

## Excerpt from *Mongrels: A Novel*

By Stephen Graham Jones



The fantasy part of all the werewolf stuff I read growing up and still read, it was never the claws, the teeth, the hunger. It was that they were all always so flush. They never had to think how are they going to buy this ticket to Istanbul. Their heart never dropped when they had to trash their third car that month. They were always walking away from these palatial estates, and these jewel-encrusted daggers, and from serious dragon hordes of treasure.

My idea was always that, if I were a werewolf, I would coax the hunters after me, in hopes they would have silver bullets. We'd be in some construction site with lots of raw wood, so that all their missed shots, I could come back the next day and dig them from the two by fours, melt them down into an ingot, make some serious scratch down at the pawn shop—if I could keep

from getting plugged, that is.

We all think that's the kind of werewolf we'll be, right? I'll be fast. I'll run through the rain and never get wet.

Don't get me wrong, I get why werewolves have a full bank account in novels. It's because watching a werewolf in human form out mowing lawns, that's not really what the reader's looking for when there's a werewolf snarling on the cover, right? Rigging stories such that werewolves always have total credit, it lets the werewolf exist at a level of drama where what's life and death isn't groceries, it's a vampire on a revenge arc, it's a society of trained hunters, it's a deadly pathogen or a long-buried secret weapon or Nazis, and on and on. There's always somebody stepping up to kill the werewolf. It's what stories do with monsters.

What if the werewolf's just scraping by, though? What if the werewolf's like us?

In 1987, at the fever pitch of Anne Rice's tragic vampires, a film came out that challenged our idea of elite monsters: *Near Dark*. When I saw this on VHS for the first time, I was smiling the whole way through. Here was a family of vampires who weren't wearing high velvet collars and sneering at all the cattle herded together at this cocktail party. Instead they were living in a series of stolen vans with blacked-out windows. Just driving from town to town, using different scams to lure victims out into the darkness for a little teeth-on-neck action.

These *Near Dark* vampires, they weren't dealing with feuds that had been started three centuries ago, and they weren't searching for some holy relic that would give them back the

sun. And they weren't investing in the stock market. They were just doing what they could to survive.

They're far and away the best treatment of vampires I've seen. Here, finally, was a monster I could believe in. A monster like me and mine.

But, in 1987, when I was fifteen, I wasn't having vampire dreams every night. No, in our little green and white house way out in the country that a great uncle was letting us live in because we didn't have anywhere else that season, what I was dreaming about every night, it was werewolves. I could hear them running around and around the house. I would go to the window, look through that old warped glass, and know that was their fur I was seeing in the darkness by the barn. And that if I quit watching, they were coming inside for my family.

Fifteen was more or less the end of my werewolf experiments, too. Starting about twelve years old, living at my grandparents' even deeper in the country, I'd set about trying to become a werewolf. I scrounged all the methods I could from the used bookstore we went to in town every now and again, and then I timed the full moon out, so I could roll around out in the grass, wait for the transformation to ripple down my arm, punch claws through my fingertips. When the moonlight didn't work, I remembered a long-legged, pale coyote that we'd seen out at the fence once, just watching us, and in my mind I squinted it into a regal, dangerous wolf, told myself those were *wolf* footprints in the driveway the next morning, coming out of the puddle I'd made the day before with the hose. If you drink from a wolf print, you become a werewolf. It's automatic. It's a rule of nature.

The water tasted like dirt, and all our big farm dogs had their faces right down by mine, sniffing at whatever it was I'd found.

I tried the raw meat angle—it was like eating cold oatmeal, with blood—I tried running naked through the mesquite, but mostly I just tried wishing.

When you're twelve, you want to be anybody else. *Anything*. Werewolf, that was just my first option. And it was mostly for night. What I wanted to be in the day, it was a kid with blond hair, blue eyes, and a gold-rope chain necklace. The necklace was very important for this new identity to work.

Neither happened. I didn't become a werewolf. I stayed an Indian in West Texas, where there aren't any Indians.

But then I saw *Near Dark*, and I'd already seen *The Howling* about as many times as it's possible to watch a stolen VHS, and something clicked over in my head. I knew now that being a fantasy creature, it wasn't reserved for the Lestats and the Draculas of the world. There could be ordinary monsters, too. There could be check-to-check werewolves. There would have to be, wouldn't there?

It gave me hope. Back then, we were always check-to-check, always piling all our boxes and trash bags of belongings into a truck bed or a horse trailer, moving to the next town, the next place, the next life.

In a way—in the way I figured it—we were already kind of werewolves. The people in town, it was just that they were too smart, they were figuring it out, they were doing the math, making the associations. The reason we moved so much, it was to stay ahead of their suspicion. We were too dangerous to be in one place very long. The villagers would see our teeth, then mob up, come for us with their torches and their pitchforks.

If you wrap yourself in the right story, everything makes sense.

In a lot of the stories I read about werewolves, they're the monster, they're the horror, they're the intrusion into our world that must be dealt with at all costs.

I never quite get those stories.

I'm always wondering instead how this werewolf gets home the next morning, naked, his or her stomach bloated past all reason from eating a whole swan the night before. I'm always wondering how this werewolf's going to pass the credit check at the used car lot. I'm always thinking that you can tell when werewolves are in town, because all the used jeans disappear from the racks. I'm always thinking that, if werewolves are around, it might be handy to have a chicken, because if I were a werewolf, I'd snatch a chicken from a front yard and just keep running, right on past that house. And if *everybody* had a sacrificial chicken tied to a post in their front yard, then nobody'd even need to die.

I'm always thinking about running like that, chicken feathers trailing behind. Running is something you start to dwell on, after you've had your knee taken apart and put back together with baling wire, after you've trashed your back on warehouses full of refrigerators and miles of irrigation pipe, after you've ruptured your Achilles two or three times—running is something you start to think about when you're somehow forty-four years old already, but still remember being twelve and peeling out of your clothes in the pasture, moving through the mesquite like an animal nobody knows about and finally closing your eyes, telling yourself this is what it's like, this is what it's like.

Just—faster, faster, lean into it. Believe.