

Wilderness House Literary Review 13/2

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Road, or What White Boys Know

WE SPUN OUT ON THE GRAVEL SHOULDER then the tires bit the asphalt and we were smooth-riding down the straight two-lane, dipping through the big desert valley and pale blue sky.

It wasn't a cool car, but it was a cool road. The car was incidental, the road the real force. I would later think how road as a noun needed an additional sense in the dictionary. Road wasn't just a plain thing, a strip of asphalt, nor was it just a proverbial thing about journeying. It needed a deeper aspect, like the way the word "head" came to signify the act of fellatio. Road needed to signify a state of gratification, a state of coming, becoming.

Nevada's Highway 50 gives good road. Some of the best road in the country. Deep road. Clean road. Burning road. It comes through mountains that are witch-dry and spotted with piñon pines. It comes to holy Utah. It comes upon a great something in the emptiness.

Anyways, we set out driving, two white boys escaping the guilt of history, and road came into us.

"God, I always feel better out here," I said.

"Shut up and drive," Rick said.

Rick was an asshole. He had a gray beard and barely a whiff of hair. His scalp looked like it was powdered with volcanic ash. He'd done this kind of thing his whole life, though he'd probably never thought about road, or anything like road, anything greater than himself.

"Don't be an asshole," I said, and he eye-rolled me as the car tire-whined up some sage-shot hills. This was the town of Austin. Eureka would be next. Old churches and shit. Lots of old miners.

"Sure we got enough gas to make it to Utah?"

"Yes," I said, somewhat annoyed.

It was a good car, with good gas mileage, but road was the real reason. It'd sing us through, up and down in big spooning arcs.

This thing we'd done, well, Rick had done more of this kind of thing than myself.

"Cuz if we do run out of gas I'll kill you, Johnny."

Johnny wasn't my real name. I go by John, though John's not my real name either. Listen, I was a teacher before all this, a substitute teacher but still a teacher, an administrator of books. This shit? Well, times were tough. State cut our funding. County closed two schools. We didn't really do anything too bad, Rick and I. We ripped off a casino, but it wasn't like we actually ripped anything. We just played our odds right. Still, warrants went out. I told Rick about this little town on the other side of the state where we could hang low. Nothing but farms and polygamists. I didn't tell him I wanted to see the mountains there, the Snake Range. They're glorious mountains, the kind of mountains that cut ya loose.

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“Rick, ya need a better state of mind, man. This road gives ya peace if ya let it. Got to put all that talk of killing behind ya.”

Rick reached over and slapped my balls.

“If you keep talking that way, next one will be your throat.”

I took my foot off the gas, and we purred down the pass. Good little car all shivery from road. Coming into its own.

God, I don't know how this started. I know how road started. We can ask what drives men into the desert, into the mountains, into the big spaces. Mine started with my dad. We'd take random road trips, just drive, leave the towns. And soon enough the sage would come into our eyes. An open-window kind of blurring and burning. Sage would season our eyes.

My dad was no good with money. He'd travel for work, come back from the coast, and complain: “It's a club. It's an exclusive club out there, and they'll never let us in.”

I didn't know what he was talking about.

“They ain't gonna invite ya to their party, son. If they do, be wary.”

My dad never got it. He wanted in so bad. But there is no in. Those people are like flowers. They're precious. They're protected. We're like weeds. The small towns breed weeds and there's nothing in between but road.

My dad tried. He built himself up. I remember him calling me before all this began. He said, Money's tight—what should I pawn, my pistol or my saddle? I said, Pawn em both—cowboys deserve to die. He laughed. He thought that was funny. I wasn't being funny, though. This was when I was getting into social justice, in the years before Trump was elected. I'd never really thought about race or sexuality or anything like that, but the internet helped me. I talked to some black boys on the other side of the country. I said, How bad is it over there? And they said, It's bad. It's real bad. And I'd tell em, Road—get yourself some good road. Come west if ya can. Best road in the country.

“Easy on the dips,” Rick said as we came down another hill.

We were past Eureka now. There would be more of these dips before crossing over. I wanted to tell Rick the dips were the best part. That smooth dippy feeling in your stomach. Less like butterflies and more like butter. Alejandra had made me feel that way, too. I thought of something she'd told me when we were still together. Something about staying versus going. I couldn't remember what she meant. It was like I had the shell of a thought, I could think up the shell of something, but then the shell dissolved and there would be nothing. Whatever it was, the road would bend it out of me, I thought.

“Just a few more of these dips and we'll be free,” I told Rick. “Good road does the trick. Ya learn or ya don't.”

“Jesus,” Rick said. “You ever stop blabbing?”

Shit, there's no stopping road. My dad taught me that without knowing he'd taught me. It was in his driving. He showed me how to break out

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and away. He understood road. He'd always get the best road. Nevada, Utah, Idaho, Montana. All those things that bothered him about "the club" would disappear. The road didn't care about money. Ya could walk it, bike it if ya had to. We'd drive for days. We'd drive until our eyes were full of sage and light and we could no longer close em. The sun would reach down with her slick pink fire and the whole world would ache like a wet dream. First time I saw the Snake Range was with my dad. We'd been driving all day. We were coming from way off the plain, and all of a sudden Wheeler Peak reared in sharp relief. Its glaciated face was like a shovel blade, cutting through all the pathetic tripwires in our brains. The vision was ecstasy, the closet I've ever felt to freedom. In the foothills, we found a swatch of grass to camp in, and that afternoon the rain clouds came off the desert and soaked everything in a sage-spiced perfume. By night the skies were clear, and it was stars raining down in big spooning arcs that mirrored the road, bending us giddy.

"You know that range right there," I told Rick while pointing out the windshield to a run of brown, stoop-shouldered mountains, "has one of the biggest aspen groves in the country. Out here in the middle of nowhere, a giant living organism."

Rick looked disgusted, but then dipped his head and peered out.

"Yep," I said. "You can make out some of the trees in the canyons there. It's summer, so they're light green, lighter than the piñons. In the big groves, the trees are all connected."

I swear genuine wonder stole his face just for a moment, eyes full of light, before his head knocked the sun visor and he started cussing.

"I don't know where you get this dumb shit, but I'm gonna take a nap. You just get us to the state line."

Rick was an asshole. I don't blame him. We're all kind of like that. Come west, I told the black boys. Get some road. Sounds stupid now, but a lot of us white boys know the road is good, the road is fair. Road made Rick and I the same.

But there's something else I'm not telling ya. Remember Alejandra and that shell of a thought? Well, that shell cracked a bit toward the end of our trip. See, I was kind of lying about the school. The state didn't cut our funding. My school didn't close. It was me. I quit after Alejandra left. Aw, God, how to explain it? We didn't have a lot of black boys in my town, but we had a lot of brown girls. Alejandra was my girl for a while. She was the one who got me into social justice. She'd come up from Mexico with the violence growing stories inside her. There was a line of blood, she said, from the jungles of Peru all the way up to our gringo cities, to the chummy coasts. On a map, it would look like a tree of blood rooted in the south, blooming in the north. She'd come up one branch to my town and had become my girl. When Trump was elected, she just wanted to drive. We'd get real good road together. We'd go to the desert to lighten whatever was pressing her. Good road in the Sierra, too. I took her fishing in Hope Valley once. She cried on the way up, telling me she couldn't think of having kids in America anymore. She caught a trout and then cried when I clubbed it. She asked me why it had to die. I told her I could've put it back if I had known. I cleaned the fish and found eggs in its belly. She saw the eggs and cried some more.

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That was one of our last trips. She stopped wanting to drive with me. A few months later, she moved to the coast. I thought I could find her. I thought I could get her back. I quit my job and hooked up with Rick. I thought Alejandra would come back if I made enough money. By the time Rick and I got things going at the casino, I realized her leaving was never about money. It was about something else. Something I couldn't give her. Staying versus going. Coming versus holding. I see that now. I wish it weren't too late, but it's too late. I still dream about her hair and her skin. I dream about Mexico and wild roads in the jungles and mountains and the place she's at now, where the sun's pink light turns red then purple then black.

I was dreaming about her when a police cruiser pulled out behind us screaming bloody red lights. That's when Rick woke up from his nap and shouted What the Fuck? and took out his pistol and started shooting out the back window crack crack crack and I shouted for him to stop cuz it wasn't worth it cuz we were almost there cuz just around the bend the mountains would rise up and he'd see like I had seen the shovel-face of Wheeler Peak scraping our souls clean

But he kept shooting and the red lights kept screaming and I reached over to grab his arm and the steering wheel slipped and bucked against my hand and I felt the front tires grinding against the road then catching and all of a sudden we were up weightless and butter-smooth through the air until the car crunched and rolled and I saw Rick's face scared and sad and no longer mean and my ears popped before I could hear the sound of his skull being crushed and that's when my own skull cracked like an egg and I began this deaf, open-eyed dreaming

I still can't hear anything. But people can hear me. I've been waiting out here in this desert like a ghost, though I don't believe in ghosts. I'm just a story in the dead air, waiting for someone to bend through me. I'm part of the road now, I guess. Some of the best road in the country. If it were up to me, we'd save all this. The road, the land, the space. We're gonna need it.