

Wandering Son

by Oliver Wraught

Michael stares out the window of the Greyhound bus, watching the Oregon landscape scroll by. He is tired of just sitting all the way from San Francisco, but decides that pulling the shade down to get some sleep would be inconsiderate to the woman seated next to him. She is deep into a novel and he shouldn't deprive her of the afternoon sunlight. Natural light, he thinks, is a gift. He smiles, catching himself being sentimental.

The I-5 corridor between Eugene and Salem is an endless swath of pastoral fields and distant hills. From here it's a straight shot north, dotted with the occasional alpaca paddock and rest-stop dog park. Outside, the farmland stretches back for miles to some unreachable part of the world that no roads could possibly lead to. Michael wonders

if he could ever settle in a place like this. Now forty, he is old enough to know who he is and old enough to appreciate the little time he has left. A place like this, far from the urban bustle, could be good for the soul.

This part of the country isn't unfamiliar to him. He had traveled this road many times in the past to visit his sister in Portland, back when he had a car, back before things started to go wrong. His emotional state isn't what it used to be and he is beginning to realize that friends alone can never be enough. He had let many go when their needs weighed too heavy on him, and now little can be expected in return. He needs to be close to his family again. He hasn't seen his mother in years and it's time to change all that. First, to Portland and his sister. Then to Seattle, where his mother will welcome him and cap-off this meaningless decade of wandering.

The Greyhound pulls in for a scheduled stop at a gas station not far off the main highway, in a place that could hardly pass as a truck stop. There is the road, and then there is farmland. It's a ten minute opportunity for new passengers to board, old passengers to disembark, or the restless to just stretch their legs. Michael chooses a cigarette. It's only been forty minutes since the last stop in Eugene, but the minutes compound quickly when your

energy is siphoned by the desperation of those around you. He wonders how much life he's stolen from the people who've known him too well. He lights up a smoke around the side of the building. It must be ages.

He takes a drag. The smoke fills his lungs and for a fleeting moment his cares step aside. A mouse shuffles near from around the corner, sniffing frantically at the concrete walkway. It noses about in circles searching for anything that might make a meal, or at least a nibble, but there is always nothing - just loose gravel and soiled cigarette butts. Why have you come here? Where is your home?

Michael has always felt emotionally tied to the destitute, relating more to creatures of the wild than to the people around him. He watches, saddened, as the rodent turns back and loses itself in a field behind the dumpsters. Cigarette smoke rises, unnoticed, up to the skies.

The beep, beep, beep of his digital watch snaps him out of his trance.

The restroom is less than ideal. The usual filth lay strewn about, languishing in puddles of sewage that soil the floor. Michael has a theory that the over-all sanitation of an establishment can be determined by the

cleanliness of its lavatory. The restroom is always the last place a business cares for, so if the restroom is clean then so must the kitchen be. The converse is almost never the case. He opens his backpack producing a small leather pouch. Patrons can be heard converging outside, clamoring to use the toilet before the bus departs. Michael unzips the pouch and readies a syringe.

The bus driver checks his watch and takes another drag of his cigarette. He enjoys the unusually dry summer that Oregon has presented him this year, but knows it can't last much longer. Too often has he driven this route through heavy rain and sunless days. The occasional deep snow was the worst. It meant that he would have to get out and affix the chains. Riders would get antsy. Babies would cry. And when he was ready to go, some guy would exit the bus, scampering down the road to find a place to pee. It's nearly time to go, but the passengers will have to wait until his smoke is fully cashed-out.

Michael brings a few ready-made sandwiches and a bottle of sugar-free soda to the counter. He grabs a candy bar or two from the impulse display and pays the cashier. Outside, the bus is loaded and ready to go. The driver

guides a few stragglers up the steps and takes his seat behind the wheel. Michael places the items in his backpack, standing at a distance from the bus's open door.

The passengers peer at Michael anxiously through the windows. He gazes at the blue sky that fills the whole of the earthly periphery and wonders at the beauty of this world. Crops of grain brush quietly in the summer breeze. Somewhere far in the distance a train blows its whistle and continues slowly on to other places. But something is missing. Something is not right. Michael feels a familiar tug on his soul that tells him to alter his course and explore his surroundings. How can I let this elegance escape me? He was never one for following a plan. Plans keep you sheltered. Schedules stunt your imagination. He decides that his family would have to wait a little longer.

The bus driver places his hand on the door lever and motions to Michael. "It's time to go, my friend."

Michael throws the backpack squarely over his shoulders and smiles. "It's a beautiful day. I think I'll walk."

The driver returns a smile and seems to understand in a way that borders on envy. There are few people in this world that live their lives as if they are truly free, the

rest are just observers. He closes the door and eases the bus forward, toward the open road, and away.

Follow the mouse. That's Michael's new plan. Around the corner and through a field of tall grass. Just follow the mouse. Beyond a lonely dirt road and down a soft embankment. Past cows grazing in the sun and industrial sprinklers watering their fields. Follow the mouse to somewhere other than where he is now and someplace special that he's never been. He could feel his heart lighten with every step. People are waiting for him, but it doesn't matter. They know him well enough. They know that he is guided by impulse. That the journey above all else, is his only reward. The beauty of the world is meant to be experienced. People, with their expectations and their daily planners, can wait.

The train tracks roll ahead of him for miles without a bend in sight, but the landscape rises and falls about in waves. He walks between the rails taking his time, admiring the trees and quiet sounds that were once drowned by the mechanical buzz that choke the now distant highway. Here his mind is free to languish in the natural forms that lost their place when stones became structures and letters

supplanted memories. He walks north toward some ultimate land, kicking playfully at some cans along the railroad.

Michael walks for miles before thinking that a drink would do him well. He swings his pack around on one shoulder and continues ahead, digging around inside for that soda he had stowed away. Deep down, between a mess of T-shirts and socks, the bottle lay wrapped within a plastic shopping bag. He looks up, soda in hand, and stops. From nowhere, it seems, a man appears before him.

The man is in his twenties, disheveled and unwashed. The whites of his eyes are red from tears. He returns Michael's gaze with unease. The man looks in shock, as if he has just witnessed a horrible accident.

Michael forces a smile and extends his hand, offering his soda in a gesture of goodwill.

The man takes a step closer, placing a hand on Michael's shoulder. He plunges a knife deep into Michael's abdomen, closing his eyes tightly, afraid to see what he's done.

The bottle falls from Michael's hand.

The man pulls Michael close, locking him in a tight embrace, ear-to-ear. Tears well in the man's eyes, seeping through his clenched lids.

Michael grabs at the man's shoulders to brace himself. His backpack drops to the ground.

The man opens his eyes and gazes, teary-eyed, at the immeasurable landscape. Hills embrace the open skies. Tall pines pin the two together. It's a gift from gods for mortal joy, but the beauty seems to torture him. He pushes the knife further in.

Michael struggles for air, eyes wide, clutching feebly at the man. The landscape pitches and blurs before him. His grip gives way and he slides slowly down.

The man frees the knife with a swift tug and takes a step back. He wipes his tears on his sleeve. Blood streaks his brow.

Michael falls to his knees and then to his side, his head resting on the ground. The side of his face presses against the whetted gravel.

"I'm sorry," the man repents, then hurries away.

Michael lies motionless on his side, each breath heavier than the last. Heavy lids half cover his watery eyes. His breath disturbs the ground beneath his lips. Tears seep down off the bridge of his nose, falling just inches to the dirt. He blinks to clear his sight, moving his labored gaze up and to the distance before him. He blinks again with a

look of disbelief. Struggling, he tilts his head from off the ground, fighting for a better view. His breathing slows and calms.

He sees a shape, a sphere, just yards away, hovering above the ground - noiseless, motionless and completely out of place.