Spring 2001

There's Deserts Out There

Richard Nunez

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss55/17

This Prose is brought to you for free and open access by ScholarWorks at University of Montana. It has been accepted for inclusion in CutBank by an authorized editor of ScholarWorks at University of Montana. For more information, please contact scholarworks@mso.umt.edu.
RUDY AND I WORKED the late shift at the Las Cruces City Library. He trained me on my first night, shelving books. We wheeled a loaded cart to the third floor, where Rudy began putting books on the wrong shelf.

“That’s not right,” I said. “This is section RN. That book goes in EL.”

“This,” he said, thumping the book, “is Holbrook’s study of the exploitation of the Chinese during the railroad boom of the late 1800s. I’m putting it next to Elie Weisel’s Night. They’re related subjects.”

“But that’s wrong,” I said. “No one will find it there.”

“This library,” he said, “needs reorganizing. They’ve got books in the wrong place. It’s all wrong. That’s why I took the job. They’ll thank me later.”

“But they have a system,” I said. “The Dewey Decimal System. That’s how all libraries are organized.”

“Have you seen the second floor?” he said. “Of Wolves and Men is next to an encyclopedia of insects. Wolves are mammals,” he said. “Not insects.”

The job was temporary, so I protested no further. Instead, I pulled a book from the cart, sat on a footstool, and began flipping through the collected letters of Isak Dinesen. Before Rudy was through reorganizing the third floor, I wept for reasons I did not understand at Dinesen’s description of lions sleeping on the grave of Denys Finch-Hatton.

I am prone to weeping. My chest suddenly cracks open, and for no reason at all I begin crying. A doctor in Oregon once told me there was a clinical term for my condition. He couldn’t remember at the time, so he told me to make an appointment with the nurse. He would do some research, he said, and tell me the next time he saw me.
At the time, though, I was homeless. It was late autumn, too cold at night anymore to sleep on the beach, so I left town the next day, hitchhiking from a truck stop in Coos Bay with only seventy dollars, a bedroll, and a backpack filled with dirty clothes. In three days, I crossed the knuckled backbone of the Rocky Mountains and reached New Mexico. I washed and shaved in a dank and moldering restroom of a Conoco station in Las Cruces, then walked across the street to a medical clinic, where I sold my plasma for fifty dollars.

The doctor on duty told me I had low blood sugar. "Do you get dizzy spells?" she asked.

She was a big woman, as dumpy and bloodless as an unwashed potato. She had a wandering eye. Looking at both, I couldn't figure out which one it was. She was a haggish woman, but the type, I could tell, who had transcended her ugliness and operated in the realm of near-saintliness.

"No," I said. "But sometimes I weep for no reason at all."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said.

"There's a clinical term for it," I said. "A doctor in Oregon told me."

"What is it?" she said. She turned her face sideways, deliberately, so I could focus on her good eye. That alone, her act of kindness despite her handicap, almost made me weep.

"I was hoping you could tell me," I said. "He didn't know at the time."

"What were you doing the last time you started crying?" she said.

"I was on a street corner in Santa Fe," I said. "The sun was setting."

"And the time before that?" she said.

"I think it was at a bar in Provo," I said. "Summer Wind was playing on the juke box, so that might not count."

"The clinical term is unhappiness," she said. "Which isn't surprising, living the way you do. Find a wife," she said. "Have some kids. You won't have time anymore for unhappiness."

"Really, Doc," I said.

She shook her head, as if I had disappointed her. "Come back in a few days," she said. "I might have an answer for you then."

I thanked her and left.

Spring 2001
The parking lot of the clinic was where I first met Rudy. He wore a grimy jean jacket, faded white at the elbows and cuffs, and oversized Levi’s baggy in the seat. He was thin and broad shouldered, looking from behind like a garden rake in clothes. I had noticed him leaving the clinic as I waited in the lobby. The doctor was chastising him in a consolatory way that intimated a history between them. She told him he could come back when he was clean.

“Get help,” she said. “You need it.”

She watched him shuffle out of the clinic, shaking her head as if she were watching her own sorry son make his way into the world. By the time I left the clinic half an hour later, Rudy had not made it more than thirty yards from the front door. When he heard my footsteps, he turned as if he’d been expecting me.

“Looks like you sold some of the real estate,” he said, pointing to the cotton bandage on my forearm.

“Yeah,” I said. “You?”

“Nah,” he said. “Can’t. I went to the well a few times too often.”

I didn’t know if “well” meant blood or alcohol, and I didn’t ask. I found out later, after he died, that it was neither. He was a heroin addict, and I feel at turns amazed and idiotic that I never suspected during the few weeks I knew him. I have invoked almost every memory of him and cannot remember anything strange about his behavior, possibly because almost everything Rudy did was out of the ordinary. He couldn’t cross the street without mentioning that Charles Langley, the first man to climb the highest mountains in all seven continents, was struck dead by an automobile while crossing a street in London. And it’s true; I looked it up.

I was thirsty for a few beers and company, so I asked Rudy the location of the nearest bar. He pointed across the street to a place called The Brick.

“I’m buying, if you’re interested,” I said.

“I’m a fish out of water,” he said. “Been flopping on dry ground too long.”

I couldn’t interpret, but he followed when I walked across the street.

The Brick was a converted grain silo with a wrap-around bar
in the center. Booths skirted the outer wall. It was like sitting in a stationary merry-go-round. Or a moving one, I imagined, if you were drunk enough.

After a few pitchers of Leinenkugels, Rudy told me about the temporary job at the library, that a few extra hands were needed to move books from the old building to the newly constructed library down the street. Once all the books were transferred, he said, we would be out of a job.

"Suits me," I said. "I'm not looking for anything permanent."

"Only cowards are," he said.

"Damn straight," I said, though I had no idea what he meant. We were speaking in platitudes, the language of drunks.

We were on our fifth pitcher, when I told Rudy about my parents, how they died in a car accident when I was ten years old. I was asleep in the back seat, so I didn't see the pick-up pull out in front of our car. The force of the collision pinned me against the front seat. When I woke from the initial stupor, I found I was staring into the face of my dead mother. She had spun around in the accident, and her head hung limp over the front seat, as if she'd turned to check on me one last time before dying. I called to her for several minutes, but she never woke, so I finally clamped shut my eyes until paramedics forced the lids open to shine a flashlight into them.

Often, I can predict the severity of an impending hangover while I am still drinking. While telling Rudy my story, I felt nausea already building in my stomach and a hardening, like calcification, spreading throughout my head. Rudy listened, but he didn't say anything, except to shake his head and cluck his tongue every once in a while. I think he wanted to say something, be sympathetic, but he couldn't. That's the way with guys like us, vagabonds; you hook up with one every once in a while, but the conversation stays on the surface, like two boys trying to hide their hard-ons while looking at a girly magazine. I'm sure that's partly why I didn't know about Rudy's addiction; I didn't want to know.

The only other time I told that story was in an essay I wrote for high school English. I described my mother's eyes, how wide and vacant they seemed, as if she'd been surprised by death. She
was staring at my chest, and I remember looking down to see if there was something there. Then I noticed a drop of blood forming on the edge of her nostril. Because she was so still, so pale and vacant, the formation of that drop seemed huge and monumental. It lingered on the edge of her nostril, like an icicle in warm weather, then dropped onto my pant leg. That's when I shut my eyes. In the essay, I described the seeming force and suddenness of that drop hitting me like a jolt of electricity. Her nose continued to bleed and a dark stain blossomed on my pant leg. For months afterward, I kept scratching that spot on my leg, just above the knee, until the memory of it faded.

My English teacher pulled me aside after class and praised my writing. He said it was the best essay he'd ever read in all his years of teaching. He asked a few personal questions, which I did my best to evade, and for the rest of that semester he threw books at me: Catcher in the Rye, Lord of the Flies, The Old Man and the Sea, Of Mice and Men. I read the books, usually overnight, and returned them the next day, hoping he wouldn't hand me another. But he always did. I enjoyed most of the books, but his eagerness to befriend me made me uncomfortable, like walking in wet shoes.

I was living with my uncle at the time. He was retired, widowed, and had already raised three kids of his own, so he didn't pay much attention to me. Shortly before he died of a heart attack, I saw him through the kitchen window dancing alone in the garage to imaginary music in his head. Watching him, I felt more alone than he looked. At least he had company, even if it was imaginary. He died shortly after Christmas. I was pulled out of my Algebra class and spent the next few weeks in foster care until a relative could be found to take me in, but I ran away before they could tell me the inevitable—there was no one.

I dined often from dumpsters: discarded pizza slices seasoned with cigarette ashes; blackened bananas soft as baby food; fuzzy, green bread; a block of cheese with the shape and solidity of a bar of soap. I slept in downpours, children's tree forts, unlocked cars; beneath highway overpasses, atop desks in unlocked office buildings, inside cardboard boxes. The closest I came to having a permanent residence was the three months I lived with a woman in Omaha. She showered me with blind, suffocating love until
one day I hitched a ride with a trucker hauling frozen steaks to Colorado Springs.

I don’t remember much of the walk from the bar to Rudy’s motel room, just Rudy tripping in a parking lot. He tried to break his fall, but the parking lot was strewn with pebbles, and his hands slid from beneath him. He rolled to a sitting position and inspected his palms.

“Let’s see,” I said.

He held out his hands, palms up. There were deep gashes. Dirt and pebbles were lodged in the cuts. A shiver ran through me. I knew how painful it was to wash and clean wounds like Rudy’s. It was almost better to leave them dirty, risk infection.

“Stigmata,” Rudy said. “I knew I had a complex.”

“You’ll have to clean that,” I said.

“Watch,” he said. “Tomorrow, I’ll rise from the dead. Mark my words.”

“We almost there?” I said.

“Not sure,” he said. “Some days the walk is longer than others.”

As he struggled to his feet, I saw how thin he was. Malnourished, really. Limbs spindly, spiderlike; knees and elbows as prominent as doorknobs; hair wispy and sparse as comsilk. He stood unsteadily, wiped his hands on his pants, and gazed uncertainly around him.

“This way,” he said, pointing down a side road. “I think.”

As soon we got to his motel room, he fell face down on the bed and was asleep immediately. I grabbed an extra pillow and pulled the blanket from beneath him. He grunted, but didn’t wake. I wrapped myself in the blanket, threw the pillow on the floor, sank to my knees, then dropped. I woke up later that evening, my head buzzing and clanging, and staggered to the bathroom. Rudy was curled around the toilet, his head hanging in the bowl. I asked if he was all right, but he just mumbled, his voice husky either from bile burning his throat or the echo off the porcelain and water. I couldn’t tell which. I had to urinate badly, so I unzipped and peed in the bathroom sink.

As I was shaking off the last drops, Rudy moaned into the
toilet. I asked again if he was all right. He waved me away without lifting his head off the seat.

"Don't drown," I said.

The next day, I was working at the library.

Rudy found me weeping in the aisle. He took Dinesen's book from my hand and glanced at the cover.

"That sad, huh?" he said.

"It hit home," I said.

"Social science is done," he said, pointing to the half-empty cart. "Literature is next. That's on the fourth floor."

We transferred all the library books in less than a week, and we were out of a job. In hindsight, I should have told Rudy not to be so zealous; we could have stretched the job for another week, at least, but Rudy was asthmatic and was taking a lot of Primatene at the time. The medication made him manic about everything. Especially talking. He was a mile-a-minute talker. I became a selective listener, and learned the art of the well-placed grunt, or nod of the head, indicators that I was still listening.

We were paid at the end of the week: two checks for three hundred and fifty dollars each, which we cashed at a currency exchange. With nothing better to do, we jumped into Rudy's rust-eaten '72 Chevette and headed for the Grateful Dead concert in Taos.

Thirty minutes out of Las Cruces, I had reached saturation point from his talking. He was blathering about the Very Large Array, enormous satellite dishes in the middle of a vast scrub desert in Northern New Mexico. He said the dishes transmitted radio waves encouraging people to buy things they didn't need, like Chia pets or electric can openers.

He said, "It's a government plot to keep the economy afloat. They aren't fooling anyone."

"They fooled me," I said. "I thought they were harmless."

"That's what they want you to think," he said. "Remember when they put fluoride in the water?"

"They still do," I said.

"That's the point," he said, slapping the dashboard. "That's exactly the point."
Then it was dark, and I knew I must have fallen asleep. Rudy was gripping my shoulder. His fingers dug in like talons.

"Durango's in Colorado, right?"

"Uh-huh."

He pointed over his shoulder with his thumb. "We just passed Durango," he said.

"Durango?"

I peered out the window. A thumbnail moon was racing alongside us. Mountains like hunched cats crouched in the distance. Even at nighttime, even in complete darkness, you know when you are lost.

"How did we wind up in Durango?" I said.

"We're not in Durango anymore," he said. "We passed it an hour ago."

"Where are we?" I said.

"Utah."

"Utah?"

"Utah," he said, nodding his head.

"Pull over," I said.

"Why?"

"Do it."

He released the gas and sidled to the shoulder. By sheer coincidence, we came to a slow, rolling stop in front of a billboard welcoming us to Moab. Our headlights gave birth to a cartoon cowboy riding a buckin' bronco.

"How long was I asleep?"

"Two... three... four hours," he said.

"We're at least five hundred miles from Taos," I said.

"We don't want to go there anyway," he said.

"We don't?"

"Hippies," he said. "They're all wiggy. They talk the strangest shit."

We slept six hours at the threshold of Moab. I crawled into the backseat; Rudy slept in the front with his head on the armrest and his feet dangling out the passenger window. At dawn, we clambered out of the car onto the shoulder of the highway. Rudy stretched, bones popping, and yawned.

He took a few steps forward, and bent nearly double. I thought he was going to throw up until I saw something flop-
ping at his feet. As I approached, I saw it was a bird with a broken wing. Frightened by our presence, it flapped feebly, moving only in pitiful circles on the ground. Rudy stepped away into the ditch and returned carrying a large rock. He didn’t hesitate. He brought the rock straight down on the bird. I was shocked. I gazed at him curiously, marveling at his composure. He seemed the type who might cry if he stepped on a bug. He noticed me staring at him.

“It wouldn’t have survived,” he explained.

“Probably not,” I said.

“It was suffering,” he said.

“Probably,” I said.

He looked down at the dead bird. Its broken wing was visible beneath the rock. It had been a clean shot. Quick and merciful.

“I did the right thing,” he said.

“You did,” I assured him.

We walked back to the truck. He turned the engine and pulled onto the highway. We scanned the barren landscape of one of the least populated states in the lower forty-eight. The sparseness of the land plucked at chords in my solar plexus, but eeriness took hold of Rudy. He claimed he heard whispers, tendrils of voices, exhaling from the scrub. He seemed genuinely frightened. His eyes were glazed and distended, like the eyes I once saw on a golden retriever just before it went into an epileptic fit. I suggested driving to Montana, where I worked as a grocery clerk in Missoula a few years back. Rudy agreed heartily.

“I need mountains,” he said. “They watch over me.”

Ten hours later, we crossed the Continental Divide a second time near Butte. “How can we cross the Divide twice?” Rudy said. “If there’s a line dividing the country in two, how can you cross it twice going the same direction? That defies all logic,” he said.

Rudy rambled on and I adopted a role that suited both of us: I was silent. I was good at being silent.

Years later, I was watching a reporter interview a Buddhist monk on television, and the monk said something that made sense of Rudy for me; he explained the difference between big mind and little mind.
"Big mind," the monk said, "is the infant state, when nothing had a name, and when one and two could equal zero."

"How?" the reporter said.

"If you give me one apple, and I eat it," the monk said, "and if later you give me two apples and I eat them, what is left?"

Hours later, the highway spilled us into Missoula. Though I had left town only a few years back, I thought it was for good, and I was slightly unnerved to see nothing had changed in my absence. I believe most of us, when we leave a place, secretly desire that a large void be left in our wake.

"Where to?" Rudy said. "I'm Tonto here. I'm just a sidekick."

"Red's Bar," I said.

"Good idea, kimosabe. Right now, I could easily lead a horse to drink."

We drank 18-ounce Schaefers for a dollar and shot pool for about an hour before the lights winked once, twice, thrice, then went out finally with an audible click, as if great machinery had been unplugged on just the other side of the wall. The darkness was complete, and people bumped into one another until eyes adjusted.

Rudy said, "I can't see a damn thing. My hand is in front of my face, and I can't see it."

"What do you suppose happened?" I said.

"A bird sat on the wrong wire?" he said. "A car wrapped itself around a pole? Someone threw the wrong switch at the plant? Who knows?"

"Where's the door?" I said.

"Behind us."

I turned and saw a rectangle of light squeezing through the cracks around the door. It looked like a closet where they kept the stuff of stars.

"Let's go," I said.

We stumbled through the dark bar and out into a world transformed. Snow was falling thick like goose down and we made reluctant tracks through an inch of virgin snow. The cobbled road gave way to a paved street that led us into downtown Missoula. We stood at the crossroads of Foster and Main, and stared
down the long street with no lights visible and the dark shapes of people milling about. The sky was like a living thing, palpable and untamed, no longer held at bay by the lights of the city, and I knew how the first pioneers must have felt stepping tentatively into an untrammeled world. When the clouds broke momentarily overhead, I saw the stars throbbing and pulsing brightly like the great hot suns they were.

"The boom's been lowered," Rudy said. "It's the end of the world."

"Don't get melodramatic," I said.

"Who's getting melodramatic?"

Suddenly, he clutched his chest, staggered backwards, then sat in the snow.

"Are you all right?" I said.

He nodded and said, "Yeah... Sure... Fine."

Then he fell on his side.

"Get up," I said.

There was a look of serenity on his face.

"Cut it out," I said.

The words came weak and half-choked. I knew without knowing. There is a look in the eyes, like a candle flame snuffed in a darkened room that belongs only to the dead.

Suddenly, a blaze of light burst forth from a nearby coffee shop, illuminating our tragedy. My attention was diverted from Rudy momentarily as stoplights flared in succession down Main Street. There was an audible click again, just as when the lights went out, and I heard a short, muffled revving of machinery before it settled into a hum and then disappeared into a medley of other barely audible noises. The blackout was over.

When I knelt over Rudy, I saw flakes had gathered on his face. I reached out and brushed them off, but the flakes continued to gather in the heavy snowfall, clinging thickly to his eyelashes, so I grabbed him by the armpits and dragged him beneath the awning of the coffee shop. Just then, a couple walked out, and the rest happened quickly.

An ambulance arrived, its peacock lights flaring, and the paramedics moved with speed and alacrity until resuscitation was deemed impossible. Then police officers descended and produced a hypodermic needle and an empty vial from Rudy's coat.
pocket. You could tell by their faces that it explained everything to them.

There had been signs, if I had been looking. He'd been sweaty all day, complaining of nausea. Every once in a while, he'd throw his arms around himself, squeeze, as if to keep his insides from falling out of an imaginary hole in his gut.

An officer stepped forward. He was young, burly, flat-topped. I imagined him as a linebacker breaking from the huddle.

"You knew him?" he said to me.

"No."

"People over there said you knew him." He pointed to the coffee shop couple huddled in their coats.

"He was standing next to me," I said. "Waiting to cross the street."

"You never met him before?"

"I don't know him," I said.

He scrutinized me. Even if I had been telling the truth, I would have squirmed. His self-confidence withered me. There was a thick buffer of flesh and muscle between us, all his.

"Mind if I search you?" he said.

He was going to do it anyway, I knew. If I refused, that would make him even more suspicious. I imagined him telling me to stay put, then walking away to consult his colleagues. They would huddle, nod heads, look my way every once in a while to keep me squirming, then return to tell me I was under arrest for suspicion of something-or other. So I beat him to the punch.

"No," I said. "I have nothing to hide."

He gripped my upper arm, his fingers pinching into the underbelly of my biceps, and led me to the nearest squad car.

"Hands behind your head," he said.

He searched my pockets first, then patted me down. I was staring over the hood of the squad car, looking into a window display of a mechanical Mickey Mouse in a red winter coat and hat. Mickey was slowly rolling a fake snowball back and forth, endlessly. The thought of him forever rolling that snowball, that his snowman would never be complete, almost made me weep.

"You can put your hands down."

The police officer was standing beside me, hands on his hips.

"You knew him," he said, "didn't ya?"
I said I didn’t, that I was frightened, that I just wanted to be left alone.

The officer looked down at his shoes. “I don’t suppose you got I.D.,” he said.

I shook my head. “My name’s Christopher Browning,” I said. “I suppose you don’t have an address, either,” he said.

“Pittsburgh,” I said.

“It’s almost December, Mr. Browning,” the officer said. “It’s going to get quite cold here soon. Too cold to be spending nights outdoors.”

I nodded my head.

“I suggest you head south,” he said. “California’s nice this time of the year. So’s Arizona and New Mexico. There’s deserts out there.”

“Yes, there is,” I said. “I’ve seen them.”

“Why don’t you go there, then,” he said.

“I will,” I said. “I’ll leave tonight.”

Rudy’s Chevette became my home for the next few years. He would have wanted me to have it. I didn’t have room in me to mourn him. Instead, I fixed on the serene look as he died. It seemed a peaceful death.

I drove all over the West, migrating with the seasons. The highways became as familiar to me as the streets of my boyhood home. After a while, though, I had skipped too many court dates in most states, mainly for being an unlicensed and uninsured motorist, and I was finally confined to New Mexico, where I hadn’t been discovered yet. Just south of Truth or Consequences, the Chevette finally died on me. A small oil leak turned into a gusher and the engine froze. I made sure there was nothing I could do and then left the car at the side of the road, reluctantly. I felt like I was leaving a fallen comrade behind. As I walked away, I turned several times, watching as it was consumed by heat ghosts shimmering off the pavement.

I made my way south, to Las Cruces, where Rudy and I met. I wandered the streets, the sun leaning over me, weak from hunger because I hadn’t eaten in a few days. Reflected sun off the sand and pavement sliced into my narrowed eyes, making me stagger, so I lay down in an arroyo, in the shade of an acacia. I slept so deeply it could have been days later when I woke with
a jerk. Oblivion can be delicious. I woke knowing only what it meant to be alive. Then the names of things came back to me in rapid succession, like falling dominos. Sky. Cloud. Sand. Cactus. Mountain. I felt like a child again, unpolluted by definitions and classifications. The world suddenly seemed immense, and I just a barely visible speck on its surface. I imagined the earth hurtling through the cosmos, spinning on its axis at thousands of miles per hour, and so I flattened myself against the ground beneath me for fear I might tumble off into space. This fear took on immense proportions the longer I lay there.

I struggled to my feet and staggered through the streets of Las Cruces. I made a few wrong turns, but eventually I found the library. No one seemed to notice me as I walked through the front doors to the elevator. I pushed the button for the third floor.

It was there. In section RN. Holbrook's study of the Chinese during the railroad boom of the late 1800s. Next to Elie Weisel's Night. No one had discovered yet that it was misplaced. I pulled the book from the shelf, giggling like a madman. I sat on a footstool and hugged the book to my chest. I felt like I held proof of my existence.

I set the book on my knees and peeled back the cover. There were pictures inside, faded tintypes of Chinese laboring in the desert. One photograph was of an orphaned Chinese water boy. He shouldered a yoke with buckets hooked to each end. Another was of an old man, humpbacked, bent nearly double from years of hard labor. Since he was so low to the ground already, the caption said, he worked along the rails, holding spikes in place so other workers could hammer them into the ground. I flipped through the photographs, engrossed, until a tear splashed onto one of the pages.

The same doctor still worked at the clinic. I demanded that she remember me. She squinted. I had forgotten about her wandering eye; one settled on me, while the other focused beyond my shoulder. I turned abruptly, fearing that a police officer or an orderly might be standing behind me.

"I was here a few years ago," I said. "I sold my blood."

"This is a blood clinic," she said, placing both hands on her hips.

"I weep," I said. "For no reason at all. Don't you remember?"
She cocked her head to one side. "Sinatra?" she said.
"Yes." I shouted. I understood how lunatic I appeared, but I couldn't control myself.
"Of course, I remember."
"What is it?" I said, getting ahead of myself.
"What's what?" she said.
"Why do I cry?"
She shook her head pitifully. "Don't you get it?" she said.
I gripped her hand in both of mine. She didn't flinch. "Tell me," I implored.
"You're unhappy," she said, and she fixed the same expression on me that she gave Rudy years ago. I was her own sorry son fumbling through the world. The entire weight of my expectation deflated, and I felt myself sag, diminish.
"There is no clinical term for it," she said.
The doctor placed a tender hand on my shoulder and bent to look me in the eyes.
"What happened to you?" she said.