harder to walk on than trailing it on the forest floor. As we took each step some deer, far or near, would leap out and jump across the stairs. Sometimes, they'd bump into us and say sorry, but not before we asked if they've ever--

No, most of us jump over to get to where they want, one side or another. We've never seen anyone walk on it!

Aren't you curious to see what's at the end--

If only! Then,  
we could all go around it..

*Sometimes, they'd follow us a few steps before falling back on the opposite side they came to us from. Other times, we'd apologize before they asked*

Sorry—you haven't been eating us, right? There's something that smells...charming on you. I don't like wolves, but

*He'd tell them off, all while keeping his mouth closed in case something came back up. Then, they'd sniff at me and*  
**Forget a month.** I'd better not meet another deer for a lifetime (and a half)

Eventually, the steps stopped sagging under the weight of countless deer families and began rising, edging out its steps and even glowing with its smoothness. Here and there we'd see a stag, alone and willing to climb the wall where it rose highest from the forest floor. Those ones didn't look at us.

Here, the trees blocked everything but the next one, a few steps down. They rose up like railings, and even bent over the stairs so low I had to walk on all fours to get under them. Maybe he'd appreciate it, being a quadruped—

You really *are* mocking me!!

*As it got higher, all I felt was narrower. Sometimes I'd bump into the trees, and sometimes the view. It surprised me how high we were! When we looked back down across the stairs we'd once been on, we found the deer, all upon where we'd once walked, leaping over the stairway like they were stitching up a wound.*

She wasn't fast.

She didn't know where the stairs would lead, and I didn't think memory would make my feet skip every other step like a kid again. She plodded, held my tail, and felt around for each step—and despite it all, pushed me up the stairs.

Before I put my hands down, I never noticed how smooth the steps were. The dent from all the footprints made a dip, large enough to pool rain and erode the sides as it poured out. Were they going this way, or back? I raised my hands to see my print. I was here! One more step, and the one before seemed lower than before. The stairs were slithering away, and its escape will be the proof I had that I was there.

I rolled the flattened bullet in my hand, and its rim cut me.

## Dawn

Birds picked up their eggshells so we could walk across the steps. The faint orange glow could be heard arguing with the chickens. On the hill, there were animals clustered in the fourteen places her fingers touched my back last night. What are they?

I think they're

Hogs—oh! One's running up

And just as it was about to go over and reach the new sun, another tackled it and they rolled down the whole side, little hogs and all. Leaves began to clear, and light fell on the stairs. Each step felt connected to the others, like a single piece running up the mountain—sucking up the rays, the rays yesterday

and the day before. All I knew was that the mixture felt warm in the way that grass tickled me.

The sun traveled on the trunks of trees, then came over them. At some point—not sure which step, the trees looked not like they were planted by birds dropping seeds or squirrels hiding nuts but by men, long ago.

The stairs died down as we reached the top; looking back, it was the most polished thing about this place. Everything high and wooden—the temple it once led to—had caved into the grass that now caressed it. The planks that once made up its walls now crawled back to the trees surrounding it, and there was no destination to block us from looking off into the empty grove. He collapsed on the ground to fit inside its new dimensions—

When I lay like this, the world becomes a finger pointing up, and it's easier to forgive the earth for curving away from me. The only thing I could see was the sky—but when her footprints stopped, I could tell she was no longer looking at me

I found some shards on the ground. They were so together and white they looked like they were from the same pot but, when I arranged them, they turned out to be pieces of two separate wares. In front of me were words, drawn into the wooden floor, written in one continuous line, so crisp that when they crossed each other I could tell which one went over which. They looked etched into the floor at first until I touched them and exposed the black wood under. Around them there were footprints.

I began to read silently. Even without words, my breath tossed the dust and I was more afraid of waking him than I was when I was walking. Each word was strong enough to take me back, back until I found myself back on the staircase. As I descended, the temple began to rise to its former height until its top just settled on the horizon the hill made.

The steps were so much harder and less worn that they almost bit me. One of my hands had a red imprint of its edge as if I'd slept on it. In my other hand was an urn. None of this surprised me.

## 2. Hill

*How god became me*

