

[I Don't Like Dogs]

If you stand on top of the supermarket just a bit down the road, you can see all of the buildings in town. You can count them too. Seventy one and a half. I don't count dog houses as wholes.

I don't count dogs as whole people either; they don't speak and they don't spend money and they don't furnish their houses like we do.

My Dad says that a dog is a man's best friend, but that isn't true, because that would make them whole people; as far as a dog is concerned you're just providing him with a vicinity to eat and sleep and a way of using up all his blind love. My Mama says I shouldn't be so bitter, and that all regular people do is eat, sleep and love too, so dogs shouldn't be discounted as such.

But that isn't true either, because people think as well.

In fairness, it is easy to doubt most of the people in town and their capacity to think, but I definitely do. I've been thinking since I was really small.

Granted, it wasn't always about dogs, I've thought about all kinds of things.

When it started, Dad, Mama and I were in church. I let slip a little, breathy inquiry. I was about four. Uncertainties had been rattling round in my tiny head for a while now, but beneath the solemn roof struts and stifling prayer, one managed to worm its way out across my tongue and outwards, mingling awfully loudly with the holy words.

"Who's God Mama?"

She told me not to ask so many questions. My response was expected.

"Why?"

My persistence earned me a cuff around the ear and no milk before bed that night, but it didn't teach me a lesson, I went on asking and wondering for years and years and years. And as I

stand up on this supermarket roof I'm still wondering too, because all those years of thinking and I still haven't been able to figure out why every single person in this town owns a dog.

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My name isn't important. It's going to be buried alongside my bones and built over, carried away by the wind, resigned to weathering the rocks that make counting anything beyond the town impossible. My name isn't ever going to be spoken outside of these borders and it isn't ever going to be spoken by somebody with an important name. Nobody here has an important name. Everybody here is a deadbeat, especially the dogs.

We have important buildings. A school and a church and a town hall and you can see them all from the supermarket roof too, but they're only important relative to us. Besides, the most important stuff you can't see anyway. Like oxygen.

You can see dogs all the damn time, which by default makes them the most unimportant.

Mama reckons I could grow up and teach at the school if I set my mind to it, she says I have enough brains, and that musings like these aren't something her and Dad ever passed down. But I don't want to do that, I've turned away from the school, and the church.

They've never had any answers for me.

Saying that, I don't mind The Pastor's Son. The first time I met him the sun was setting, he was smoking a cigarette outside of the tallest church window, one of its stained panels opening like a hatch to allow him through. I was younger then, obviously inquisitive, and well aware thanks to weekly church visits that smoking was a sin.

I called up and asked him outright, "What you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?"

Not an answer, but a question, the first time one of my questions had been met with a subsequent question. I stopped dead in my tracks, like a circuit had just been completed and I was, accordingly, rooted to the spot.

I stared up at him, I remember my skin tingling with electric excitement, quite literally in shock, "What did you say to me?"

"What's it look like I'm doing?"

His voice is coarse, probably from the cigarettes, but it doesn't sound foreboding like his father's is. It invites a reply, "It looks like you're sinning."

The Pastor's Son surveyed me then, taking a drag, bemused. I remember surveying him back. He had a young face, so his heavy set eyes seemed misplaced; too tired. I remember wondering what he was thinking about my face, my eyes, if he could even make them out in the dusk. The surveillance was sustained until he finished smoking, then he retreated from the window and closed it behind him.

I stood there outside the church for ages, half expecting him to come back. My feet got cold. The sun finished setting, and in its wake stained the orange sand a deep blue. I don't really know what I was expecting.

Much the same way I never know what I'm expecting when I stand on top of the supermarket and re-count all the buildings in town. It's always the same. Seventy one and a half.

I climb down off of the supermarket roof via a ladder that deposits me into the car park, satisfied with normality. There's only one car parked, in need of a clean, some children have drawn into the dust clinging to its exterior revealing the car to be blue. The desert here tries to make everything beige.

During the day the only respite from the intense heat offered by the sun is the occasional breeze, offered in response by the desert. But with it comes clouds of dust, so big sometimes you have to shield your eyes, and sometimes so enduring you have to wait inside. It sticks to things like cars and windows because of the moisture in the air. Dad told me this long ago, when I was young enough to draw on the sides of cars.

It never feels like there's moisture in the air, but it lingers from the nighttime, when it cools, when it rains; unknowable to us daytime creatures. The water cycle is one of the last things I remember learning at school. It always seemed like a fantasy. Nobody is ever awake when it rains.

The school is a short walk from the supermarket, which flanks the main and only tarmac road in town, seemingly going on forever. When the sun's out, you can see this road cutting through the desert both to the north and the south, like the blackened remains of a fuse lit long ago. If the edge of the desert is even visible under normal conditions, it is blurred by the heat during the day, and masked by the dark at nighttime, so the road goes seemingly nowhere. The lack of finality deters anyone from following it for too long.

Despite our separation, I go to the school most days. The sound of babbling children and wind chimes is relaxing. It's easy to let the noises wash over you and watch as time slips away with it; finding ways to actively pass time around here is hard.

Plus, enshrined in pebbles and a small, low fence, next to the school, stands the town's only tree. A lonely testament to the true powers of the water cycle, the only thing really stopping it from seeming like a complete myth. I like to read beneath it.

I like to read generally, mostly non-fiction, but occasionally fiction. As much as I seek answers, I seek a way out too. The desert is infinite, it surrounds everything, not even the dogs are stupid enough to try and tackle infinity on foot.

It stretches on so far and so unknowably that even tackling it by vehicle seems unwise. Petrol in a petrol tank is infinitesimally small compared to the desert, and so is the possibility that there's a petrol station that a normal, residential vehicle would be able to make.

So we're all trapped here, slowly being digested in the intestines of a fathomless, sandy beast.

Though it feels like some sort of macabre resignation, I sit amongst the pebbles beneath the tree. I read. A digestion of my own. The tantalising combination of words and the images they subsequently create goes in, time comes out. It is like the rain, another cycle.

When it reaches lunchtime the children stream out from their classrooms into the yard-like area demarcated by the same sort of low fence that surrounds the tree. They play before they eat. This is a cycle too.

The usual babble that eases reading along changes into a chorus of shrieks and giggles, the announcement of rules for made up games, governance of these rules, which is sometimes met with tears. I can't read amongst it; my attention is something like a raft, not the best at

traversing choppy waters. Every so often I'll hear a snatch of something that interests me. Playground politics are much more colourful than the kind of politics that go on at the town hall.

Children are easy to watch too; that passes the time. There is something fond in it, or nostalgic. When you leave school you stop running around aimlessly, simply for the sake of running. Watching children run is the only way to ever recapture this sentiment I think, vicarious and vague. Though I'm smiling faintly as I watch them charge about, I'm of course not inspired to get up and start doing so myself.

Bizarrely I think children are my preferred company, apart from The Pastor's Son. They have imagination, strange little rites and customs and animals they make up for themselves. I'm always alive with the hope that the church won't get to all of them, that adulthood won't get to all of them, that the cyclical nature of things permits more than one exception and maybe I could adopt a protege. I'd rather a protege than a dog. Once, when I was younger, I remember imploring my mother for a brother or a sister. I envisioned a mini-me; someone else to stir trouble between the rustlings of the church book, someone who might ask questions I hadn't yet thought of. I think these were her exact reasons for never entertaining the idea.

Though it seems so long ago now, I can still remember what I was like at school. Rather, I can see what I would have been doing amongst these children, now. What these children, despite my wistful hope in their imaginations, are not doing. I would have been at the fence, straining to get a better look at the stranger beneath the tree.

"What you doing?" says the me from the past.

"What's it look like I'm doing?" I reply.

"Reading," is what comes shooting confidently back, "But what are you reading? Also what are you doing under the tree? I don't think you're allowed under the tree. There's a fence."

"Don't worry about the fence."

Throughout my whole time at the school, short-lived though it was, I never saw anyone beneath the tree. And throughout my time since, which is a lot longer, and since I have

become the person beneath the tree, nobody has ever asked me what I'm doing. Not even the teachers.

As much as I appreciate my apparent falling out from the cycle, my propensity to ask, to know, to resist, it is difficult not to see that same falling as a rejection. The reason these children don't ask is because they are content not to know. They are content that they will grow up as The Postman's Son to become The Postman. The desert will digest them, just as it will digest me, but then it will regurgitate them. This is a cycle I'm not a part of, that I've been rejected from.

The sun has moved, the children are corralled back inside, I pick my book back up and will continue to read, either until I finish it, or until it is time for the children to go home.