

Wandering and Withering  
by Jeremy Damato

On the right-hand shoulder of a county road, a weathered Chevy sedan idled listless and unsound amongst memorial Christian crosses. A semi roared past trucking livestock and startled Hal Morlin awake in the driver's seat. As the eighteen-wheel monster surpassed a hush of still tranquility lingered like low-lying fog. Helpless to discern peace, the crippled arched skeleton trees that lead into a range of mountains were Hal's only solace. Doomed to the watchfulness of gloom and despair, what moved with the same sadness diverted him.

Opening the trunk of his car, Hal pulled out a red jerrycan and started down the coal tar pitched road.

With the sun at his back, Hal mused over his abstruse shadow feeling more like the shadow of himself than the man. A dim-witted red eyed sneezing hound that nosed in a byway of pepper. His hopes and plans all whimpering. The sight and scent of dreams a cunning trick. Wandering was withering. Freedom-loneliness. Badgered by tolls he could no longer pay on the turnpike. Hal was living in a second-rate trailer park in West Texas with a stubborn feeling of tiresomeness until he was evicted for defaulting in his payments.

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Newburt Johnson, a traveling salesman for Marcus & Son's, pestered over a warning violation ticket on the dashboard of his Plymouth. A highway patrol officer suspected him of concealing questionable contents in his trunk. Embarrassed by the realization of order books and sample cases. The patrolman refused to apologize for his false accusation. Johnson was pondering the officer's conceitedness while unobtrusively drowning his gas pedal. Abruptly a tremendous crosswind thrashed through his car dislodging order forms and the ticket from the dash. Startling

him he uncontrollably jerked the wheel, sending the car spurting onto the soft shoulder.

Through the rippling heat haze and whirling dust, Hal disconcertingly made his way toward a black Plymouth off the roads verge. Newburt Johnson, a stout figure, stood unnerved before his ajar vehicle door.

"I'm awfully sorry," he hollered. "I was given a turn by the wind".

"Dammit, you nearly killed me," responded Hal indignantly.

"I'd be obliged to help you to the nearest filling station," offered Johnson gesturing to Hal's fuel can.

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When it came to introductions Newburt Johnson was very proficient. However, this time he was offering generosity, not queen leaf footwear. Feeling discomfited Johnson erupted into sales talk, blathering about Marcus & Son's new spring line and the sales convention ahead.

Hal submissively stared through the grime on the window shield, as Newburt Johnson steadfastly steered with his small pudgy hands blobbing about selling slogans. On the roadside Hal saw a picket sign with handwritten words that read, "Native stones for sale" in red marker. The sign prompted him to think of his long ago and far away home in lone tree county. The blooming rosebuds. Yellow aspens. His mother's potato patches. The abandoned trailer and umbrella shade tree on the outskirts of his father's once far-reaching homestead. Before grain prices dropped and big debt loads took the farm.

At a Mobil gas and service station, was a ramshackle pickup truck with worn cowboy boots asleep outside the passenger window. Hard riding America is few and far between thought Hal, no longer reckless on horseback; the wild west is now a mustang in an automobile, soon to

be run ragged into dust. Near the forward gas pump, Hal made a thankful gesture, as Newburt Johnson's Plymouth withdrew into the smoldering tide, rising off the burning land.

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Hal stood lopsided with a chock-full of gasoline in his jerrycan; opposite from an AMP Grocery where a Chrysler was parked, "just married" taped to the trunk; the bride fidgeting in the passenger's seat as she waited for her newlywed husband.

"She got me this morning, but I'll get her tonight," said the groom, rubbing his tongue anxiously against his lower lip.

"Well, I reckon that woman's gonna stifle you Louden if you don't hurry out of here soon," replied the grocer sardonically as Hal walked into the grocery.

Paper signs shouted VANILLA WAFERS 15¢ IRISH POTATOES THREE FOR 10¢ TOMATO JUICE 49¢ In front of hills of Hi-Ball Flower bags, two small girls made funny faces at Hal with distended lips and low heating eyebrows. Hal playfully exchanged the glum expression. The girls chuckled aloud silly. A woman wearing a cotton dress, hair carelessly tied back with a food basket underarm, came toward them with a lazy sideways smile.

"Girls, if you make that face it might stay that way," said the woman teasingly. "I'm Rita," she said.

"Hal."

"Hal?" she replied; lingering in thought, "HENRY!"

Hal smiled.

"I'm a learner of nicknames," affirmed Rita.

Hal took the remark as an invitation to talk. He was surprised that she seemed so little awkward.

“Well, to tell the truth, I've always felt kinda nameless,” admitted Hal mischievously.

“Nameless,” inquired Rita? “Without names we'd be strangers.”

“I've always felt closer to strangers,” revealed Hal with a sly smirk.

The girls impatiently tugged at Rita's dress as she and Hal shared each other's gaze, revealing a temperament of great sensibility and familiarity.

“I have an inclination that you're the type that only comes for matches,” disposed Rita.

“Woman's intuition” replied Hal, “I suppose I have some strange tendencies.”

“You always grocery shop with a fuel can?”

Hal snickered.

“My old Chevy ran out about five miles back, tried like the devil to make it. Was just comin' from the fillin station when I got my mind set on a can of peaches.”

Rita smiled and said, “why how uncanny” and quintessentially pulled out a can of sliced Del Monte peaches from her food basket.

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The sleepy-eyed sun slowly set below the western horizon. Soft red light tinged and tangled in Marlana's hair. Lulling in the play of her imagination. She blew bubbles with her saliva while picking at the splintery deadwood of the bench outside the AMP Grocery. Swaying her foot while her toes clutched the buckled strap to her Mary Jane's. Her sister Ella, bustled about on a coin-operated pony shouting, “SANDY RIDE!” Marlana jealously watched out of the corner of her eye. She wanted to ride the ten-cent pony too. The grocer dusted off dishware and fruit jars in

the window and kindly smiled at her. She inquisitively looked at the stranger talking to Rita.

“Until I came to care for those girls, I never felt needed,” revealed Rita. “If I could only take them to the right place, the right people, away from the wrong ones, maybe that would help.”

“The wrong ones?” replied Hal with consideration.

Rita stared blankly over the plains.

“Their father,” she responded. “He’s a drunkard. Drinks whiskey and fights over water like most people around these parts, but he doesn’t give a damn, as long as he’s got two six packs to see him through the day.”

“And their mother,” inquired Hal.

“She died of Pneumonia. Mr. Barnett doesn’t talk about it. As long as I keep house and not worry about his disposition, he’s tolerable, but when he gets to bucking those empties and making sudden passes, he’s everything but tolerable. Times, I think of goin’ back to from where I started, but I can’t off and leave them.

With a rusty shrill, a rooster weathervane slowly rotated south. Hal thought about the fast wind he had been blowing mindlessly around in, like dust bowled across the southern plains. Displaced like the red dirt of Oklahoma in Kansas, the black dirt of Kansas in Colorado, to call this loam true would be a lie. There’s no soil in dust to cling to, it grows only storms of affliction.

Rita glanced at her food basket and knew she had to get the groceries back for dinner.

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The back door to Rita’s old junker clicked open; the hinges squeaked and creaked. Ella and

Marlana climbed in, rattled on the backseat as the door clacked shut. Hal sat up front, his red jerrycan resting on the lap of his dirty blue jeans. Rita turned the key, the engine boomed and the trees and utility poles began to wander.

“Are you sure it’s no trouble,” asked Hal.

“None at all,” responded Rita turning onto the two-lane blacktop from the rock and gravel parking lot.

The endless dry pastures of rusty wire fences curled around cankered posts faded to dusk. Rita turned on the headlights and they glowed through the desert grassland. Far off in the shrubs rusting automobile carcasses passed through Hal’s eyes like restless ghosts. Wisps of smoke snaked within, whispering feelings of hopelessness and bleak, consorting with the long immense waste. Rita’s voice-trailed off as she glanced sidelong at Hal, disconcerted by his silence. Throwing her head back she squinted down her nose at the unfurling road.

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Laden with what was dead, lost, and past. Hal’s weather beaten automobile inert on the side of the road was the grave of his unfulfilled ambitions. As he watched Rita’s taillights disappear, he felt the weight of the red jerrycan in his closed hand and impulsively splayed the gasoline over his sedan. Setting it up in scintillating flames. Turning his back on the highway, Hal walked out into the crippled arched skeleton trees that lead into a range of mountains.

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