

THE HIGH PLACES

By Fiona McFarlane

From the High Places

In the fifth year of drought, Jack prayed for rain. His wife was always praying and had developed a pinched, devout look, which Jack found more and more distasteful as the drought years passed. He felt her praying in bed beside him, with her hands folded in the bony country of her ribs, and was irritated by her little offerings to Heaven. She went to church every Sunday and took the children, who were invariably difficult when they returned home. For a long time, Jack thought this was because of the drive: two hours there, two hours back, shuddering on the torn, hot seats of the truck. The girls on Sundays were skittish and rude, and they complained: about the heat, the flies, and the style of their church dresses. During the week they kept to themselves. They stayed in their bedroom - the Girls' Room - taking lessons by two-way radio. But on Sundays they were reminded of what it was like to be among people, and it was this, Jack concluded, that made them unruly. They teased him on Sundays, which he quite enjoyed, until one of them went too far. Then by certain gestures of his, and his tone of voice, they knew to stop. The boy was harder to understand, not because he was wild but because he spent his Sundays vague and blushing. Jack disliked his son's solitary nature. There was no form to it. It had a feeble, dreamy quality, and he was always worse after church. Then he would take his Bible and sit outside under the red gum to read. Grass had never grown under the red gum, even before the drought, but the ground was littered with the bark and leaves the tree shed. The messy ground sloped down to the dry waterhole, which was itself such a white, rocky pit in the afternoon heat that the boy, on the bright ground under the loose tree, appeared to be sitting and reading his Bible in a lit haze, in a ring of fire. He was sixteen. He was old enough to know it was too hot to be outside, too fruitless to read the Bible, too dangerous to sit under the fragile limbs of a red gum, known with good reason as widowmakers. Watching his son beneath the tree, Jack felt a tightening of the inner organs. Every Sunday, the boy came to dinner only reluctantly, as if ashamed to need any sustenance beyond the word of God. And he kept his Bible with him at the table, by his plate, where its blank burgundy face accused Jack of something he couldn't identify: some form of neglect, some deficiency, some failure of will or spirit.

There was a Sunday in the fifth year of the drought, before Jack had begun to pray for rain, on which the boy came to dinner willingly and, rather than just leaving the Bible on the table, opened it and cleared his throat, preparing to read. The girls giggled. They were all younger than he was, with smoother skin and blonder hair; they considered their brother weird. Jack's wife turned her tired, ready face to her son. The kitchen buzzed under neon light and the moths of early evening battered the window screens. Jack took a lamb chop in his hands.

'Listen,' read the boy. 'I tell you a mystery: we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed.'

Jack bit into his lamb chop.

'Amen,' said his wife.

'Can we eat now?' asked the oldest girl, and as if her question had been a form of permission, she and her sisters took up their knives and forks and began to scrape and chew.

'We will not all sleep,' said the boy. 'But we will all be changed.'

'All right, son,' said Jack, and the boy gave him a dim, unseeing look, put the Bible down, and turned to his dinner. The family ate without speaking, and when they had finished it was night.

In bed, Jack felt the slight movement of his wife's hands as she prayed.

'Do you ever pray for rain?' he asked her.

'Not specifically,' she said. 'I pray for God's will to be done.' And she leaned over to kiss him on the cheek. Her body was like the thin run of a creek in the bed, a low creek that puts out the small noises of a comfort it can't deliver.

Jack's mind turned over his son's phrase: 'We will all be changed.' He liked the sound of it. It seemed generous to him. But the dead rising imperishable bothered Jack, who had killed and buried most of his sheep when he couldn't afford to feed them; he knew the rot and stink of a sheep left too long. He amused himself, anyway, with a vision: he heard the last trumpet, which sounded like the reveille, and saw his sheep rise from the earth, whole and round and white, like silly clouds. He smiled in his dry bed, and slept.

The next day was one on which Jack always felt certain of himself. It was time, on Mondays, to create the world again. Jack and the boy drove out to the western edge of the property to repair fences. The shake of the truck over the ridged paddocks produced so much noise that whole thirsty flocks of birds flew out of the few trees. The boy, too, was different on Mondays: obedient, attentive, with a sort of waiting stillness his father took for concentration. They worked together all morning, although they both knew there was no need to repair these particular fences, which kept nothing in or out. The land was flat and grey. There was no wind, but the soil was so fine it flew up with every kick or shuffle of a boot, and that was like wind. The boy sang a little. They worked hard through the long, steady morning.

At midday the boy stopped to look at the sky. So Jack looked and saw, coming toward them, a long, light cloud, like a pillar laid sideways, like a plank of quality wood. The sky was otherwise empty. There was no rain in the cloud, Jack could tell, but it was moving so quickly and was such a strange colour, so golden-green, as if it were reflecting the steady burning of a diseased flame, that he became uneasy. The air was charged, the way it used to be before a storm. The boy dropped to his knees in a slack and yielding way. He took up fistfuls of dirt, which he rubbed in his hair.

'Christ almighty,' said Jack, as he might have said another day, at some other peculiarity of his son's, but today the boy made a strangled yell as if to smother the words. The cloud rushed toward them. It reminded Jack of the surf he'd seen on a coastal holiday: a long green running line. And there was that same ominous, swimming feeling.

'Cover your eyes!' called the boy, and pressed his face to the ground. The cloud was so close now that Jack thought he should be able to see through it to the sky beyond, but it was as if the sky behind the cloud were no longer there, and nothing had replaced it. He found himself hiding his face in terror as the cloud passed overhead. A brief, cold shadow crossed the ground. The boy

sobbed and shook, lying there in the dirt, and Jack saw, to his surprise, that he, too, was crouched down and shaking. But the sky and the world were ordinary now, the smell of the dirt was ordinary, and there was no sign of the cloud. Jack wasn't afraid to look. He wondered why he'd been so frightened.

'Come on now,' he said to his son. 'Back at it.'

But the boy had lost his strength. He tried to stand and couldn't. His skin was an unusual shade of yellow-pink and a thick liquid ran from his nose. The joy of Monday and of work was lost for Jack, so he took the gear to the truck and stood over his son, nudged him in the back with a boot, and, when he didn't move, bent down and lifted him at the armpits. He dragged the boy to the truck and hoisted him in. A sixteen-year-old son is heavy. His feet are large and his limbs are long. Only closing the door of the truck very quickly could keep him from tumbling out of it.

Driving home, Jack said, 'Fix yourself up' and 'Jesus Christ,' and stopped the truck so the boy could lean out of the window to be sick. Afterward the boy slumped against the door, exhausted, but was able to manage the weight of his head.

They arrived at the house. 'No need to say anything much to your mother,' said Jack.

They walked together up the steps to the veranda and into the front hall; the boy leaned on Jack as he went, with one hand held out in front of him as if afraid he might fall. Dirt flickered from his hair.

The girls swarmed out of their bedroom with wide eyes.

'What's wrong with him?' said the oldest. 'Is he sick?' The radio spoke behind them: 'A verb,' it said, 'is a doing word.'

Jack's wife came from the kitchen. She ran to the boy and touched his filthy hair.

'Too much sun,' said Jack.

They were a solemn procession going down the hallway to the boy's bedroom: the boy leaning on his father, his mother behind them, the girls following until she shooed them.

'Does he need a doctor?' she asked.

Jack shook his head. He pressed the boy down onto the bed.

'Was there a voice?' asked the boy. 'Did you hear it?'

'Let him sleep it off,' said Jack.

'The whirlwind,' said the boy.

Jack led his wife from the room.

'What's this about a whirlwind?' she asked.

'A lot of rot,' said Jack.

He left the house, climbed into the truck, and drove over to look at the last of his sheep. They trembled under the pepper trees. They were loaded with flies. Jack went carefully to his knees and prayed for rain.

The boy stayed in his bedroom for a few days. The girls lost interest in him. His mother brought him food and news of the unchanging weather. Jack went out to work on the fences. He prayed as

he worked, and, having begun to pray, grew more impatient with the passivity of his wife's prayers. He disliked the helpless, quiet way she made her approach and her lack of any particular request. His own prayers were more specific.

Almighty God, he said, make it rain. Create a weather pattern that means rain,. Raise the air; God, faster and faster, until a cloud forms. Load the cloud until it has to rain. Fill the waterhole and the creek and the dams. Make the grass grow. And while it does, lower the price of hay. Protect my land from the banks. May the banks shrivel up and die, like my grass. May they be killed and buried, like my sheep. Bring my sheep back from the dead, imperishable. And look after my son, Lord, if he's crazy. May he not be crazy. May he be content with life, and strong. Amen.

Jack didn't tell his wife he had begun to pray, because he didn't want to go to church with her. He also thought it would be unjust if she took any credit for his prayerfulness, which had more to do with the absence of the sky behind the cloud than her own scheduled devotion. The Sunday following his son's 'turn', Jack stayed in bed until long after he heard the truck driving away from the house. It had been easy to avoid his son while the boy slept and shuffled in his room, but the boy was up early that Sunday, calling his sisters out of bed, clattering up and down the hallway, telling his mother in a loud voice that he would drive. Jack couldn't stand to look at his rejuvenated son. He lay in bed until midday, which he hadn't done in decades, until he felt a sweat descend on him, and a buzzing in his legs. The sweat and buzzing got him out of bed.

There had been a time, when the children were small, when Jack wouldn't let his wife go to church because he didn't think small children should travel four hours in the old truck. He liked to see his wife on Sunday mornings too; to keep her in bed. When she protested, he reminded her that she knew what she was getting into, marrying onto a sheep station in the middle of nowhere. But he'd bought the radio. It wasn't entirely a luxury, since they'd need one eventually for the children's education, but his wife thought of it that way. When it arrived and she saw the size of it, she held his hand. She listened to the city news and pretty songs and foreign languages, and on Sundays she tuned in to religious programmes. She sat in the Girls' Room, still a nursery, still not entirely filled with girls, and he heard her singing along with the hymns in a thin, fine voice, which seemed to lift up of its own accord and float above the house. He remembered hoping that the vastness of the sky over their property would not entirely dissolve the song. He'd been fanciful like that, in those days.

On the Sunday after the cloud, Jack went into the Girls' Room. The midday sun struck at the beds through the window. Each single bed was spread with a yellow coverlet; each little desk was clear of possessions. It was a room, Jack saw, to which no one was tied, and that no one would be sorry to leave. Against the far wall stood the high-frequency two-way radio transceiver through which his children learned, with growing confidence, of the existence of an outside world made up of things like tall buildings, speedboats, elephants, and rain.

Jack tuned the radio in and out of pop songs and newsy chat until he found a promising voice: a deep, certain voice of painful energy and, behind it, the low hum of organ music.

'Have you noticed,' said the voice, 'how many significant biblical events take place on hilltops?'

Jack sat in one of his daughters desk chairs..

'Let's think about it,' said the voice. 'The ark came to rest on Ararat. Abraham sacrificed Isaac on Mount Moriah. The bush burned on Mount Horeb, and the Law came to Moses on Sinai. Elijah tested the prophets of Baal on Mount Carmel, David built his palace on Zion. Jesus preached from a mountain, and he died on Golgotha hill. He wept for Jerusalem on the Mount of Olives, and from the Mount of Olives he ascended to Heaven.'

Jack thought he recognised some of these stories.

'Listen, friend,' said the voice, which lulled and throbbed. 'God is in the high places.'

Jack thought about his property, which was flat to each horizon and lower than sea level. The whole plain on which his sheep had died and his wife had grown old had once been an inland sea. It had filled and sunk over millennia and was a long way from any mountain.

'The Israelites knew it,' said the voice, 'and before they built their Temple on the Mount, they sought out the high places to make sacrifices to Yahweh. They sought out the high places to make and fulfill vows. They went to the high places, friends, to worship God.'

Jack turned off the radio and left the Girls' Room. It angered him to think God listened harder to people standing on a hill; that those people might be given rain and healthy sons and living sheep. Even so, it seemed right that there might be particular places in which conversation with God would be more effective. He didn't think his wife, with her bedtime prayers, had found such a place.

Jack thought he would see what it felt like under the red gum. He walked out into the heat, which pressed at him from all sides; he felt the sweat gather in the small of his back, and he felt the sun dry it. The closer he got to the red gum, the more his inner organs suffered a kind of squeeze. He stood beneath the stifling tree, and the brightness of the light from the white waterhole was like a wall of fire, but if the boy could sit out here for hours every week then so could Jack. It didn't surprise him to learn that making requests of God might also involve suffering. He sat on the ground with his back against the trunk.

'Almighty God,' he said, 'make it rain.'

And the seriousness of what he was asking, the great size of it, was brought home to him by the noise of the gum as it cracked and strained, the hot light of the sun through the branches, and the sound of the largest, oldest, most rotten limb as it fell: the airborne rush of leaves, the snap of smaller sections, and finally the clatter of wood hitting the ground. The fallen branch was itself the size of a substantial tree, and it lay so close to him he could stretch out his foot to touch it; if he'd been sitting just a little farther to the left he would have been partially or wholly crushed. But he was unharmed. Jack moaned as the boy had done at the passing of the cloud. He gathered dirt in his hands. Unlike his son, he didn't rub the dirt in his hair. He only sat motionless beneath the tree, terrified by God.

When he heard the truck approaching the house, Jack found he was able to sit up and dust himself off. He watched the truck stop and the girls traipse inside. He watched their mother follow them with her handbag swinging, calling his name, and when he didn't answer, the girls began to call for him as well. The boy turned away from the truck with his Bible in his hand, heading for the tree. Jack stood. He felt composed enough to place one foot on the topmost part of the fallen branch, with his knee bent, as if he had planted a flag there and claimed it for his

own.

The boy ran to him. It must be four metres long,' he said.

Jack kicked at the branch. 'What did I tell you? Widow-makers.'

His son looked up into the tree, lifting his Bible to shield his eyes from the glare.

'Was it a wind?' the boy asked. 'Was it the cloud again?'

The girls and their mother came running from the house.

'Dad! Dad!' cried the girls, delighted by the catastrophe of the fallen branch. They inspected everything. Their mother stopped farther away. She wanted, Jack knew, to order them all out from under the tree. She wanted to gather and scold them, but had lost that habit.

Jack didn't tell them he'd been sitting under the tree when the limb fell. He said he'd heard it from the house. The boy stood with his Bible shading his eyes, looking at the dirt on his father's back and under his fingernails.

Jack spent the afternoon cutting the branch into firewood. The boy paced on the veranda, where his sisters sat crowded over a borrowed magazine. The girls read with a solemnity unusual to them on a Sunday and kept looking up from the pages as if fascinated by their father's labour. Their mother stood at the kitchen window, peeling vegetables in slow, even strokes. Jack felt them all keeping him in their sights. He felt it in his spine and his gut; it was a pleasant constriction. The girls talked in thrilled whispers about how lucky it was their brother hadn't been under the tree when the branch fell. There was a conspiracy among them, of longing and possibility and dread, and this glamorised their brother, so they endured his pacing and the strange way he cleared his throat at the sky.

The boy didn't bring his Bible to dinner. He didn't speak as he had the previous week. He only stabbed a lamb chop with his fork and held it over his plate. The girls were more expectant than usual, bright around the eyes.

'Well, dig in,' said Jack, and the girls began to eat, their faces turned to their food. But they snuck looks at their brother, who finally lifted the chop with his fingers the way their father did and tore into it with his teeth.

Jack was revolted by the sound of the boy's teeth in the fibres of the lamb and the creaking of the bone as he dug out the marrow with his long finger. He couldn't eat with all this noise, and pushed away his plate. That was enough to stop his daughters, who held their knives and forks in the air. But the boy reached for another lamb chop with a slippery hand.

'The sermon was excellent this morning,' said his mother.

'Oh?' said Jack, careful to keep a casual, disdainful note in his voice.

'We learned about sacrifice,' she said. She laid her cutlery down on the table. 'We learned about making burnt offerings of our lives.'

'Burnt offerings!' scoffed her son, waving the lamb chop above his plate.

'Sounds uncomfortable,' said Jack. Still with that light tone in his voice, the one his daughters knew to be wary of.

'We have to be willing to give everything to God,' said the oldest girl in her proud and piping

voice. Her sisters looked at her in awe. 'He demands it of us.'

'Oh, but we demand it of ourselves,' said her mother with a sigh, as if the effort of this demand were unbearably sweet.

The boy laughed again. 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own,' he said. 'And we will all be changed.'

'You watch yourself,' said Jack, still light, but in a lower tone, with his face only partially turned toward his son. The girls shrank a little in their chairs. Their mother wore a plaintive face, her own burnt offering.

'I'm not afraid of you,' said the boy. He dropped the chop onto his plate, wiped his hands on the tablecloth, and said to his sisters, 'I'll tell you a great mystery. This man died today. He was crushed by a tree, but God raised him.'

Jack brought his fist down on the table and the plates and glasses jumped.

'He was raised, and he was changed. I'm not afraid of him.'

Jack leaned over and struck the back of his son's head. The boy cried out. Then he ducked his head and laughed.

'A burnt offering!' he said. His nose bubbled with snot. His sisters were silent; his mother lowered her face. Jack lifted his hand again. 'Fire from below,' said the boy, almost singing, 'and water from above.' He cringed as Jack's hand flew. 'That's what the voice said from the whirlwind. He heard it! This man!'

Jack's mouth was filled with a bitter fluid. He swallowed it down. He said, 'You make me sick.' Then he walked out of the house and climbed into the back seat of the truck. There was a blanket in there and he pulled it over him. He would spend the night in the truck, away from his family. He would stay out of the house so the roof couldn't fall on him. He pulled the blanket over his head so no part of the sky was visible. That way he might be hidden from God.

His sheep rose in the night. Jack felt them nudging at the truck, which rocked so that it seemed to him, lying in the back seat, as if he were in a boat. There was a sea sound too - but it turned out to be the soft murmur of the sheep as they brushed against each other. They had risen from the dead, whole flocks of them, a wealth of sheep, imperishable after all: they were plump and perfectly shorn, not a nick on their bodies, not a curl of wool anywhere but on their heads, except they had the tails they were born with. Jack could see the sheep around the truck although he was still beneath the blanket. He was comforted by their perfection, their great number, their eternal life. He closed his eyes and slept.

When he woke, the truck was moving at some speed. He threw the blanket off and sat up. It was day and his son was driving. There were sheep - five or six dirty ewes in the bed of the truck. Jack's head thundered, and his throat was so dry he only wheezed when he opened his mouth to speak.

'Morning, Dad,' said the boy. 'Might want to wear your seat belt.'

The truck flew over a ditch. Jack jumped in his seat and the sheep tumbled behind him.

'Slow down,' said Jack. His voice almost sounded like itself.

'Sorry,' said the boy.

Jack climbed between the seats into the front of the truck. The clock on the dashboard read 10:02, but they were already hours from the house and driving west: away from water, away from the last of the grass, and into that arid plain out of which the cloud had risen a week ago.

'You turn this truck around,' said Jack, without conviction.

His son grinned at him from behind the wheel. 'Nup,' he said.

'Where are we going?'

'Dunno, the boy said.

'And the sheep?'

The boy laughed, but not the way he had the night before. This was a brief, ordinary Monday laugh. It took in his father and the truck and the sheep and the sun as it rose over them, and it laughed at each of them in turn, and then at itself. It wasn't serious. 'Burnt offering,' he said.

Jack was in a state of steady calm. He felt as he once had when he sat down to a test at school and knew the answers.

'Then we go somewhere high,' he said. 'We find a hill.'

The boy nodded. 'All right, then,' he said.

Jack felt a strange pulse in his side, the side closest to his son; he was aware of a tethering there, and he reached out his hand and put it on the boy's shoulder.

'Your mother will worry,' he said, and the sheep all cried out together as if in agreement. But it was the absence of his wife and her worry, and of his pretty daughters, that made Jack's calm possible. Without them he felt able to enter into a new arrangement with his son, which might turn out to be binding.

They drove all day to find a high place. There were a few mounds that sometimes looked like ancient burial sites and sometimes looked like piles of fossilised dung. But these mounds were high only in relation to the flatness of the land around them. By midafternoon, a ridge of hills became visible to the west, but they hung on the horizon as the truck continued to clamber over the plain and nothing ever grew nearer or farther away. The road was very rough now. It might not have been a road. There was spare petrol in a jerry can, but the boy had brought no food and only a small bottle of water. Their mouths were so dry, they didn't speak unless it was absolutely necessary, and for hours it was never absolutely necessary. At one point they swapped seats and Jack drove. The boy opened the glove box and showed him the slaughter knife he had placed there. The truck pointed into the west.

They reached the hills in the early evening. The sun was low on the other side of the hills; the gum trees on their tops were lit gold, but the twilight on the eastern slopes seemed to Jack to be the shadow of the day of resurrection. It was there in the EZ permanence of the rock, the perpetual grey-green of the eucalyptus trees, and the great flocks of white parrots that rose into the air like souls. Jack was so thirsty by this time he'd begun to think about licking his own eyeballs. The sheep had been silent for hours. His son, however, was animated and alert. Jack worried that night would fall before they reached the tallest hill. What if they chose a hill thinking it seemed the highest, but when they woke in the morning saw it was overshadowed by something higher? So he drove faster among the hills, finding the road and losing it again,

driving along the gullies between the rises, while the sky dissolved.

Just before it was fully dark, the truck went skidding over a sandy patch of old river and tipped into the ditch of a dry waterhole.

It wasn't a deep hole. One good rain would soak it; one storm would fill it up. The truck hissed and the sheep scrambled onto the sloping ground. Jack and his son followed them up the rough sides of the hole. A hill rose above them, rounded in shape, and grass grew on it, which the sheep had seen or smelled. They butted against each other in their frenzy to eat, but Jack wouldn't let them stop. He ran at and around them, the way his dogs did; he clicked and yapped, and his son ran and yapped too, the knife tucked into his belt. Jack's lungs tightened and burned as he struggled up the hill. The sheep scattered and were frightened by the smallest noise, but were too tired to disobey. Although it was dark by the time they reached the top, with only a small piece of moon rising in the east-northeast, Jack could feel the weight of the view all around him, and how much closer he was to the sky.

The sheep settled down to eat. The boy made a ring of stones around a bare patch of earth, and Jack stripped bark and branches from trees. One stray spark and the hills would catch and the fire would race over the waterless plain, all the way to the house and the girls and their mother. But they knew how to build a good, safe fire. Jack was careful about the length of the branches and the boy packed the stones tight. The cigarette lighter flicked in the dark as the boy sought out stones, and its flame sprang and kindled as it met the waiting wood. The fire was like liquid pouring up and out of the branches; Jack would have liked to drink it.

The boy hit the sheep on the back of the head with the handle of the knife, one by one until they all lay stunned on the ground. Then he gave the knife to his father, who slit their throats and severed their spinal cords. Jack angled the knife so the blood ran out in a tidy pool. The smell of it rose over the burning wood. His son helped him throw the sheep onto the fire. The flames dulled and grew waxy around the first carcass. By the fourth, they had to load on more wood and widen the stone circle. The final sheep took some effort to place: they heaved it onto the top of the fire, but it rolled down. It required three attempts. By then the fire was so high it lit the whole top of the hill. A breeze lifted and blew, but the fire stayed in its circle of stones.

Jack looked into the sky, which, being night, wasn't there.

'Almighty God,' he said. 'Make it rain.'

The boy turned to his father. 'That's all you want? Rain?'

Jack felt his intestines pull tight.

'When you could ask for anything?' said the boy. 'When God felled and raised you? When He spoke to you from the whirlwind? When you saw His hand?'

'I didn't see any hand,' said Jack. He held his own hands behind his back. The blood on them had dried. He wanted to lift them to the sky, or raise them to the fire. He wanted in some way to satisfy his son. 'What do you want, then?'

The boy turned back to the fire. 'To be changed,' he said.

They slept that night on the hill with the scratch of dirty grass and the smell of roasting sheep. There was a particular quality to Jack's second night of bedless sleep. It was leaden without being

deep. It afforded no visions: he knew he was hungry and thirsty on top of a stinking hill, that his wife was alone in their wide bed, wondering and calling out to God, imagining disasters of every kind and bowing her head to accept them, and there was dignity in this, and it was hopeless. But no disasters came as he lay on the grass; no trees toppled, no stars fell, no fire spread. No snakes or spiders crawled across the ground. The world, in the morning, hadn't ended. So Jack expected, when he opened his eyes, to see the plain flooded with rain. Or if not that, then a clouded sky. Or at least to feel a barometric shift. He'd been obedient. He'd sought God. He had so few sheep to spare. But the early sky was empty.

Jack stood on the hilltop. It was so long since he'd seen an elevated view, and he was disgusted, standing there, by the terrible dry sloped world, the thinness he felt in the air around him, and the small distance between Heaven and Earth. He could look through one cloud and the sky was gone. He could look into the branches of a tree and watch Heaven's light fall beside him. He could stand on a hill and see the hand of God, laid out there over the plain: each knuckle and vein, and all the fingers.

The boy moaned. He lay covered in ash next to the fire. His hair and fingernails were ashy-white. The sheep were black but still whole. Flies and ants gathered at the blood. Jack wondered what his son had seen and heard in the night. Had a voice come? A cloud? Or some other thing that might visit a holy boy? But the boy only moaned in the ash. The moans were forced and slack. Jack stood above, looking down, as his son curled and wept. The change had come in the night, with the fire and the absence of voice and cloud. The boy was real now. He was abandoned and ready, again, to be loved. He turned his face into the ash; he breathed and coughed it. The sun was already heating the little dew.