

Bean Rodriguez

Creative Nonfiction

Lewis

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### He Exists

I met Ray 15 years ago. He wears only a dirty t-shirt, a kilt, and sandals. Some might say this is impressive; others, that it is diagnosable. His neglected beard pushes him toward the latter. He has a last name, but he probably forgot it. Ray and his dogs live in an old sand colored Chevy Suburban, which puffs clouds of fur from the ever shedding dogs out its windows into the air like a steam engine. Both of his Great Pyrenees are the same size as Ray. When he first acquired the dogs they were white as the snowy tops of the Rocky Mountains. Time with Ray crisped, discolored, and tangled their fur, which now closely resembles Ray's twitchy, twelve-inch beard. Ray and the dogs do not have a house, so their Suburban home wanders as they do around the headwaters of the Rio Grande beneath the densely starred skies.

Their cramped living space has united the three mountain dwellers. They exist as one fluffy gray and white creature. Each one wears the fur shed by the others. However, there is one shiny thing about Ray, his bald head. A hair has not grown on it for at least thirty years. The sun and beads of sweat are absorbed into his scalp, but anything else slips right off like water on an apple's skin. Years of knotting synthetic flies to fly-rods has grown colonies of calluses on the tips of his fingers. His grip is firm and excited, but his skin is like the sole of old running shoes, rough and rubbery, imprinting its dirty outline on every hand he shakes. Everyone in town knows who Ray is, but not everyone knows Ray. The town has a population of 300 to 400, so one would

expect everyone to know each other, but Ray does not try to be known. He exists. He lives, works, drives, fishes, and drinks. He does not belong or commit. He does not have anyone or anyplace to leave behind, and he never has to leave since he never stays; he just keeps going somewhere else.

He was a fishing guide once, but now he lets the fish guide him. In other words, he is usually fishing, and does not have a stable job. One day my father asked Ray if he would guide a group down the Box, a part of the Rio Grande River trapped between two canyon walls without any banks. No one is supposed to raft this stretch of the Rio without a certified guide, but my father desired to say, "I floated the Box," and Ray was the closest thing to a guide my dad knew who was recklessly confident enough to agree to the trip.

The day arrived, as did Ray with a smile tugging beneath his beard. My father, my grandfather, my sister, and our neighbor, stepped into a raft with the kilted man. That evening the rafters emerged coated in fur from the ride in the suburban: my sister arrived having lost her glasses, my grandpa limped home, my dad apologized to my mother, our neighbor was silent. Ray grumbled from behind his beard, "Damn good day. Guess we'll hit Tommyknockers now?" Tommyknockers, one of two bars in town, is closest thing to a permanent address Ray has. No one went. Ray and his dogs wiggled back into the Suburban. I watched them drive away.

As I watched him leave, I considered his simplicity. He was not fazed by the day's events. Nothing on his body, in his eyes, or in his mind was misplaced because he did not have a place. He has his beard, his kilt, and his dogs.

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