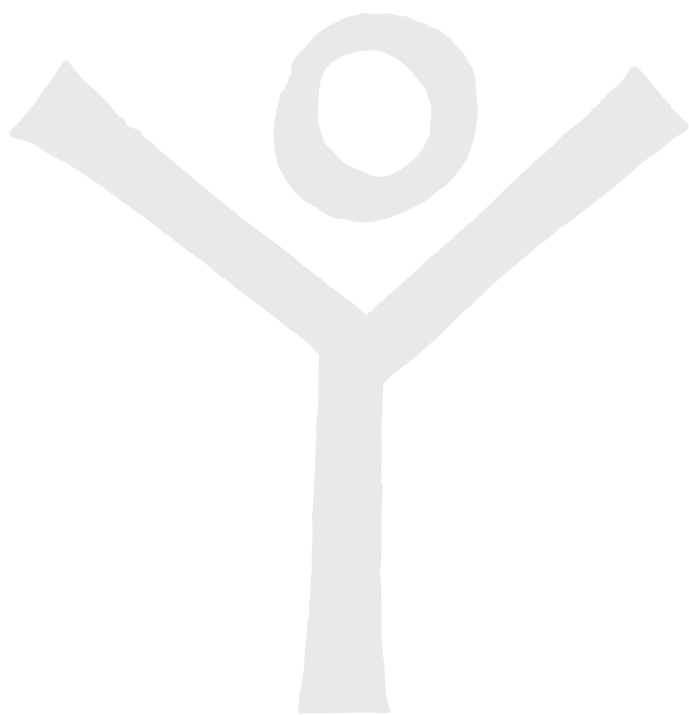


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BEHIND THE MOON

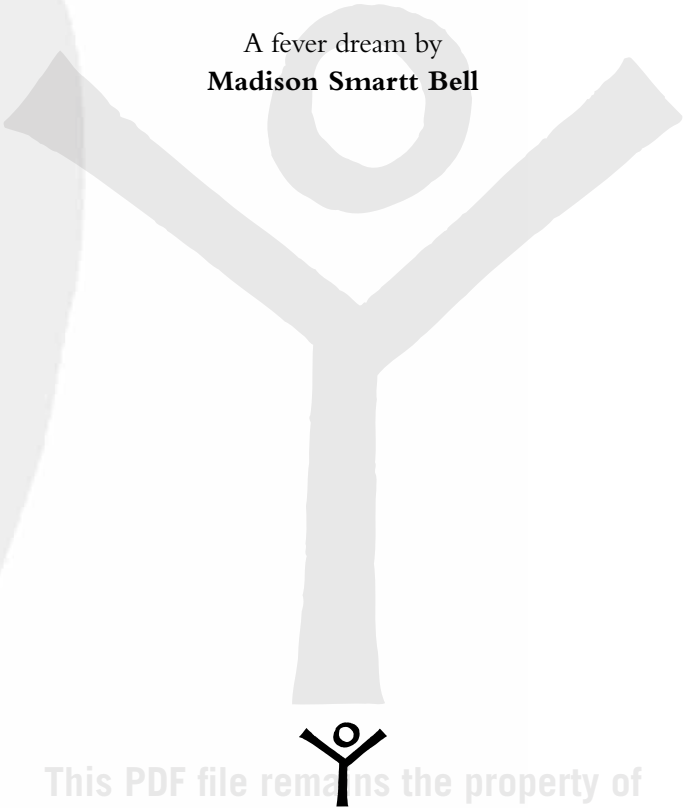


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BEHIND THE MOON

A fever dream by
Madison Smartt Bell



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“The dreamer enters the unknown world. . . . The dreamer, in the course of such journeys, meets other beings and speaks with them. She may sometimes meet other dreamers, in the form of energy. She is able to make speedy departures and returns between the known world and the unknown world, which always gives the impression of being outside time.”

—Mimerose Beaubrun, *Nan Domi*

“Understandably enough, they would have believed that caves led to that subterranean tier of the cosmos. The walls, ceilings, and floors of the caves were therefore little more than a thin membrane between themselves and the creatures and happenings of the underworld. The caves were awesome, liminal places in which to be.”

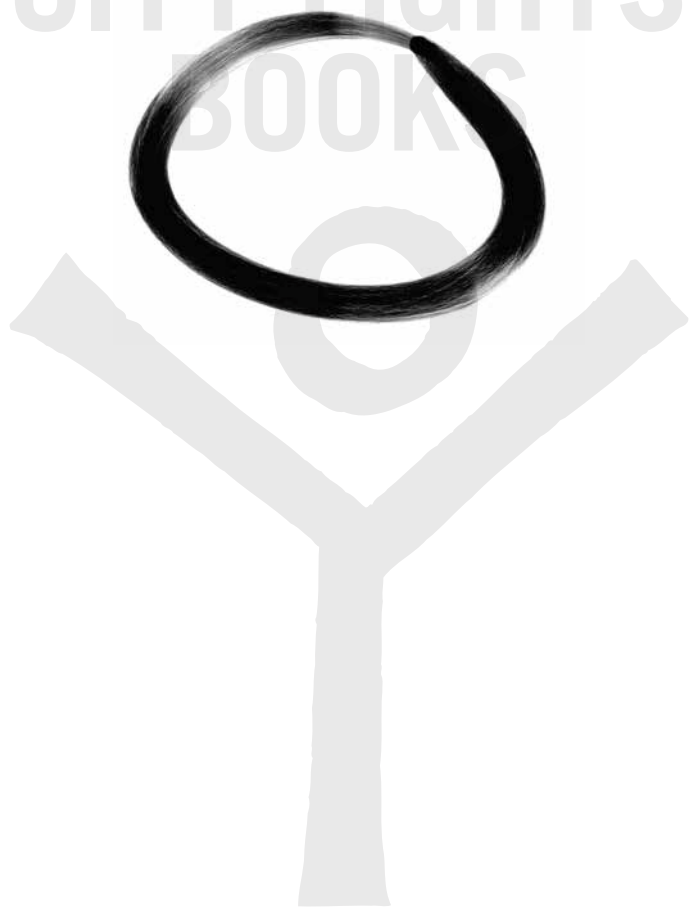
—Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams,
The Shamans of Prehistory

“The acoustics magnify every sound, and it takes the brain a few minutes to accept the totality of the darkness—your sight keeps grasping for a hold. Whatever the art means, you understand, at that moment, that its vessel is both a womb and a sepulchre.”

—Judith Thurman, “First Impressions: What does the world’s oldest art say about us?”

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1

The eye was on her first—the first thing she knew. A brown eye with sickles of a yellow gleam around the edges of the iris, attentive, indifferent—did it even see her? She could not see any part of herself, only the eye that seemed to regard her, with a kind of warmth, she felt, but she was still wondering if it saw her at all and not at all sure that she wanted it to.

She couldn't feel her body in the dark, and she thought of being frightened by that, but it was just a thought, not fear itself. She remembered that not long before she had been truly frightened, but she didn't remember anything more than the sensation. Where did the light come from in which she saw the bear? It was so, so dark at the bottom of the . . . Of the shaft. A sort of shaft, maybe; she had fallen into it.

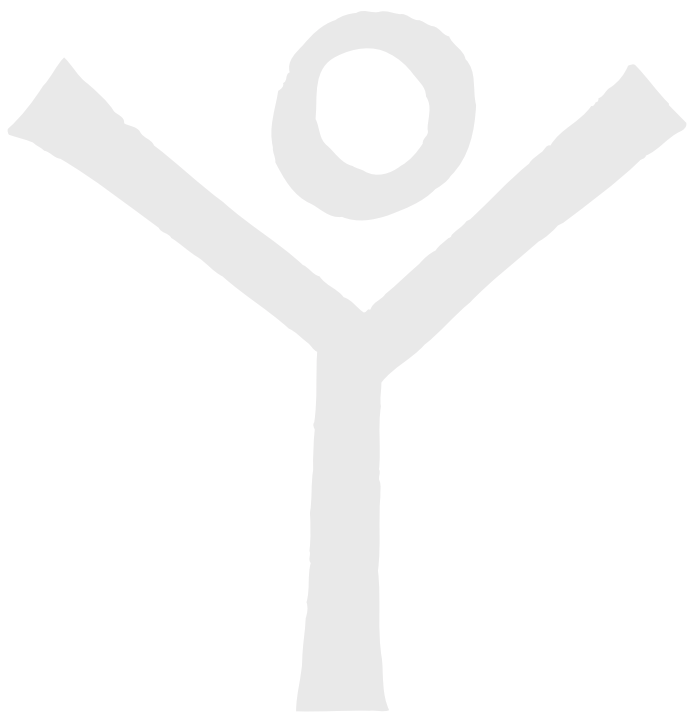
Maybe. She didn't remember that, either. There was no pain. Now the bear's head organized itself around the golden-brown eye, there the dark muzzle, damp nostrils, a hint of white teeth and red tongue . . . another eye, but this one hidden under the heavy, hairy bone of the brow, and turned a little into the stone, as if it had not yet come out of the stone.

Maybe it was only a a trick of a few deft lines, streaks of hematite and ochre, that made the bear appear in her mind. Cunningly stroked across a natural contour of the rock. Yet she could feel the warm ebb and flow of the bear's breath across her face (it was that near), could hear the grumbling of its breath. The big shoulder and the high, humped back of a grizzly coming toward her, as if through a fissure of the rock.

Emerging, as if the stone was water. A grizzly!—she should have been afraid.

But this, this creature was older than any grizzly, by hundreds—no, thousands of years. And the eye was like her own, she knew, and she was seeing with the same eye that saw her.

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2

A bright white light bore down on her, piercing, like a laser or a diamond.

Julie, Julie . . .

The voice hauled on her, dragged at her. She knew it. Did she, had she loved it once upon a time?

Julie . . . What happened? Julie . . .

The voice wanted her to come out of the cave. She would not come.

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3

In the yellowish gleam of her mind's eye she saw herself among them, five of them on three motorcycles raising red dust as they came across the desert floor toward the rock shelters. She would have liked to ride with Jamal but he had the smallest, lightest bike—hardly more than a scooter really, and Marko had urged her up behind him, while Karyn and Sonny rode together, and Marko roared out in the lead. Julie sat with her legs uneasily forked around the squat muscles of Marko's back, and now and then he looked over his shoulder at her in a greedy way she didn't like, but she liked the rush of air in her face and the way her long black hair streamed in the wind, from under the band of the turned-around ball-cap she was wearing—none of them had helmets.

To savor the speed she closed her eyes. A picture appeared: a tousle-headed little girl in a calico dress, riding behind her father on a bicycle, reaching out for something—rambler roses twined through pickets of a fence the bicycle passed; in this daydream it was springtime. The little girl could never quite get her fingers to touch a rose, but whenever she reached, the rear wheel of the bicycle wobbled, and the father, unaware of the cause, bent more sternly into his pedaling.

"Don't do that." Marko's voice, cutting through the snarl of the engine. "You'll dump us."

Julie started out of her reverie. Had she, herself, reached out her hand? There was nothing nearby. They were crossing

a long wide flat of the desert and the nearest hillocks of painted sand looked halfway to the horizon.

Sonny pulled level with them, the drone of his engine beating with Marko's. Karyn's face smooshed out against his leather back, her mouth a little open, moist, like a sleeping mouth that breathed against a pillow. Sonny shrugged his near shoulder, rolled the throttle with a faint smile. He pulled ahead, and Marko tilted in to the right of his tailpipe. In the roar of the bigger engines Julie couldn't catch any hint of Jamal's smaller one. She tried to look back to see where he was, but she couldn't turn her head far enough without unbalancing the ride.

Now they were coming into the long shadow of the cliffs where the rock shelters were. Marko swung the heavy bike in a long curve that brought them out into the sunlight again, beside a boulder, where Sonny had stopped. He put his heel down and cut the motor. In the quick shock of silence Julie thought she heard the cry of a hawk overhead and she looked up, blinking into the sun, which was still high. There would be several hours of daylight yet, and she thought it must be three, or three-thirty—buzzers would be ringing to let her out of school, if she hadn't skipped.

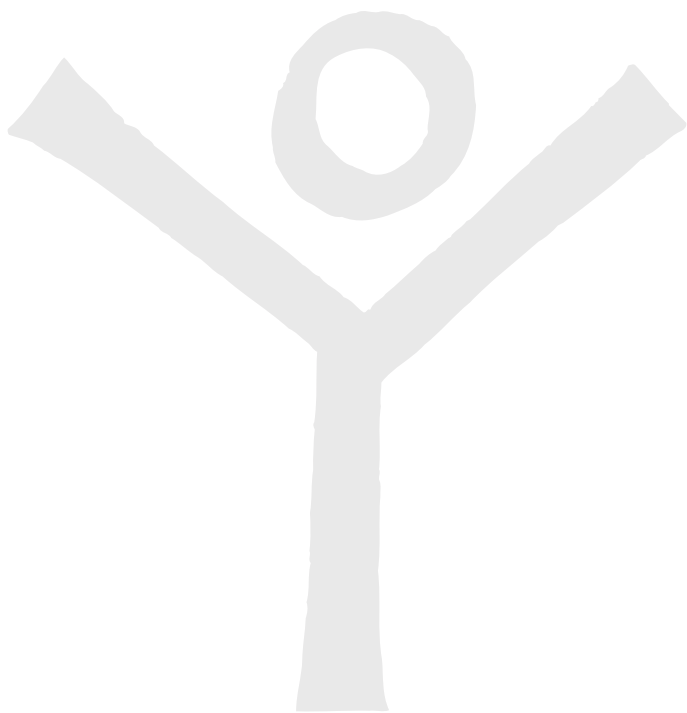
Karyn, who might have been thinking a similar thought, gave her a complicit smile as she swung her leg clear of the saddle of Sonny's bike. Hastily, Julie scrambled down herself. Her legs felt rubbery from the long, shuddering ride. She took a few backward steps away from the others and turned to look in the direction they'd come from. With a distant, crickety sound, Jamal's smaller bike persisted toward them, leading a plume of the reddish dust. His hair in a cloud around the triangle of his face. Sunlight winked from a yellow lens of his wraparounds.

"Rice-burner," Sonny said, and turned to spit Skoal Bandit juice in the sand.

Marko winked at Sonny, then pulled the bandanna from

his head and used it to wipe grit from his face. “That’s a spaghetti-burner, dude,” he said and grinned aslant at Julie, pushing back the inky waves of his hair. “He’ll get here some day, won’t he?” Marko said. White teeth.

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4

Now the light of the eye was extinguished, and she saw instead a pattern of dots, in umber and ochre, splayed over a hump of the stone, dividing into two bands like a tree trunk forking, like branches of a stream. The pattern swirled and scattered, and then for a time there was just darkness.

She could feel an object in her hand, a cool and smoothly contoured rectangle; it must be her phone. If she turned it on, there would be light. If it turned on.

Away on the surface, in the rose-colored dusk, the moon had appeared before the sun quite set, a wafer frayed on the edges like lace and pale to near transparency, against the deepening blue of the sky. Jamal said one of those weird things that charmed her: *I wonder what it's like behind the moon.*

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