Journey Away

Ervin Krause*
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Abstract

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Man, it's fast

Stark brown and green, red and gold — tall people short
to and fro
Cars escaping time, stop and go — students walking fast,
thinking slow — no stop no — steaming water splashes, off
on below
Running water now, some hot some cold — coffee tea or Coke,
some hot some cold.
Is it worth it — yes — and some say no
I hear there'll be a snow — a blizzard, oh
The women were so cold, no food and Joe—
Thought I'd buy some boots I hate to tho
Feet so cold and wet you have to tho
Rings around my calves, black rings you know
Yes yes yes, I scrub with soap
Guess I'll get some leggins — I'll see ya Flo
Hurry up please and take my dough
Hurry hurry please and take my dough
Water sloshing cups that steam and glow
Honk sharp and stop—stop stop go.

Journey away

In the crevices that were the narrow bluff road, Jethroe Stevens could still see the double row of tracks he had made four days before. They were nearly covered with dust now, but he could still make them out. One pear-shaped set of tracks coming and another set going. He did not stop to consider them, but walked steadily on in the afternoon heat. His head slumped, like his shoulders that held the two suspenders of faded and dirty overalls. A string from a Bull Durham sack hung from a bib pocket. The buttons at his waist were open, letting a part of his shirttail spill out. The yellow, powdery dust that rose with each step settled lightly in the little creases the shirt made. He did not look back. Now and then he turned his wrinkled, olding face upwards to watch the clouds go scudding overhead.

Ten paces behind Jethroe walked his son, Garvin. He was bigger by half a head than his father, and heavier. But where
his father had a hard stringy leanness, Garvin was soft and plump. He shuffled through the dust with a lop-sided un­stable gait, kicking the fine dirt up and across his unlaced shoes and over his bare feet. His sweat and dirt-stained blue shirt and overalls were too small for him and suggested they had been his father's. His thick, fine-haired wrists and neck were exposed by the smallness of his shirt and were beginning to turn red in the sun's heat.

The two moved up the road, silent, and the sun and the earth were silent around them. The hot south wind slid delicately between the yellow banks and curled the dust before it, mixing it with the heavy heat belts that shimmered up. The wind licked up into their faces and into their clothes, making them sweat, and then dried the sweat too quickly.

Garvin's eyes squinted beneath the mottled and torn straw hat. His father walked ahead, steadily, his shirt growing darker as the sweat soaked, leaving dusty imprints. Whenever his father looked up at the clouds, Garvin would look up quickly too. Garvin shook his white, fine-veined hands and hitched up his overalls, easing the tightness. He stopped beside a mass of plum trees that sided and overlapped the road.

"Pa, can I get a plum?" he asked, peering down the road at his father's back.

Jethroe stopped and turned slightly. "If you want one," he said.

Garvin leaned in among the thorny branches and then stopped, looking at his father with a twisted, unsure expression on his round face. He began to whimper suddenly.

"Go on, pick one, ferchrissakes," Jethroe said.

Garvin leaned in to the brush again. He picked two purple-black plums, both big and overly-ripe. He squeezed them between his thumb and forefinger. The plums split softly open, and the juice dripped darkly down the warm skins.

"I seed some plums with worms in onct," he said softly, as he closely inspected the plums. Satisfied, he carefully hid one of the plums in his overall pocket, and then moved back onto the road.

Jethroe Stevens had walked some distance farther and had reached the top of the rise to where the bluffs leveled off for
a piece. Garvin began to shuffle quickly down the road, his shoulders hunching each time he took a quick step. He sucked on the soft plum, smacking his thick lips and talking to himself.

"Pa," he said. "Pa." He peered up the road.

"I got two plums," he said softly. He giggled suddenly as he felt for the hidden plum in his pocket.

Jethroe turned to look back at him. "What took you so long?" he asked. "Jees Christ, do I gotta carry you to Newton?" He turned his back and walked up the road again.

Garvin hung his head uncertainly, and shuffled after. "What we goin' to Newton for, Pa?" he asked. His father didn't answer. "I only been to Newton onct," he said, loudly. They were silent again.

A whirlwind broke with a rushing sound out of a twisted swirl of grass and onto the road, rolling the heavy dust up into a delicately-balanced liquid cone. It slid gracefully down the road and into the grass again, losing the dust as it went. Garvin watched it till it had bent the last blufftop grass before it slid down into the valley.

"Ma always said that was the finger of the devil stirring in the dust," he said. "It looks like that to me too. It looks like the finger of the devil."

He lifted his thin voice to his father. "Pa, did you jist see the finger of the devil?"

There was no answer. "I just seen the finger of the devil," Garvin said, softly and wisely.

The two plodded steadily on, heads bent down, shielding the faces from the glaring white sun. Jethroe looked up at the light-blue sky, and then he stopped and turned to look back down the bluff and at the bottom, faint in a blue haze. The brown Missouri dozed down there like a snake dozes, sluggish and deadly and silent and knowing. As far as he could see in either direction the great Missouri coiled. Behind him he heard his son speak. His shoulders sagged suddenly and he turned from the river and back to the road.

"Is it gonna rain, Pa?" Garvin asked. Jethroe said nothing.

"I wonder if it's gonna rain," Garvin said to himself. "Do you like lightning much?" he asked. "I don't like lightning. It always scared Ma too." He recalled the stark white light as it played along the wall of the cabin, and the thunder, and his mother trembling as she talked to him just
before the first heavy drops of rain thudded down. "Lightning used to scare me and Ma," he said.

He paused suddenly, his forehead tightened, thinking. "Pa, where's Ma? Pa, what happened to Ma?" He shuffled on, his round face puzzled.

"Oh, she must be in Newton." He giggled, suddenly happy at the simple explanation. "Pa, is Ma in Newton?" he questioned, hardly able to suppress another giggle at the secret he had discovered. They were going to Newton to see Ma. He wished Ma had been home to be with him and talk to him the last few weeks.

Garvin squinted at his father's back, and then wiped his large white hand across his forehead where the sweat had begun to trickle down. The two walked silently down the winding road, on the back side of the bluff, ten paces apart as before.

They shuffled across a little wooden bridge that pursed itself across a dry gully bed. Yellow butterflies clustered on the edge of a small waterhole that had been left from a rain of a few days before. The butterflies tumbled in a whirling, wing-beating mass as the two passed over the rotting timbers. Garvin stopped and leaned over the gray weather-beaten rail.

"Did you see the butterflies, Pa?" he asked. "I bet I could catch a butterfly. Can I catch a butterfly, Pa?" He peered intently, smiling at the vibrating yellow cluster.

Jethroe turned to look back. "Come along, boy," he said. He waited for Garvin to move from the bridge, but he stood as before, excitedly watching the butterflies, his mouth hanging open, sucking the air quickly in and out with a parting noise. "Come along, boy," Jethroe repeated, more loudly. He took a weary step back. "I allus got to drag you along," he said. "No better'n a baby." He took Garvin's arm and pulled him sidewise across the bridge. Garvin hung back, still looking towards the butterflies that were beginning to settle on the cool wetness again.

"They sure are purty butterflies," he said.

"Allus lookin' at purty things. You can't do nothin' but you can always look at purty things. I gotta work like a fool and haul you around like a baby, and you look at purty things."

"I ken do lotsa things."

"What! You, you can't do nothin'. Can't even wipe your
hinder, but I gotta do it for you. No wonder Ma died. You could kill a dozen people, the burden you are."

Garvin scraped his heavy shoes in circles in the dirt and looked at the ground. His full lips trembled as he started to whimper. "I didn't kill nobody," he said.

"No?" Jethroe said. "Well, your Ma's in the grave, and I'm halfway there, and the reason is you're crazy, boy." He turned away. "Why did it gotta happen to me, that I gotta send my only boy away."

"I ain't either crazy, Pa," Garvin said, shaking his head. "Ma said I ain't crazy."

Jethroe made a short movement as though to begin walking down the road again, but he stopped short and looked intently at his son a long moment. Garvin pulled away from his stare.

"All right, boy, let's go down to Newton," Jethroe said. He took Garvin's arm and pulled him gently. The large loose body slowly, unwillingly yielded. "Everything's all right, boy," Jethroe said softly.

They walked slowly up the last slope and cleared it, leaning lightly against each other, both tired in the sapping liquid heat of the afternoon. Beneath them the dusty yellow road wound down the long hills, curving this way and that from farm to farm, and at last marked a straight white path into Newton. The town was hidden by trees, the town and the trees clustered thickly along the banks of a creek. Only the white Baptist church steeple showed, and the red brick schoolhouse hung on the lip of a hill overlooking the town.

The father and son sat down in the brown, dust-soft Indian tobacco and sunflowers that grew thickly along the road. Garvin sat, his head hanging and his large pink hands loosely across his legs. Jethroe slapped him on the knee.

"That's all right ... son," he said. He paused, shielding his eyes and peering down into the valley. "They put in a new road through Newton," he said gruffly, coughing behind his hand. There was a long moment of silence. Somewhere far off a meadowlark piped his six-throated warble.

"I guess it's gonna rain," Jethroe finally said. "We better get going."

They stood up, shaking the sweat-clammy shirts loose from their backs, and moved down the road, their eyes squinting in the hazy sunlight. They were silent as they walked,
now side by side. Off to the west a bank of heavy clouds crawled up into the sky to net the sagging sun.

When the two reached the hundred yards of gravel road that bridged the distance between the dirt bluff-road and Newton, the sun was hidden. Streaming from the forward edge of the cloud were long, somber, dust-colored shafts of light.

Garvin turned to look up at the heavy banks of clouds. "Is it gonna rain, Pa?" he asked, lurching against his father.

"I think it will," Jethroe said.

"I don't like rain and lightning much. Do you, Pa?"

"Oh, the rain's all right. It washes everything clean, the rain does."

"I like the rain too." He turned to smile up at the clouds. He was glad he and his father both liked the rain.

"We should get home before it rains," Garvin said, "or else we'll get wet."

"We can't. There's nothin else I can do, now."

Garvin turned to look at his father, a puzzled expression on his face. The two were silent again. They shuffled into the town and down the gravelled main street. A sudden coolness had come over the town, and the men and women in the stores came out onto the sidewalks into the cool to watch the tremendous black thunderheads roll overhead.

Jethroe and Garvin moved the length of the street and at last stopped before a car parked in front of a square brick box of a building. In one window of the building, "U. S. Post Office" was printed in gold, shadowed letters. A heavy-set man dressed in a gray suit and who looked at though he had been waiting for them came out of the building.

"Hello, Jim," Jethroe said.

"Hello, Jethroe. Hello, Garvin," the man called Jim said. Garvin could not remember having seen him before. There was a lull as if they were listening for something, perhaps the thunder.

"It's gonna rain," Garvin said suddenly.

"I think it will, yes, I believe it will," Jim said. "Have you told him where he's going?" he asked Jethroe quietly. Jethroe shook his head.

Jim turned to Garvin. "We're going down to the city," he said. "They'll take care of you there. They'll have people your own age, and doctors. You'd like that, wouldn't you?"
he asked, with the exaggerated care and simplicity one uses with foreigners, children, or fools.

Garvin stared silently at him, his brow furrowed in thought.

"Here, get in the car," Jim said, gently. He opened the door and nudged Garvin in. "How's that?" he asked.

Garvin peered out the open window at Jethroe, his eyes terrified and dumb. Jim moved around the car and got in the other side. "Well . . ." he began.

"Ain't you goin', Pa?" Garvin asked, his high-pitched voice squeaking in fear. He fumbled for the door handle, searching for a way out. When he couldn't find it, he leaned his head against the door and began to bleat hopelessly.

"No, I ain't goin', but it's all right, it's all right," Jethroe said, holding the door shut. "You're gonna have friends there, and people who can take care of you, and . . . and Ma's gonna be there, too. I'll be down, too . . ." his voice trailed off.

Garvin relaxed suddenly, his soft, sun-burned face creasing into a grin. "I'm gonna see Ma?" he said, half wondering, half questioning.

"Yea, you're going to see your Ma," Jim said, soothingly. He leaned forward and started the engine. He looked over at Jethroe. "It's for the best," he said quietly. "It's only an hour or so drive down to Columbia. They'll take good care of him." He leaned over behind Garvin and locked the door. He backed the car out onto the street. "I'll drop by and see you in a day or two," he called to Jethroe. The car purred down the street and away.

Jethroe turned and shuffled tiredly down the street. When he reached the dirt road where the heavy cold drops of rain were already cratering the thick dust he looked up at the sky. The blackness of the clouds was over all the sky, turbulent and overpowering. "I had to do it," he said. "I had to do it, Ma. "I'll go down and see him. . . ." He paused, his head and eyes finding the ground again. With the high rattle like tha of nails pouring into a barrel, the thunder knifed across the sky on the heels of the lightning, and the rain whipped down in wavering gray sheets, hiding the man and the heavy tracks he made as he walked up the road.