

James Leishman Etchison

Because Before the Wind There Was Wandering

From above, the desert makes Leto's trailer look like a tiny turquoise dot which occasionally billows smoke. On every side the desert stretches wide, without interruption from trails or roads.

Leto steps off the corrugated aluminum step to watch the sunset. The sun bronzes the west side of the afternoon with a fine patina: the windy tree, the East mountains, the trailer, the barbecue, Leto's gray eyes. Besides a few bushes and Gila monsters, that is all there is.

Leto sees the windy tree was long ago blown by the wind. He knows well it's gnarled trunk, stooped and bent for the east, branches pointing westward like a hand out of the grave. It has taught Leto that many years ago this desert was blown with a constant mighty wind, and the windy tree still remembers it.

Now the desert is still, like a sunning snake. Some days he stands tall and stiff, unshaven and brown from many such days, arms straight out with fingers licked and pointed in search of the least trace of what the tree remembers. The quiet never disappoints him; he only waits.

Seven years ago, Leto towed his trailer beyond the farmland, the irrigation pipes, the electric wires, beyond every trace of man but two. He cannot escape the last two.

One is above him. The haphazard zig-zagging of jet planes across the sky stitches a seam of vapor trails in the perfect blue which Leto cannot escape no matter how far he takes his small

turquoise trailer. The other sign is the clouds on moonless nights.

Where Leto had grown up, the word for cloud meant “sky mountain,” and now on moonless nights the mountains in the sky glow like nocturnal eyes. The glow reflects from the streetlights, stoplights, and the twelve hundred windows lit by the twelve hundred televisions of West Basin. The golden blue reflects off the clouds and into Leto’s face. One of those lights, he knows, lights the face of one woman in West Basin whom Leto once loved. She was all he knew until the wind blew him east. Now, she watches the blue light at night alone, and Leto gazes into her reflection in the glowing sky mountains.

Day or night, Leto watches the clouds to see which direction the wind is blowing. When he lived in West Basin, the spirituous wind would often deceive him unless he stayed very still. A quick glance at the clouds and he would think, “The wind is blowing south west,” but then he would take a slow, long look and say, “No, he blows north.” Now Leto is always still and slow, always sensing the wind high above him.

On the ground, though, there hasn’t been wind for seven years.

Leto looks again at the silk knuckles of the East Mountains, marvelling at the hand which had carved each crevasse and ridge. The sun’s bronzing effect on its side fades into purple and gray. Leto steps back into his trailer.

The postman is coming tomorrow, and Leto wonders if he should talk to him. Leto doesn’t like to talk. Words form on his mouth like mildew, slow and unwelcomed. It isn’t the English language that weighs down the words, even though English was extremely difficult for Leto to learn. As a child in his far away home Leto said very little. The most noise Leto ever made was when he played the oboe.

Inside, Leto looks on the tiny aluminum windowframe where his oboe sits in its case. He hasn’t taken it out to play since he moved to the desert seven windless years ago. The desert doesn’t listen to oboe playing.

There were listeners once, but not in the desert. In his far away home he played before thousands. His oboe led him around like a master sergeant. It led him onto the plane with those three other

woodwind-playing men. It led him, on long night flights of sewing those vapor trail seams, to talk to the tight-lipped bassoonist about their home and romantic love.

“When you find it,” the tight-lipped bassoonist always said, “hold on for dear life.”

He did find it, he thought, in West Basin, but the wind blew and now she is a dreamy glow in the clouds at night. Leto now reserves his love for the hand that carved the mountains, the windy tree outside his trailer, and the wind itself.

Leto watches as the little plume of dust approaches from bluffs between West Basin and Leto’s desert. It grows larger, and as Leto expected, it is Mr. Guthals. Mr. Guthals is the postman, and Leto knows that his name means “good neck” but when Mr. Guthals drives his jeep up to Leto’s trailer and steps out, Leto notices that a small goiter has developed, causing Mr. Guthals’ neck to swell to unusual proportions. Leto says nothing.

“Don’t mind the neck,” says Guthals. “It’s from the low-salt diet my wife had me on last month. It doesn’t hurt and the doctor says it will go away.”

Leto smiles and nods.

“Got a few things for you today,” he continues. “Here’s the whole box.” He hefts a box from the back of his blue jeep and as he sets it down next to Leto’s corrugated aluminum steps, dust shooting out from beneath it. “All the usual stuff. Plus the rope you ordered.”

“Any junk mail I could have?” Leto asks, his voice hoarse and dry.

Mr. Guthals smiles, his chin overlapping the goiter so he appears to have no neck at all. “Thought you would ask that,” he says. “I got some right here.” He pulls out a stack of sale catalogues that people left sitting in the mail chutes at apartment houses. “Nobody seemed to want these, so I guess you can have ‘em.”

“Thanks.” Leto takes them.

“Well that’s it,” says Mr. Guthals. “Guess I’ll head back. See

you in a couple days, Leto.”

“Bye.” Leto sticks his hand straight up to wave him goodbye, his eyes scanning the junk mail Mr. Guthals had given him.

The dust plume from the jeep goes back around the bluffs to West Basin, and Leto flips through all the catalogues, scanning the names on the white address labels in search of one particular name. Lilly. He is not sure where she lives now, and although Mr. Guthals thought he used the junk mail to burn, Leto also searched through the white labels, sifting out the “occupants” in search of Lilly’s new address. He flipped through them all, but once again he did not find her name among them.

Leto wanted to write her and bring her back to him. He wanted Lilly to live where the wind had blown him.

He had ordered thirty feet of half-inch rope, and Mr. Guthals had given him exactly that. Leto took one end of the thirty feet and threw it over the crook of the lowest branch in the windy tree. Leto felt that thirty feet would be just long enough, but that the rope might as well be infinitely long—so long that it only has one end. A rope that long, he thought, could only lead to God.

Leto ties a loose cinch around one end and feeds the length of rope through so that it is tied securely to the branch, and a full twenty-two feet hangs down along the tree’s trunk. The bottom is a foot off the ground.

Leto stops and looks east for a long time. He licks his finger and stands in communion with the tree, feeling the windless air. Then he ties a loop at the bottom of the rope big enough to wrap himself in.

Leto steps back to his trailer and looks again at the tree. “It looks like a hanging tree now,” he thinks.

Leto gazes at the blue sky from the East Mountains all the way toward West Basin. There are no clouds, so Leto steps into his trailer to get out of the sun.

Leto sits on his wobbly, plastic-backed, steel-legged chair staring at his oboe case. He is perfectly still. Flies crawl on his face and into his ears and nose but he doesn’t move. He just stares at the

case lost in its memories. There had been a purity to his music once—a purity too divine to speak of in any church. For as little as he could communicate with his mouth, his oboe would communicate that purity with a passion. It was in West Basin that the passion left him. It left him and then he had nothing. Just the wind that would leave his lungs, pass through his oboe and out the other side. Meaningless wind. He will never go back there, for fear of losing even the little wind that is left.

He stares at the oboe case a moment more and stands.

After seven years he opens his oboe case. It is still inside, perfectly preserved, ready for him. The small double-reed is inside a sealed plastic container and to Leto's surprise the reed has not cracked with age. He carefully puts the reed into his mouth to moisten it and begins connecting the sections of the oboe together.

Then he hears it.

Leto always thought that he would first be able to see or feel a sign of it. A movement in the higher branches of the windy tree, a low cloud moving at high speed, or a coolness on one side of a licked finger, but he never expected to hear the wind first.

It is a low rumbling, far away, at the base of the East Mountains. Leto quickly puts together the instrument and steps outside to see. A giant cloud of dust speed towards him like water from a burst dam. It is more than a wind, he realizes, it is a Spirit movement.

He runs to his tree, alarm in his steps, and slips the rope around his waist. He puts the oboe to his mouth and waits. The wind approaches so fast that it will push by him and pass straight through West Basin in less than a few minutes. The tree would save him, though.

First he feels a tiny breeze, and he begins to play.

Although it has been seven years, he plays virtuously and with the purity he had once lost. The wind hits him with full force, carrying the sound of his oboe out and away so swiftly that he can't hear what he is playing.

The trailer begins creaking and is torn loose from its cement footings. The wind is so loud in Leto's ears that he cannot hear the crashing as the trailer rolls end over end toward West Basin. The Windy tree bends low, and the rope is taught. The wind pushes Leto

westward with more force at his back than he has ever felt.

The tree holds him fast, the mountains stand resolute, and the trailer is lost in the cloud. Leto continues playing. His music passes through the dustcloud, with the wind, through the loud desert air. Leto hopes that it passes into West Basin, and into the ears of a dark-skinned woman named Lilly. The oboe sounds with passion, pure communication. It says, "come back, come back."