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Approx. 5400 words

## DOWN TO THE HEAVENS

As the plane began its descent, I surveyed my new home. Browns. Nothing but browns. The olive brown of dust-choked bushes and the ocher of windswept fields. Mostly, though, Mali took its color from the russet brown of scorched laterite. Brown is not a good sign at the tail end of the rain season. This is usually true in Nebraska, always true in a land of subsistence farmers. Green is what you need to feed a family. Looking down at that forbidding environment, thinking of the people there, I tried to imagine what life would have been like if I'd been born in their place. From 7,000 feet, it was a land of thin lives: a narrow existence.

The flight attendant touched me on the shoulder to get my attention, then collected the meal tray, its silver foil still pinched tight over the main course. As the shadow of the aircraft skidded over the flat terrain, I picked out circular groupings of huts and cleared patches dotted with plants. Fields? They weren't plowed. They weren't even sowed in rows. Where were the verdant sweeps and swirls? God's combing of the corn. That's what my father had called it. We were flying west from Lincoln, my forehead cold against the window as our farms spread into a quilt. Phil's going to college *all the way* in Spokane, he used to tell the neighbors. All the way to Mali left him less enthused, perplexed. His eyes softened for days after my declaration at a family supper that I'd taken a job in Africa, as if his stern demeanor were to blame. But I had made up my mind. When he squeezed my shoulder at the airport, I couldn't remember the last time he had touched me.

We deplaned in the middle of the tarmac, like in a movie from the 60s. The gangway shook with every step. I tried taking a deep breath, but the heat had weight, like the air inside a parked car in July. It was even hotter inside the terminal. My flannel shirt and heavy jeans grabbed like Saran Wrap. I'd been wearing them since home, where the January air bit your

skin. I could feel all Africa eyeing me, an idiot American who'd forgotten it was warm in Africa. I wanted to tell them I had read all about Africa, explain how my luggage and two shoulder bags were filled, filled, filled in the face of two years in Africa.

I was supposed to be met. Gerhardt Bauman, the engineer in charge of my project, would pick me up as I cleared customs. Ten long feet more. A rotund customs agent was making a painstaking examination of everything in my bags. He spat accusations in French like bullets from a machine gun. My head went fuzzy with every question. Six weeks of intensive French lessons seemed like a dream.

When the agent began pushing the buttons on my GPS locator, I reached to show him how it was used. My first African mistake—the agent jerked back his hand, barking at me to stand still. A harangue started that I couldn't follow. Several soldiers snapped alert, AK-47s black and shiny across their chests, fingers over the triggers. The hall quieted, expectant. My knees buckled and my stomach churned.

A sunburned man resembling Bluebeard the Pirate suddenly shouldered his way in front of me. He was short, with a barrel chest and a solid pot belly that exaggerated his build. His forearms rippled as the two men went through an elaborate set of greetings, repeatedly shaking hands, then touching their chests and shaking hands again. Bluebeard was clad entirely in African print cloth, though faded and a bit dusty compared to the bright, embroidered chemises worn by some of the passengers. He had a wild black beard and wore a large hoop earring that jiggled as he spoke in what I later learned was Bambara, the mother tongue of most Malians. He nodded gravely as a threesome of agents discussed matters in excited tones. I felt like a small child at my father's side, powerless regarding my own fate. My head drooped down; I feared they were going to arrest me. It was then that I noticed Bluebeard was shoeless. His feet cracked, hardened. He could have been a peasant farmer if he weren't so obviously white.

They finished their conversation with a good bit of laughter—Bluebeard fingered my soaked shirt and brought some of the soldiers in on a joke which was no doubt at my expense. Then he quietly slid the agent a pair of Nike shorts and my only two rolls of black and white film. “We can go now,” he said, turning to me. Still disoriented, I looked back at the agent. He was smiling as if we were old friends, wishing me a pleasant stay. At least I understood “Bon sejour.”

Just as I feared, Bluebeard tagged along and tried to help with some of my bags. I figured him for the African version of the men who hang out at big city bus terminals, preying upon green arrivals from farm country.

There was nobody outside customs so I walked on. I was relieved to be away from the soldiers, but still nauseous. It occurred to me that I had no phone numbers; knew no people on the entire continent. Playing worst-case scenarios in my head, I reassured myself that I could always go to the American embassy and they would take me in.

“You are maybe waiting for a friend?” he asked, challenging me.

I tried to appear disinterested, scanning the crowd hopefully, ridiculously expecting to spot one of those chauffeur types holding up a clipboard with my name on it. Beyond the parked cars, thousands of plastic bags stuck to the fence, snapping in the wind. Beyond that, millet stocks dwindled in their mudbrick silos and the veldt seared to a crisp in the Sahelian sun.

“His name is maybe Gerhardt Bauman?”

“Yes,” I answered, turning in surprise.

“Hi Phil, I’m Gerhardt,” he said, smiling broadly and delivering a big hug. I stood there, embarrassed, shocked. This was an engineer? Beneath that shock, enormous relief. We walked to the car, Gerhardt effortlessly shouldering my heavy duffel and me finally peeling off my wet shirt. Then he clapped me on the back with a brick-thick hand and asked me if I was expecting to do some winter hiking. His guttural German accent made the idiocy of my attire even funnier, pronouncing it *high-kink*. It was my first laugh in Africa. I kept laughing, even though it wasn’t so funny. I laughed so hard tears came to my eyes.

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My assignment was with Project Puits de Mali, known as PPM. Gerhardt, the “Rockman,” was in charge of blasting and drilling, and I was the new chief mason. He teasingly nicknamed me “Mudman,” explaining that I was too clean cut for the bush. Of course, it stuck. According to the info I’d received from Lutheran Volunteers Corps, PPM was part of the local Catholic Mission, taking advantage of the Frères’ garage and workshops. Villagers throughout the region had developed ingenious ways of digging and shoring up wells, but needed help when they hit a thick stratum of rock or suffered cave-ins due to soft layers, like mud or clay. PPM brings in equipment, materials and expertise to drill or blast through rock and to buttress unstable well walls; the villages supply manpower and put us up.

I liked PPM's philosophy. Other organizations drilled bore holes and capped them with a pump. This was supposed to save women work, but pumps break. No pump, no water. No water . . . I thought I could imagine what that meant in this culture, but I'd already learned not to trust my imagination. There were no such risks the way we did it, just a hole in the ground with water at the bottom. A shaft of air into the earth. What could be more simple?

Five weeks after my arrival I was heading to the village of Bekui in order to situate a new well. Maurice, PPM's most experienced blaster, threaded our banged up Peugeot along a track cut by donkey carts. It was slow going, the path snaking around an endless battery of puddles, termite mounds, and trees—perfectly emblematic of a culture that meandered rather than advance directly. Gerhardt, who I thought was in front of us, suddenly roared alongside and accelerated over a large mound of earth, taking off like a fat motorcycle stuntman. Not wearing a helmet, and still barefoot. I doubted even a stuntman would ride barefoot. He turned to me in mid flight and delivered a wink. I remember him that way: pumpkin-sized head floating against the cloudless sky, tangles of beard and hair whipping rearward, a glint of sunlight from one eye matching the sparkle from his gold hoop. That day, the hoop was on his right ear. He alternated ears daily, which left some people scratching their heads.

Maurice pulled into the open square beside the mosque and mashed the brakes next to Gerhardt's dirt bike. "If you keep riding like that I'm going to end up in charge of the blasting too," I said, stepping out of the cab. He didn't reply. "Do you have any idea how far away we are from a doctor, for cryin' out loud?"

"Phil, you should pay attention to yourself," he responded, smiling yet lifting his eyes to meet mine.

"What? Me? When was the last time I did anything that dumb?"

"Never in your life, I am sure," he said victoriously over his shoulder, moving to join Maurice, wading through a throng of giggling children who had assembled from all directions. We were like movie stars showing up at a WalMart.

I was still mulling over Ger's comment when three village elders greeted us eagerly, eyes milky from cataracts. One wore comically large glasses that were mended with a nest of twine at both hinges. Their callous-scaled hands gripped mine strongly, reminding me of my father's shake. Like him, these were men of quiet strength. A woman presented a calabash of water in a traditional offering to visitors. Gerhardt drank. Though thirsty, I faked a few gulps, trying to avoid parasites. We joined a group of men under a massive baobab, its gnarly

knobs of root smoothed to a shine where generations of villagers had sat weaving mats from straw or smoking tobacco. Thrice-poured tea was prepared on glowing coals, the air sweet from fresh mint stuffed into the tiny pot. They served it in shot glasses that were too hot for me to hold, bringing laughs even from me as Gerhardt cracked a joke. “They never laugh at you in a mean way,” Gerhardt had told me on my second day, hoping to make me less self-conscious.

After lunch, Gerhardt and I went over to the village well to set up a light winch for an exploratory descent. Several women were there chatting as they hauled water, expertly keeping the pouch from catching on the sides as the rope coiled higher and higher at their feet. The well was the deepest I’d seen. The water table lay fifty meters down. Half a football field! No wonder there were so few villages in the area. And there was no pulley system, so water for the family came up arm over extended arm. Washing, cooking, cleaning, ablutions, drink for the animals: a daily routine forging great globed shoulders on every woman in the village. No exercise machines necessary.

Gerhardt talked with the women about the proposed site. “Never ask the men,” he said in English, so nobody would understand. “It’s hard to get a straight story from the men.”

“I know, you told me already, it’s the women who will have to use the well, so they’re the ones to ask.”

“Phil! I’ll make a development worker out of you yet. Now, if you would only give up shaving every day. And remember to ask open-ended questions. I heard you asking Moussa if twelve men would be enough, so of course he agreed with your lead, to avoid contradicting the ‘great white expert.’ You should have asked him how many men he would need. It’s probably more like fifteen.”

“Okay,” I said, nodding. I checked the pole anchors and tested the cable with a hard tug. “Ready,” I said to Gerhardt, hooking on a double set of harnesses.

As we descended, his belly against my side, I was awed by the work it must have taken to dig such a well. Nothing but shovels and picks and thick slabs of back muscle.

Gerhardt clicked off my head lamp at about the thirty meter mark. “Look up,” he said.

I looked up. The sky, just an azure dinner plate atop a barrel of darkness, appeared dimmer, and I could see what looked to be faint specks of brightness. “Stars?” I asked, enthralled, puzzled.

“Yes, stars. They’re always there; it’s only that we can’t see them because of the surrounding light. The well acts like a giant telescope, blocking out most of the daylight.”

“Like cupping your hands around your eyes to block glare,” I said, demonstrating.

“It may be shit work down here, but heaven is never far away.” Gerhardt beamed, excited to share this, reminding me of my father back when we still did stuff together.

Back topside, I pulled out the aerial surveillance photos as the elders showed us to the site divined by the local dowser. Gerhardt and Maurice, the chief blaster and a right hand man if there ever was one, wandered over to me smirking, a sure sign something was up.

“You can put those away,” Ger said, indicating the photos.

“We’re not going to put the well in the dowser’s spot, are we?” I asked, incredulously.

“Probably, but we’ll check it first, eh Maurice?”

“Yes, the first thing is to check it,” Maurice reported back, his smile of complicity embellished by tribal scarification—three grooves radiating from the corners of his mouth like cat whiskers.

Water is like oil. You had to pick your spot—a good flow as close to the surface as possible—or you were wasting your time. Unlike oil, though, with its high tech extraction methods, most African communities were on their own when it came water.

As the villagers milled around, Gerhardt fetched a stick from the truck and began walking in wide circles. He paused near a goat corral fashioned from thorny branches—the bush version of barbed wire—then closed his eyes and raised the stick in front of him. I still thought he was joking, pulling my leg, as he paced deliberately behind the divining rod. It was like something you would see Jed Clampett doing on an episode of *The Beverly Hillbillies*. I thought about taking a picture to show my engineering buddies back home but left the camera buried in my pack. I didn’t want the villagers to get the impression I was a tourist. It was a point of respect. Ger had explained it to me on our first day *en brousse*: no cameras with the people in the beginning. I understood, but itched to photograph this amazing world. Almost two years later, when I finally brought the camera out, I took very few photos; the thousands of extraordinary images I’d promised myself to capture had become so familiar I didn’t see them anymore.

After a few minutes Gerhardt began to zero in on one area, and the rod bent gradually downward. Everybody was nodding towards Gerhardt or exclaiming something like “Do you see this Toubab?!” The rod made a final, marked gesture to the earth and Gerhardt stopped. It turned out he was about two meters from where the village dowser had said to dig. They compromised on a spot in between.

Gerhardt tossed the stick in the back of the truck. I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction of protesting. Even much later, as I watched the work of a dowser for the umpteenth time, I still got the willies when the wooden stick quivered downward. At first, my "scientific" mind fought hard to find a gimmick, a magician's sleight. There is none. There are people who are water sensitive. That's the way Frère Herbert explained it to me. He has been working in Mali for over thirty years. Devout, humorless, sincere. He told me he can't sleep if there are water pipes running in the floor underneath his bed. His stomach churns. I thought of my own susceptibility to drafts—how even minute currents of cool air against the back of my neck cause the muscles along my spine to clench. As a kid, I was always sickly, always catching colds that seemed to start underneath my shoulder blades.

During my first month, we never stayed long in San, our base. Day after day, we headed out through the scrub along paths grooved deep into the packed soil. Three hours of hard driving to reach villages like Kolonzo and Felonkui, lying deep in the warrens of rocky escarpment near the border with Burkina Faso. The nether regions of our well operations. Those tournées were steps back in time, to a vanished Africa. Nobody except missionaries and an occasional doctor visited such remote places. An entire region where every village seemed perched on the edge of human existence. You could bump up right against it. Or disappear. Children sometimes cried in fear at my color. They'd heard about the white man. The bogeyman who would take you away. I thought of the two black kids at my high school, and how they would have found that pretty funny.

We were supposedly checking old wells and monitoring drought conditions. More truthfully, I think Ger went simply to be with the people: to drink *dolo* until buzzed and eat wonderful meals served to us by people who obviously could not afford to be serving us wonderful meals. Just as obviously, they didn't calculate the consequences of such warmth and generosity. I remember asking Jean, one of my neighbors, why he kept having so many children. He was my age, celebrating the birth of number five, yet he couldn't possibly feed more than two in a proper way. One daughter had already died. He didn't really understand the question, so I explained about how fewer children would mean more food for all. "J'aime trop les enfants," was his answer. His perfect answer. I love children too much.

It took months before I would adjust to that pace—just sitting while there was so much work to be done. Listening to what people had to say, waiting for rounds of storytelling to break the long, contemplative silences. We would sit under a great tree that drew in the entire

village like a towering medieval church, or under an awning of dried millet stalks that rustled as skinks hunted for bugs. I would listen to the cadence of the conversations, increasingly able to pick up words and phrases, content to fall under the mesmerizing ebb and flow of their stories, until I would find myself laughing when Gerhardt had everybody else laughing. There was a tangible affection between these people and Ger. When they laughed, when he made these people with barely enough food and water laugh, the white of their teeth broke from their ebony faces like lightning in the night sky. The laughter—one white man’s very deliberate camaraderie with these forgotten people—was almost as valuable as the well water. It reaffirmed their dignity. I told Gerhardt this early on. He winked at me. “Our camaraderie, Phil. Our camaraderie.”

He knew I had trouble with the idea of *our*. I thought of a posting in rural Africa as sort of a Shangri-La for twenty-three-year-olds on a journey of self-discovery. A place where I would finally have the solitude to learn. Before leaving America, I had mailed a carton of books to myself—*Walden*, Krishnamurti, *Ulysses*, Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky. After work or on weekends, I eagerly holed up in my courtyard, ready to unearth what I sincerely thought of as the wisdom of the ages.

From day one, I felt under attack. A stream of neighbors, or sometimes simply people I’d met in the market, dropped by unannounced. I couldn’t figure out what they were looking for, aside from the few who asked for money. Some would sit silently for a half hour, content, while I stubbornly read. Others wanted to know about Mike Tyson, Madonna, or (once) Jerry Springer. Gerhardt would also drop by, or he’d send somebody from the team as an emissary, trying to convince me to come out. I usually stayed in, wielding “not feeling well” like a shield.

His showing me around during work trips was straightforward enough. It was the other times that bothered me. He dragged me into a river despite the risk of bilharzias or those microscopic snails that eat your eyes out. The cool water provided wonderful relief from the heat, but I spent weeks imagining my skin itched in the telltale way of infection. It seemed that Gerhardt wanted me to revel in just about everything I had been warned against by my directors at LVC (not to mention a few things they would never have imagined it necessary to issue a warning over). Once, Gerhardt brought his girlfriend’s sister back to my compound, saying I could learn more in an hour behind closed doors than in a thousand pages of reading. Claudine sat on the edge of my bed, hands in her lap and eyes fixed on the floor, an offering, while I leaned on my desk and babbled about how different things were in the



States. He just wanted company for his decadence was the way I saw it. Dances and parties deep in the non-Muslim quarter. Lots of hanging out in moonlit *dolo* courtyards, where we'd buy rounds for the peasants and listen to the griots playing balaphones as they sang the people's history. Rare, vanishing moments which I prized, but Gerhardt wanted to drink *dolo* every night. What neither he nor anybody else seemed to understand was that my privacy was something I enjoyed. What I didn't understand was how sitting home alone looked to my neighbors—the American equivalent would be something like standing alone on a street corner and talking out loud. By and large, I resisted Gerhardt's efforts. When he stopped trying, I felt I had won.

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Finding water is not always as important as *when* you find it. As the dry season progressed and daily temperatures soared, the Bekui well passed the forty meter mark. The existing village well began to dry, like so many across the Sahel that year—victims of a rain season that spattered and dripped, but never replenished the water table. A couple of good downpours, a stratospheric current on the other side of the globe: those meteorological whims mark the entire difference between life and death here in West Africa.

A pall of resignation settled over the villagers as they relived ancient but intensifying lessons of scarcity. Women woke at all hours of the night to go to the well, managing a pouch or two of silted water, then waiting 25 minutes for more to puddle at the bottom. Other women walked eight kilometers to the next village, returning with a large bath basin of water balanced on their heads. Thirty pounds of shifting weight. I figured I could carry that load about three blocks, maybe less. Our diet changed. Women scavenged for leaves to replace vegetables normally bought in the market. The price of meat plummeted as families desperately sold off bone-traced goats for the money to buy grain. I heard you could buy a cow for the equivalent of \$4.00—the price of three beers for a family's most prized possession.

The impeccably clean people of Bekui wore a sheen of dust. Mud clung to the well team, Gerhardt and me included. We resembled earthen creatures from some deep cave. It was his idea, a way of expressing solidarity, because the villagers always brought the two of us more than our fair share of water to wash.

We were three weeks behind schedule after hitting a sand seam that required special molds to be delivered from Senegal. We worked double shifts. Whichever team wasn't down in the hole was running over to deepen a well about an hour away. At fifty-two meters we

finally hit a decent flow of water just above a layer of rock. Villagers were shooting off rusty hunting rifles in celebration until Gerhardt explained the situation.

“It’s a good sign, but the water isn’t deep enough to stop here. Maybe it will be good for a year or two, but if the water table falls even a few inches, the water will disappear underneath that layer of rock.”

People were sullen, but they knew from their own experience the truth of his words. I was beyond sullen. I tossed a load of equipment into the back of the truck, hard, exactly the way I’d often chided my team not to do it. I didn’t care if the water disappeared because I’d be long gone.

Ger continued when he saw people had absorbed the news. “If we can get through this rock, maybe with two days of hard work, we’ll reach a much better flow. I can feel it.” Then he came to my side and spoke in English so nobody would understand. “Look at these people, Phil. They need you. I need you.”

So we drilled some more. “Fucking granite,” he would say to me on his way to the truck.

“Fucking mud,” I would say on his way back. Three more days and two more meters and the blasting team set off the final explosion.

With villagers pressing around the lip of the well, Maurice dropped a stone in. The crowd quieted. A sonorous plunk. You could hear water lapping against the sides. You could somehow even hear in the plunk that the water was deep. Then more plunks sounded. For the second time, the levity quickly passed. Clods of clay were falling off the walls. A collective worry that the whole well might collapse. The rock team hurriedly hauled away its equipment and my team got the temporary support casings ready. I paced while everybody lunched at the truck, waiting for the air to clear. I couldn’t eat. I thought I heard more of the wall fall in. I anxiously told some villagers to lower me down so I could see for myself what the problem was and take some measurements. As I neared the bottom, the water sparkled in the light of my headlamp. It looked clean and plentiful and God-sent. I shouted up for everybody to relax. The clay layer looked stable enough, and wasn’t breaking off anymore.

Relieved, I also began to feel dizzy. I unclipped myself and shouted for someone to send down some sample jars from the test kit. My head began pounding and my name echoed down the cylinder of dirt in Gerhardt’s voice. I looked up, and everything went dark, except for the stars.

“Yes, I see them,” I said, grinning.

When you set off an explosion in a well the blast consumes the oxygen. Given the poor air flow into a well, it takes time, hours, for oxygen to arrive at the bottom again, even if you use branches to stir the air. I knew all this, but went down too early anyway. At fifty meters, it required an entire hour more than at forty meters. Impatience. Fatigue. A miscalculation. All of the above. I don't know. I can't settle on an answer.

The next thing I remember after passing out was waking up to the burn of an ammonia stick under my nose. My senses returned to a commotion. I gradually realized somebody was still at the bottom of the well.

Gerhardt had yelled for Maurice to get the first aid kit and had then leapt onto the cable coming up with the empty harness, stripping several teeth of the winch's main gear. He rode the cable to the bottom, then attached me. It took ten minutes to reel me up because the gears kept slipping, ruining still more teeth.

In a painful fog I stumbled to the well wall. They had managed to throw the cable back down but Gerhardt had not attached himself and there was no response to anyone's calling. Ibrahim appeared with a coil of rope from the truck. Maurice, practically in tears, lashed the rope around his waist and was lowered down. From the moment he came into the light, Gerhardt's unblinking eyes stared through me, his tongue hanging across his lower lip, his feet blue. The cacophony of the living turned to a hush, save for a donkey braying in the distance.

Gerhardt did not die the day he saved my life in the well, though I wish he had. I visited him in Germany earlier this rainy season, when there wasn't much work to do. His solemn mother brought me to a room where he sat on a chair placed by a southern window, staring into the distance, or to nowhere. There was a stain of drool on his shirt and his body slouched like a sack of flour.

"I ni ché, Gerhardt. I ni ché, i ni ché, i ni ché," I whispered. Thank you, in Bambara. His lumpen form rested there, without movement, let alone any sign of recognition. When his mother left the room I just sat there, squeezing his hand. I swapped his earring to the right ear. The hole had almost closed from disuse. Then I pulled his shoes and socks off and walked out, down a stairwell full of family photos, of infant, boyhood, and teenage Gerhardts.

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My replacement hangs close to Frere Herbert, not yet comfortable being a center of attention. I have been retracing Gerhardt's somewhat unappreciated introductory tour, right down to forcing Henry Thummel to spend a weekend with a peasant family and taking him on

my nightly round of the top dolo courtyards. The guy has been whining about it the whole way, almost as much as I did. I even advised him to get a girlfriend, or he would never understand the world around him. He called me an asshole that day, but later apologized when I bequeathed him my books.

“These are great!” he said, practically squealing as he flipped through a few of them. The bindings creaking slightly they were so dry, and still uncreased.

Today is the first time I have visited Bekui since the accident. PPM and the villagers are dedicating the well in memory of Gerhardt. Bekui itself cannot hold all the people, many of whom have come from over a hundred kilometers away on foot. There is a brass plaque in the truck, officially naming the well after Ger, and I had a pedestal made from chunks of rock that came out of his dozens of blast sites. The scene is an endless series of long handshakes and heartfelt greetings. Everybody has a favorite story of Gerhardt, now a part of the oral history in the region. My name is there too, a smaller piece of this lore. It feels good to be connected to Gerhardt in this way. I hold my head high. These people don't blame humans for the will of God.

The people of Bekui tell the same story, of how the dry season lingered an extra month and the old Bekui well turned to dust for the first time in memory. How people from Dalani, the next village over, were forced to come and use the new well and still it would not tire. How it gave and it gave and it gave. They believe it has magic spirits. I won't say differently.

It strikes me that far more people know my name in Bekui than in the entire United States, and I wonder how that is possible. It makes me feel sad about my upcoming departure, and then the weight of the day hits me. Tired of the smiling faces and invitations to come visit, I walk over to the well, everything about the path still familiar, right down to the dogs who always barked warily at the strange scent of a white man. They bark. Once there, I toss a rock in, finger-combing my beard during the long moment before the plunk. Shining a halogen beam down, I check the casings. Far at the bottom of that dark chute, glittering points of light.