

Tom Latkovic 299

This is a character extension of Muley Graves from John Steinbeck's Grapes of Wrath from February 5, 1992.

The Persistence of Muley Graves

As the sun peaked over the eastern horizon Muley Graves awoke from his crude dwelling, a small cave next to a river bank. He crawled out, stretched his hands in the air, and yawned languidly. His ragged shirt, a dirty brownish-gray, was a result of Muley's decision to stop washing his clothes out of an indifference for his appearance. As he sluggishly sauntered over to the river bank he gazed at the turbid water in front of him observing his emaciated body, much weaker and gaunt than it had ever been. From a motionless stance his body, in an almost singular movement, picked up a large rock and hurled it into the facsimile of his body causing circular ripples in the water to radiate from the image of his head.

The surrounding countryside was blanketed by thick gray dust. It clung to every tree branch, rock, and person. Since the foreclosures began every breeze brought with it feelings of pessimism, melancholia, and hopelessness. There was no apparent life on the land other than a few scattered trees and some small shrubs on the river bank, the only traces of green against the dismal, vapid background. A warm zephyr temporarily blew by swirling the dust, which quickly settled back to its accustomed spot. The swollen sun beat down on the scorched earth unrestrained by clouds to shield the land from its merciless rays.

It had been only a few weeks since Muley had said farewell to Tom Joad and the preacher. After that he briefly lived in Tom's Uncle John's house; that was until he came back from hunting one day and saw a tractor crushing its framework. From that point he returned to cave exile, living with the fear of being removed from the land stolen from him. Although the police had come close to apprehending him several times in the past week, Muley had managed to escape capture.

He was now a parasite of society, living off of what he found. Slowly in his months of solitude he had amassed a collection of various objects from the foreclosed and collapsed houses. These tokens of a world to which he no longer belonged he kept cached in his cave. Among other things there was a

silver dollar, a wooden crucifix, and a common kitchen pot. These and the other familiar objects seemed to, in some ways, allow Muley to feel as if he were once again a functioning part of a family and society.

As the sun crept higher and higher into the wan morning sky, Muley decided it was time to search for breakfast. In front of him was nothing but the cracked, barren earth and a few parched, languorous trees with their brittle branches extended as if yearning for moisture. The landscape was empty of the wildlife that once prospered. Taking its place were piles of decayed matter and puddles of dust, now filling every crevice in the land, blowing in the air, and floating on the river. In this desolate area Muley would try to scrounge something to fill his empty stomach. He put on his beat-up, shapeless brown hat, gathered a few objects, and set out.

Over the past weeks he had eaten very little; now he was accustomed to being hungry. The land had minimal wildlife, plant or animal, for a man to gather or hunt. Nevertheless, he hunted every day with tenacity. Crude objects, such as rocks, poles, and his hands, were Muley's only weapons.

As he wandered through the wilderness following the river bank, he began to think about his wife and kids. Living in solitude these memories were the only company Muley had and were, furthermore, his only connection with the rest of his clan. After a few moments he began to talk to himself, a pastime with which he had become exceedingly familiar. "I wonder if I should a went? I wonder how the kids are? I sure hope they ain't hungry. Nah, they's is probably livin' in a real nice house. But I couldn't go with em, I just couldn't. A man has to stay with his land. Don't he? A man has to show some pride, and I wasn't gonna let some rich bastard tell me what to do!" After a brief silence he continued, "I wonder how they is?" Unwilling to ponder on this question, Muley became tacit and more concentrated on continuing his search for prey.

From the halcyon sound of the wilderness came a noise contradictory to it. It was the clamor of an automobile. Muley snapped his head around to see in the distance dust billowing from the blurred image of a police car. Out of instinct he jolted forward and began sprinting at a pace seemingly unfit for his old and stale legs. The dilapidated car approached rapidly giving Muley no chance to escape. In a

frenzied panic, Muley crouched down in a ball howling uncontrollably. Three deputies dressed in trim blue uniforms jumped out of the car and confronted the wailing man before them.

One of the deputies spoke in a scornful tone, "We finally found ya, ya sneaky bastard. It sure is hard to believe it took us this long to get ya. And let me tell ya, we ain't happy about you being so hard to find, so we's is gonna have us a little fun. Ain't we boys?"

"Sure are," simultaneously answered the two other deputies.

In a fearful, pathetic whimper Muley cried softly, "Please don't do nottin' to me. I ain't hurtin' nobody."

The first deputy laughed as he began kicking Muley in the ribs. Groaning in pain, Muley sprang up screaming insanely as to defend himself. The other two deputies pounced on him allowing the first to bludgeon Muley's unshaven face with a night stick. In a machine-like fashion the deputy continued thumping Muley's face splattering bloody flesh and breaking his nose and jaw. The deputy didn't stop swinging until he heard a loud crack that seemed to reverberate through the barren wilderness. Muley lay motionless as the officer, free of remorse, gave him a final kick and spit on his lacerated face. Thinking he was dead, the three policemen silently got in the car and drove off, leaving Muley's body to decay in the sweltering heat.

Hours passed as Muley's battered body lay motionless on the cracked earth now partially shielded from the intense sun by a mild cloud cover. Phlegmatically he moved his bruised arm. His body was laying stomach down; his face was resting on the earth. A faint groan escaped from his leathery mouth. He rolled his limp body over and slid his coarse fingers across his crushed face, feeling his broken nose and deep lacerations. Muley rose and, as a baby takes its first step, began walking. Slowly, yet with increasing steadiness, Muley started back to his cave with a new determination to live and survive on his land.

