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Wondering and Wandering

JASON JONES

The bed of my old Ranger slams around on the frame whenever I drive over the cornfield out back. It makes an awful noise, especially in the cab. (When I first got the truck, I had it repainted: forest green with a soft metallic gold strip of paint that runs along the fenders and down along the skirting. Green and gold were my high school colors.) That noise—those tiny cacophonous crashings—might sound like a problematic future, but I think it articulates the language of life. Aching

shocks long-seized, struts slowly snapping apart, the back wheels smashing into the fender wells, that noise speaks to me. It makes me wonder. And not just about the ordinary: that things rust and that everything falls apart—everyone knows that—but I wonder about finding the music in it, the beauty in the contradiction that is all around us.

Apparently, I'm missing some nuts or bolts in my truck frame. Or, at least, I'm guessing that's the case. I imagine that a group of guys on some assembly line over in Detroit took hours making sure each one of those nuts found a bolt, each seam had a strong weld, that the bumper set an even distance from the grill, all the time knowing that in ten or fifteen years their work would find itself on the back lot of Chet's Auto Salvage next to a heaping mound of tires. Their nuts and bolts now? Probably, lost somewhere in the crushed limestone of my driveway. Their work? Just a few years from being hauled away by one of Chet's wreckers. And this is the interesting part: those same guys that built my truck will most likely be building another Ranger tomorrow, one

with better steel, longer lasting paint, more safety features, and certainly a sleeker design.

Dad says I need to try to fix my Ranger, that someday I'm going to take a curve too quickly, and the whole truck box is going to end up in somebody's yard. I told him my truck wouldn't look bad as a flatbed, and that if things worked out, I was going to drive it till the tranny split, the engine choked and the tank scraped the ground. "Don't need wheels to wander," I said. He laughed.

Ben Okri writes, "A man can wander the whole planet and not move an inch." I agree. And a man of wonder can stand and move the world. Richard Hugo wrote that in the course of life you have to own a word. His word was *salal*—not salad, but *salal*—an indigenous bush to the Pacific Northwest; mine's wonder, indigenous to the average American vocabulary. Within it we marry awe and curiosity—curious of that which is awesome and made full of awe by it.

Wonder is exclusive to humans, or, at least, I believe it is. (My cats have yet to tell me they've become agnostics and won't be returning for their remaining eight lives.) We get caught up in wonderful things, and pure curiosity brings us to truth and beauty where glory resides. Truth and beauty, which Keats would argue, are one in the same, become to the wonderer glimpses of that which is greater, that which exudes and defines glory. The whole earth is full of that glory. And we can also find glimpses of it within ourselves. That glory is the single reason that humans ultimately choose justice over injustice, truth over deception, compassion over indifference. Life over death. Death is like the earth's atmosphere—the only way around it is through it—and as we now know and believe and have believed for thousands of years that there is an outer space, we also believe that there is something beyond death. Our actions say so.

Scientists perfect their knowledge of the genome. Can we be immortal? Who gets to be first? More innerspace is mapped; computers get faster; Mars is a reality. Cities get larger, buildings taller; the tide comes in, the tide goes out;

moon comes up, sun goes down; spring brings grass and the flowers bloom; another specie is curbed from extinction; kids plant a tree in a wasted park.

My parents build a pond.

It started out as a 7,500 gallon hole in the ground. Then we added the foam dad picked up cheap from the carpet department at the RV factory. It was 500 square feet of chopped up vests, seat cushions, egg carton pads, kids' stuffed toys, boxing gloves, UPS packaging, all kinds of chopped up life in assorted shapes, colors and sizes. The foam went in the hole first as a barrier between the hot black rubber and the hard ground. I built the waterfall and the creek that ran into the pond. I lined it with the black rubber also. When dad plugged in the pump for the first time, the water ran over the falls, broke into the small creek bed of tiny stones, and into the pond. We talked about it for days.

Later mom bought a cherry-red and white lighthouse and placed it on the shores of the tiny island that rises out of the middle of the pond. During the night its light turns on automatically. I stared at the light a lot over Christmas break, it's thin reflection widening as it pressed across the fresh snow, stretching all the way to my window. I could see the drive, but my old Ranger was gone. I gave it to a brave young kid with a crisp new license in hand—told the kid to wander. Looked like the kind that would, grinning wildly while popping the clutch and then rolling out of my drive and on down the road. Watch the curves I remember whispering, wondering why I would pawn off something so used and worthless to someone else. But that kid could still see the circular shape of the tires instead of the failing tread, the metallic green and gold instead of the creeping orange of rust, the order, the way each piece of the engine articulated with another piece causing motion—the glimpse of a human attempt at something glorious. I found comfort in my hypothesizing why that kid took my old truck. He had something to which he could ascribe the glory: the hands of

men. But I found myself asking, "To whom am I to ascribe the glory of me?"

The question left me cold and uncertain standing on the bridge over the chasm that separates Grand Valley's campus. On one side of the bridge lies the scientific, on the other, philosophy. But I've always wondered where that chasm came from. Erosion I guess. That tiny stream down there did all that work? Where's the rest of the campus that washed down with it? Holland? Or maybe further southeast. It makes me think of my family's beautiful façade, the pond at home. Its small creek with no threats of washing away the earth. The rubber below the tiny stones holding the water in won't allow it. And I think that in some way that's the way we all want it. "Every creek has a rubber lining," we would say, and nothing would move, and more importantly nothing would ever erode and wash away. No decay, no chaos. No contradictions.

Then you bump into me on your way to class, a little cross that I've become a clot in traffic, crossing the bridge in opposite directions and pushing into the concrete veins that spread throughout the campus, and I wonder where you're wandering to in such a hurry. Then the earth slides beneath us. The creek takes on a ferocious current, buckling the pylons of the bridge, the bridge crumbling and the creek, now a river, sweeping away the traffic, the earth and you and I along with it. The last thing we see is Padnos crumbling and being swept into the current, the Commons not far behind. We travel on the rapids trying to keep our heads up and our minds about us, realizing that we are captive to something much more powerful.

But it seems that the river doesn't flow southwest or southeast, but rather, sweeps us around and washes us, you and I and the rest of traffic, back to the center of campus. The water slowly resides and bodies limply float around the Carillon tower bumping into one another, shirts, slacks and jeans sopped, hair wet and strung across faces like sweeping shadows. Silent moments pass, and, one by one, people realize that they're still alive. Then suddenly as if nothing has happened one person heads for Zumberge; another checks her bag, notices she's lost her books and heads

for Kirkoff; some drifters, dazed and livid, head for the parking lot; still a few stragglers, distraught, march into the Cook DeWitt. Slowly the whole lot disperses and inject themselves back into the school's concrete veins. The water continues to reside and I hear it whisper something about how we're all part of one body, one organism. In the distance I hear the buzz of saws and the ping of hammers. Pink building permits signed by professors in dark black ink hang out of the back pockets of men hurrying to rebuild before the students have time to register what has just happened. Then I hear someone yelling back from the direction of the bridge telling everyone that it's gone. A group of students still soaked, the cuffs of their jeans dragging on the ground, come back our way, bewildered and wondering what happened to the bridge.

We stare at each other. They're wandering but not wondering. The look in your eye tells me you know that too. I ask for a ride and you generously oblige. As we walk you ring your shirt out, pulling the corners out tight and twisting. Water runs over your fingers to the tips of the shirt and drips to the ground. It reminds me of the waterfall at home and the creek and the pond and the lighthouse. I try to tell you about it, but you say you've already been there. I wonder when. A couple of students, dripping with water, pass us on the way out to their cars. The one asks the other something about a worldwide flood. The other one cracks a skeptical smile. You laugh and say something like, "...at least they're wondering."

Across the lot, at least a hundred feet, I see the familiar green and gold that I haven't seen in years. Rust is eating at the quarter panels, a large boil in the center of the hood, but it still seems to be hanging together. When I start to walk toward the truck, you're already heading in that direction, and when I take a good look at you again I realize you were the young brave kid that I gave it to. A little older, a little wiser. I smile.

We get to the truck and I head for the passenger side. You cough. I look over, and you throw me the keys. You say you've been to Alaska and the Cape of Hope in this truck, to California, Hudson Bay, and Massachusetts, but nothing's

changed. You're still wondering, you say, but don't like to be told what to think.

"Me neither," I say as I swing around the other side of the truck, open the door, jump in, and fire it up. You get in and close your door. The sound is loud and raucous. The tranny hasn't split yet. I push my satchel between us and my Linguistics book slides out of it and onto your lap. You flip through. The truck jumps forward as I disengage the clutch, and we head out of the parking lot, past Brian's Books and the students flashing their plastic to buy up more black on white, past Afterwards, until we come to the T at the end of the road.

"Replacing one phoneme in a word can totally change the meaning of the word," you read out loud.

"Like each road and thought," I say.

The truck shimmies a little as I force the wheel to the right, toward home. The first round in the road turns sharply, challenging us to break its will. I feel the back end of the truck slide, looser than I remember. I know, Dad, the curves. I see a freshly plowed field ahead and a tractor path leading into it. I take it. The struts shout and the springs ache as we jump the dead furrow and head out across the field.

And I wonder about mankind, about you and about me. The music struck on the heartstrings of decay. The beauty in the contradiction. The new Adam reaching for the old Adam still wandering.

Still wondering.