3-1-1993

The Royal Highway

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://commons.cu-portland.edu/promethean/vol1/iss2/24

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I slumped to the floor outside my room just a moment ago. Through a haze which I welcome, a man is walking....

In a solemn pace, a ruined upright man comes my way. Please listen! Do you hear it? Can't you see the jagged grey stones fly from under his step? His boots pull the effort from his legs. I can't help him. Cold, dead leather stretches to accommodate his features so worn with defeat. Ill-strength and decay show above his eyes; they weigh down to fix his gaze into a grumbling squint. His boots keep a trudging pace as the gravel clicks and pops, stirring wispy clouds of sun-parched dust. The heat from the sun filters flowly through his dirty overalls to his yellow t-shirt where it spreads like cooking oil and soaks his skin.

"Got to get to the top of that hill. Got to keep on. Damn sun."

His tar-stained teeth run in a scramble from his jaw when he opens his mouth to smoke. Spittle-like paste forms on his otherwise dry lips. Black and white stubble pierce his hardened skin.

His boots never change pace; his right foot scrapes heel-first then rolls flatly to the toe. The left ceaselessly follows.

"Got to get to the top. Come on you old son-of-a-bitch; you ain't slowin down, are ya?"

His words barely leave his mouth then fall to the ground.

Occasionally, his right arm rises to his mouth, bringing with it a cigar. The taste of smoke and spiked coffee react harshly in his mouth.

The sun pounds down and projects a window-screen shadow on his greasy hair from his green, tattered, Skoal cap.

The road flows on and gradually climbs to a small hill. Charred yellow tufts of grass poke through the heat with rigid tenacity. From the hill, there is a good view of what appears to be a lush, green valley. Although the distance is deceiving, the effervescent waves of heat distort what, in actuality, seems to be there. Please let it be!

Just behind and to the left, a crow chuckles and swings to the right to be rejected by a strong decision.

He is a big man, and while his right hand raises the cigar to his mouth, his left strains with the job of holding a fifty-pound bag of gravel steady on his left shoulder. The potato sack lined with a plastic sheet that is cut in a tooth-like fashion at the sewed ends absorbs the heat; and with every slight unhappy jerk of his step, it presses down on his shoulder.

"Just a few more, big boy. Don't give out on me now."

Watching his bulky outline in the distance, a long trail of gravel comes to meet bare ground in front of him. Like walking over coals, he moves slowly along, never changing pace.

Upon reaching the end, he lets his left arm hang limp and slouches his shoulder so that the bag might fall to the ground. With a slight flip, the bag rolls and slides past the tight, short sleeve of his shirt.

He takes the last drag on his cigar and flicks it to the dust where it smolders. Slowly, he bends over. With a small pocket knife, he cuts the bag open at one end. He folds the knife and places it in his pocket. He holds the end of the bag at the corners. With a steady pull and a powerless grunt, the rocks pour out dryly.

The man continues this ritual in my mind for most of the day. It is so unclear; slow, deliberate, and ceaseless.

He just won't stop! On and on, the sun, heat, and dust. To be drained in such a way....

The sun is setting. At the end of the day, the gravel road is ready. He...I...am ready. He has done his work well. Will he perform my service? Sing...for my....

"This is it. I know that I am not fit to lie before you and ask that you save me. I've never lived the
righteous life. I only ask that I can now know your glory."

With this, a man in the mind, still warm with life, dusts off his hands. He falls to the gravel-covered mound. His eyes are wide to the sun.

"I will feel no pain as I realize you love."

The heat and dryness dries his eyes, and they are useless. In darkness now, he begins to sing....

"Prepare the royal highway; the king of kings is near! Let every hill and valley a level road appear! Then greet the King of glory, foretold in sacred story: Hosanna to the Lord, for he fulfills God's Word!"