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## **Flesh and Blood: Excremental Suicide**

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Flesh and Blood:  
Excremental Suicide

by  
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Honors Thesis  
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Louisiana State University  
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Creative Writing Honors Thesis

Flesh and Blood:  
Excremental Suicide

1

-You needin' somethin' today?- the creole murmurs.  
-What ya got?

Old Finn, the story / teller stopped, "Wait a while. Now before I start grab me a couple of smoked salmon sticks, upstream protein helps stimulate the healing process, the regeneration of cells you know. Caught that salmon myself. Oh, and could one of ya'll grab that jug. I can't wait until this nub heals.

"Does it hurt, does it hurt?"

"Talk about! I tell you. It's not so easy, livin' without it."

So, like I was saying:

An old creole beats the sun to greet his customers as they bustle toward the day. Clicking hooves roust me from sleep. Through my open window I scent morning moisture, it brings me to him.

-What's that you said ya got?

-Got Bell peppers, onions, garlic. Look to see what else.

I climb his wagon, eager with sleepy joy. As I hover over the produce my eyes rove over the bags of goods that rest in damp boxes. I dig through the peppers, grab a red one fresh with life. Its coat whispers of purity.

-Don't see any turnips, beets, or mustard greens.

-Not now, ya know. They all pulled up. You alright? You get sleep this past night, heh?-  
He replies with the flare of a broken French accent.

-Not much, a wink or two. Damn college Professors drop work on us all at once.

Something about this morning feels odd. A red haze chases me down. As I come to grasp this strangeness, it slips away. A lost thought that lingers.

Suddenly I awake to the force his calloused hand sends through my front door. The busted screen door slams as his boots thump on the porch.

I remember thinking, -Because of this dream I have to put up with him twice today. I can think of a few better ways to start the weekend than with a scuffle toward the door. Aow, damn old pine floor. Those age-old splinters rise up overnight.

I hobble onto the porch with pine stuck in the ball of my foot yelling, -I'm comin', I'm comin', just give me a sec.

-Oh, alright then. I didn't know if you was home. I got a lot of customers ya know, and they waitin'.

-Alright, I know what I want. Give me bell peppers, new potatoes, and tangelos.

-How you know already? You ain't even seen what I got.

So I tell him, - Remember when I moved to Lafayette last month? I'd come out when I heard hooves clickin' in the street. Well, I dreamed that this mornin' I seen you already.

-That what college does you, boy? Huh? So what you want? Time's a wastin'.

I point to the red peppers.

He responds, -Dollar's worth everything? Them peppers five for a dollar. Tangelos four for a dollar, Okra cost more. Here, I give you some potatoes too.

-Get a little one to carry in my pocket for luck? My grandmaw's full-blooded Irish ya know, she's born and raised down in the New Orleans Irish Channel.

-Always asking for more, this one. How old you is, heh?

-Twenty-one.

-Oh, you young yet yeah.

-Mmm. I guess I got a ways to go.

-You the one says wants be a school teacher, heh?

-Uh huh. Times I think it's good, but there's a lot of action out there I ain't seen or done.

-You got that right, yeah.

-Thanks Mr. Tallier.

-How you know my name? I never told you my name. I don't like that, people just knowin' my name out the air like that.

Steam follows that old horse all over town. It rises off of her coat. She gives her tail a jerk to swat flies. A warm load of manure splats the asphalt, keeping its solid form. Organic fumes rise.

-The way you get around with that horse, I's bound to figure out sooner or later.

His large hand slaps her softly on the but as he says, -Watch what you say 'bout my baby.

-How long you had her?

-That one? I had her fifteen year. Had twenty-one horse in my career, now I got three solid ones that can pull dey *cartes*. She's a good horse, yeah. Smart too, she won't let me put the cart before her no.

-You built this old wagon too?

-A while back, it's holdin' up good. What you college kids ever built besides a lot of debt? All that schoolin' cost us all more than just that, cost days, cost work. President Clinton just lettin y'all rack them up more too. Then volunteer to work it off. Like it ain't even real money. I give you extra today, go visit your Momma. I bet she's waitin' for you down there in the City.

As he heads up to his seat at the reigns, I look into his deep eyes, wrinkled with labor; then his smile, strengthened by years. They say he's rich, sold off a plot of family land a while back. You'd almost never know it. Those old black boots don't count the seasons pass. His blue jean overalls give him away though, fresh as the morning dew, except they take longer to fade.

-Got to get goin' down the road, down the way ya know. Other folk wonderin' where I'm at,- He said, turning his back to me.

I still picture Mr. Tallier, atop his rickety wagon, reigns in hand, rolling through the mist. He turns his head to offer me a smirk as curly grey hair rolls up from under his soiled white cap.

About to roll away, he coughs up a few last words, -Remember now, everybody 'round, no matter who, knows somethin' nobody else know. Everybody got some right in 'em. It's just that they don't all the time wanna see what's right in the other guy just 'cause he not right with their right. We all gotta rise up and learn from each other. Somehow. Ya know we all we got. I'll get you one good yet.

Suddenly I started sweating dizzily as my pulse raced with a shortness of breath. I bent over and thought about deciding whether or not I should go back inside. Hands on my knees, I couldn't see his arm raise to crack me in the head. The back end of his riding crop gave birth to a lump that lasted all weekend. I should have taken it as a prophetic warning to heed Mom's bitter adage, 'Think before you act! And no matter what, don't panic.'

## 2

-Hey Coop!

-What's up, Jer? Rollin' on that fine bike again I see.

-Yeah, peddlin' round gets me out so's I can make sense of it all. It's a world of difference from my beast of a car. We all gotta get out, stay separate from what all's around us.

-Oh, I don't know about all that. In the old days us poor folk used to get out and walk all over, hell of a lot harder to get out back then. I'm still just walkin' round. I do it, get paid's the reason. After all this time I done went crazy just to keep from goin' insane and I sure as hell ain't gonna try to tell no difference between them.

Refugees from a Louisiana August, we find our way to a grandfather Live Oak that's seen many generations pass.

Coop asks as he licks salt from his sweaty lip,

-What you find in school today man?

-Ah, not much, rapped about Huck Finn's wild ride, wonderin' whether he's running away from it all or just plain wanderin'.

-Uh huh, that the truth. Everybody runnin' away from something nowadays. And here I am, dressed in blue, scoopin' up all the shit people leave behind them. I do it man, like to see my grounds clean. Way I see it, more kids just runnin' away from responsibility, runnin' out on they folks. Think since they in college they top the barrel and all that. Party till' they numb out the pain, that pain you need for healin'.

-They just ain't feelin' it.

He gazes down at a payday wrapper that rises up to float away. He gets it with a smile. I bend down low to grab a piece of trash and drop it in his cardboard box.

He says, -don't bother your damn self, I got this tool. It works good, don't even gotta lean over, just press a button and grab up all this crap. Remember back when I was a kid, if we wanted to get somebody back for something, we'd have big Fats dump a load in their bed while they was out playin'. Wonder how these silver spoons'd like a little load in their sheets, heh. The way they treat my campus, they deserving it.

-I hear ya, remind me to lock my bedroom door. Before you loose faith, some of us got our shit together.

The hostility I sensed from him began to boil in my brain. His frail frame grew in front of my eyes. I envisioned him becoming part of the oak's trunk while his cane-like scooper suddenly became a golden staff. Suddenly a heavy branch became one with his arm, supported by his immense staff. Without this brace, the branch's sudden immensity would have snapped, stunting the ancient tree's growth.

-You alright, man? Lookin' all kinds of greenish-yellow all the sudden, need some water?- Coop asks kicking my foot. He says, -Look! here comes big old but Slim.

I come back to 'normal' reality as Slim wobbles toward us laughing, a pack of Kools tucked into his right paw. Coop yells to him, -About time you got your fat ass to work. Take your woman that long to roll all that blubber out of bed and into you blues?

Slim hollers back, -You best watch yo shit Coop 'for I wax you good, your white hair self got twenty odd years on me. I ain't doing no more janitorin' today unless I gotta clean you off this tree after I whip you quick. Be quick too 'cause I got me a little woman just over there, and she waitin' to treat me right too.

Slim's cigar-sized finger points across campus to a rainbow that floods the oaks of Girard Park. His other hand fondles himself in manly triumph.

I interject, -All them colors gotta mean somebody's playin' hide and seek with a little green leprechaun.

-Yeah, workin' to find some of *that* sticky golden pot!- Adds Slim.

The old narrator, Finn McCool, was in mid-thought when he caught a couple of the younger children giggling in each other's ears.

"Ray Ray." He said softly. They continued their hijinks,

"Rachel," he repeated her name louder, "Rachel!"

As he did the little ones hushed. Rachel asked, "It's a pot of gold, silly. I mean that's what the books say, right Gramps?."

Finn sent a mischievous glance toward the older boys who were smiling at Rachel's naivete. Then Finn slipped into mixed vernacular, "Well then little missy, first of all, books don't say a damn thing, their sayin's all been done. It's up and left long ago. The teller's dee-capitated. That's right, gone from the tale, ya see. This here's a story! It ain't a book at all if it don't get writ, now is it? Rachel, you'll get them type of jokes when you get teats and yur ready to tick off yur momma."

Jimmy added, "That's the trouble with letting you little girls in."

"Now ya'll come up from back on that wall and sit on this sandy driftwood so's I can see yur little smiles," said Finn, "That's right, up here in the front row."

The three ten year old girls shuffled across the room, tripping on the loose boards. Finn looked at Jimmy to chuckle at the awkwardness of youth. Jimmy's hand was stuffed under his overalls. Finn couldn't remember the year Jimmy, his first grandchild, was born. He thought Rachel was smarter than her teenage brother ever could have been on *his* tenth birthday and loved her for it.

Jimmy knew Rachel "hung the moon" for Finn, their only living grandparent, and it made him cringe to think she was all that dirty old man cared about. He remembered how their Mothers both told the same

story of how Finn sang to them every night, "You girls hang the moon for me, my two little Mississippi river trees." Then they'd go on about holding her each *other's* hand while walking home from their first day at grammar school. They snuck in their little house through a back window to find Finn had left them. He was gone, never to return.

Finn's twins each adopted a child and liked to sing them duets. One of their songs told of how old Finn chose to wander forth. RAchel and Jimmy could only remember the chorus, "He's gone, 'gone, utterly gone, utterly beyond gone,' like a steam locomotive, . . . rolling down the track." The sisters later changed their last name and began a professional jazz career singing as the Cloney Sisters. They had hoped Finn would never track them down. Eventually Rosemary became a prominent voice on the jazz scene while *the other*, her twin, took care of the children at home.

As the dust settled, Finn surveyed the room, noticing it to be a little warm. He decided not to roll up the tarp that served as a window because the warmth reminded him of his tale. He lit a candle and raised a feeble gaze from the seated groundlings up to Jimmy and his buddies whose shadows danced on the back wall.

"O.K., so Jer and these two janitors are in a huge rainstorm, a tumultuous downpour pelts them with hailstones."

Jimmy cut in, "Naw Gramps, this is the version with the summer rainbow and all that."

"What the hell! You think I need you to tell a damn story? Just let me finnish." Finn once again assumed the role of Jerry Camile Cartre:

Coop pushes Slim playfully while gritting his teeth, -Rainbow or no rainbow, with all that belly hanging over your belt, you ain't gonna do nothing but crush her dead. We ain't gonna testify for your ass either!

-Ain't that the shit, Coop,- I say to him as we all crack up laughing in the noon heat.

-I'm out of here, goin' and get me some lovin',- Slim says, strutting toward the rainbow.

-I'll catch you Monday, Coop. Headin' down there to the 'city that care forgot.' My Dad calls it that, been planning to get outta N'awlins for years. I don't think he'll do it, but at least it's up in his head. Mom ain't never gonna leave *her* nest. Never really left, holdin' tight to too many memories in that old house. I guess it's all she really knows, but I'm gonna get her out, gotta get her out.

-Out here we just call New Orleans 'The city.' You and all your damn gettin' out, just like the rest of them kids. You got it good with family round, grab 'em while you can boy. Someday you'll be wishin' you could 'member them old folks clearer. I tell you, I bet you a scoop of college crap that they seen some real shit in they life. They got stories yeah.

-Speaking of stories, you bring that new alarm clock? The one you want me to show you how to set and all.

-Naa, I can't figure out a lot of them new digital things. Not like the old wind ups. But my grandkids gave it to me, so the boys down at the Physical Plant show me yesterday how to work it.

-What? This mean I don't get one of them stories you say your Momma used to tell? That was the deal. 'Member?

Before Coop even answers, his eyes tell me he doesn't want to waste any more words on me in this heat, -Ohh yeah . . . you wanted one of them alligator stories, didn't you? Take a rain check on that one there.

-I ain't lettin' you off easy now, you still owe me a yarn to spin. Maybe something about that swamp monster comes out on a full moon. Half gator, half man and shit.

-Yeah, yeah, I'll pull something out, for now you listen your Granddaddy's tales, they from the heart, and I bet he's itchin' to tell. For all I done and been, there ain't nothing like coming home.

## 3

The door opens inward and there she stands.

-Jerry boy, the lovable lad, I hope school has found you well. Are you hungry darlin'? I cooked dirty rice, fried eggplant medallions, and broiled sea bass, your favorites. I know it's not Galatoire's, but it'll have to do. I have just enough steak for Pops and me. I know you won't eat that anyway. Tell me something, will you eat my artichoke heart pasta soup if I used chicken broth?

Her short figure hunches over and bifocals slide down her nose, and those 'Jesuit Blue Jay' blue polyester pants hang snugly around her waist. Seeing her warm smile quenches all question of whether it's worth the visit.

-Aw hell Marm, it's against my strict piscavorian diet, but what can I do, you've tricked me once again. If it's already made I can't turn you down without getting written out of the will, can I?

Whenever they wanted something done, that was the line, 'written out of the will.' I've learned to beat them to the punch on that one. I slowly creep through the hall in her shadow. This ritually slow walk to the kitchen gives her a chance to voice her latest complaint about his grumpy mood and short temper.

She goes on again about how he thinks nothing she does is right anymore and how hard it is to lift him into the tub every day, -It scares me to think about it, isn't that how your Dad's father died? In the tub? hmm.

-No, not really, he was makin' pootsy on the toilet when we lost him. Next thing we knew he was taking his last ride in that Long Black Limousine.

-At least we've still got Pops, he really does care. It's just that he's so testy anymore.

-I understand, once y'all move back to New Orleans he'll settle down a bit. We just have to get the two of you out of Baton Rouge, that's all.

-Jerry boy, I don't know if this move is really the best thing for us.

-Well, there's only one way to find out and that'll be done soon, now that we've found a buyer for this house.



-He just loves our view of the golf course and I've made so many friends here over the last twenty-one years,

-Like the Dupree Garsea Band sings, 'All good things in all good time.' Y'all know you can't keep driving an hour each way to New Orleans and back every holiday, the highway's just too dangerous.

-What's that? My hearing aid's running down. Were you saying something about a McGhee wedding band ring? I couldn't hear you my little Touga Wouga? Can I still call you Touga Wouga?

We emerge from the shadows of the washroom hall into the brightly-lit kitchen. There he sits in his living room recliner, his head bent over in a sleepy haze, bifocals on his lap, and hands together on his immense belly.

Marmie looks at him in disgust, -That's all he does anymore is sleep half the day, he won't do his swimming exercises or even get up to do anything but eat and make pootsy. I can't keep him on his diet either.

-Well Marmie, what can we do? Not a damn thing, he's set in his ways.- I go closer to him, speaking toward his good ear, -Pops, how's it been?- The relative loudness of my voice jolts him out of slumber.

He comes to and looks at his watch, -Well I'll be God damned, he's late again Marj! What is it with you? Never can make it on time, can you? Your younger brother always seems to stick to his schedule, only logical one in the family. He's going to beat you to that damn graduation stage too, mark my words. Oh but not you, pissin' away your life, still in college for Christ's sake. What are you, afraid of that long black gown. Just like your damn Mother, always an hour late, always behind on everything. Put all her faith in that father of yours and he left her out in the cold, just like that. That's something I'll never understand. I'd never do that to your grandmother. Hell. You, you'd be late for your own damned funeral.

-I don't know Pops, sometimes life just seems to get in the way. It's like in that New Orleans song, George Porter says it just right, 'The world is a little bit under the weather, and I'm not feelin' too good myself.' Waste of time or not, I like college life. I mean with three majors it takes a while. It really burns me up when I get a B.

-Burns you up, huh? What about getting a B in life, that doesn't burn you up? Look at you: sandals, cut-off jeans, and a ratty old t-shirt. I mean c'mon, when are you going to make something of yourself? Art, theater, and music. What the hell kind of majors are those anyway? How are you going to support a family with a flimsy career like that? Jaques' in business school, he's going to be the real bread winner and you'll be crawling to him, begging your younger brother for mercy. Watch, you just watch, like your crazy great-aunt on your father's side, Adelle. Can't do a damn thing for herself.

-Enough about all that, Daddy, he came all the way here just to visit us,- says Marmie in a tone of mediation.

-What about you Pops? How've you been these days?- I ask.

-Fine, fine. Still breathing and paying taxes. Damn Republican Congress, playing that stalemate with Clinton. Newt and his cronies won't budge. Republican bastards, trying to screw me out of my social security. The Capitol Gang'll be on TV in half an hour. How about some cookies and ice cream Marj?

-O.K. I'm coming Daddy, just give me a sec.- She replies from the kitchen.

-Pops, have you eaten dinner yet?

-Aw, to hell with it, I can eat whatever I want.

-We're just trying to help. Since your quadruple bypass the doctors have been saying no meat or fatty foods.

-Who the hell are they to charge me out the ass and then take away my food? Doctors, what a load of crap.

With this comment my mind strays toward thoughts of how much better off my body'll be

when I'm his age. Toward thoughts of how mind and body must be separate, but equal in their affect on each other. Of course I couldn't be a full vegetarian. Seafood's a different story. I used to call myself an Aquatarian until I learned at a vegetarian pot luck that the name's Piscavore. The ocean's just overwhelming, undeniable, it won't let me give up my primal urge for crab, crawfish, oyster, and shrimp.

Pops rambles on for a while about the horrors of the hospital as I look down and see the metal strip separating the kitchen from the living room. That was the border when my brother, Jaques, and I were little, 'the cereal line.' No food was to go beyond where the green shag rug begins. Summer mornings during our two-week visits we'd sit on the linoleum to watch, and reenact, Tom and Jerry beating each other. I directed all the action as if a curtain had dropped and we were playing stage. Getting their lines and movements down was hard work, the most pressing matter in the world. Jaques and I were each other's audience.

-Well, anyway, it's good to be back. Three years feels like so long doesn't it Pops?- I ask.

-Three years, what the hell is three years, a wink in my sleep's all. Now wait a while Jer, are you and that girl in California *that* serious?

-It's hard to say what *that* means.

-Well then, let me ask you something. Were you having sex with that girl?

Marmie, listening from the 'cereal line,' jumps in,

-Oh bless us and save us. C'mon George, leave my boy alone. Here's your frozen yogurt, they didn't have ice cream at the store this morning.

After doing her duty, she slowly shuffles back toward the kitchen to enjoy her blush while cleaning. I know she's got an ear pricked up and angled toward us in hesitant wonder of my answer.

-You see that Jerry, see how sneaky she is! All my life I've had to deal with that, not to mention that damn McGhee clan. When I asked her to get married she wouldn't answer until she had a damn committee meeting with her seven brothers. Those Irish bastards had to approve of me.

Her voice barrels from the kitchen as she slides over the linoleum toward us,

-Those McGhee boys were taking care of me.

-Since the day I married her that family of hers has been at my door. You see Jer, she doesn't hear a word, it's like talking to my God Damned self. Always her way, she always tells it her way.

Marmie slinks back into the kitchen as he repeats, -Hard-headed Irish, All her life she doesn't listen to a God Damned thing except her brothers.

-That's not true Daddy,- her voice calls out.

-You see, Jer, the minute people start butting in's when things get all loused up. And my wife, oh she's terrific at buttin' in. Now that she's calling the shots, I don't know what the hell's going on, she's just like your mother, can't handle money at all. But anyway, you don't have to answer my question about that girl. I don't want to pry into your personal business. But the way I see it, if you were serious about her, you'd have married her before you left. You see what I'm getting at, Jer? Today you all just don't want the commitment, give it up. Unless you start it right, it'll never last. Aw, to hell with it all, just give it up.

As he picked up his left hand from the rocker's wooden arm, the gold chain link bracelet with Marmie's name inscribed into it slid down his wrinkled, bent wrist. It had been there since the war, from what I'm told. As it fell, he shook his head full of wavy Santa-white hair and mumbled,

-I don't understand *that* . . . At your age I married your Grandmaw and went into officer training school. That was the only way I could make enough money to support her while I fought my way up the Rhine River.

-That's right, and he named his jeep Marjorie, after me.

-Reminds me of an old tactic the Germans used during the war. They set choke wires



-Oh Marmie, it must have. We figured out that back when Reagan was governor of California, he closed down some insane asylums to save tax dollars. Well, buddhists bought this one and renovated it. How lucky we were to visit such a hallowed place in which to reflect on the inner workings of human existence! Apparently these monks couldn't understand why an old well out back was tapped, but not used for years. I guess they had iron stomachs of discipline, but my lily-pink belly fell out all over the place. At least I had a stationary toilet and nobody shooting at me.

-I call what Daddy had the 'oosie goosies,' but it was really some amoeba. What exactly was it that made you sick Daddy? George are you listening?

-For Pete's sake Mother, how do you expect me to remember, that was decades ago. I'm living on borrowed time as it is now. Anyhow, like I was saying, you kids don't know about pain and suffering and being scared, you just want to f . . . . Aw forget it. At least it seems like you have some goals, some sights set. I just don't see how you'll support a family on an art or theater teacher's salary. If you're honest in business, it shows. People want to work with you then. You find who's crooked and steer clear of them. You know what I used to do? I used to walk into the Maison Blanche department store when I was President over there. I'd pose as a low-income customer to see if the sales people were earning the salaries I paid them. You really have to put yourself on the ground level if you want to make anything work, get in the trenches. All that flowery art and music, it doesn't mean a damn thing in the business world. You see Jer, each business situation is separate from all the others. You deal with problems one at a time, not all together at once. It's the same way with war. Each experience takes you further than words and images. Hell, experience puts you there, solid. Experience is the only way you can really know anything, I tell you.

Just then my mind begins to wander, to wonder what Jacques was doing right now. He always has to go one step further, step up the intensity a notch. In high school I played soccer, so he had to wrestle.

Oh how I miss the roaring surf, dropping in on a six foot day, cutting a huge bottom turn, soaring up the lip, picking up speed, and catching air. Could Pops understand that rush? Or the selfishness it takes to put aside your problems and family for an experience? To forget about the family needs, to close out the world?

Jacques sure understands what Dupree sings about because, 'He's gone . . . like a steam locomotive . . . off on some high cold mountain chain.' Off climbing frozen waterfalls on Mount Rainier. Wait, he should be half way across the Canadian Rockies and headed back down to Bozeman by now. I remember him saying he wanted to do both the Big Belt and Little Belt Mountains . . .

-And that damn brother of yours. You get back from swimming with sharks in California and he runs off to Montana! What in the hell do you think he's doing out there?

-He's been climbing snow, rock, and ice with a mountaineering buddy.

Some of the routes they climb offer all three obstacles simultaneously. He says that at any given point you may for example have a hand on rock, a hand and boot in snow, and the other on ice.

-Where the hell did he get the idea for that?

-He read books and started off slow, but you know him, quick to excel. They use pick axes and strap cramp ons to their boots. These cramp ons have spikes that penetrate ice.

-Is he really studying out there or is it just a big vacation?

-He studies, but he's been opening himself to a world that never existed for him before. The world in its differences, you know in its different uniforms.

-What? Oh. I see. In other words, you've won him over.

-Since there's no convenient war forcing us all over the world, we've got to settle for student exchange. Everybody has to get out, even if just for a little while. All I know is that he chose to leave, and he'll be back.

-Aw, c'mon, don't give me all that crap. He's running away from it all, running around

with no job. Living off of family and government money. What's he thinking?

-But Pops we're both still so young.

-Young, O.K. But you all have life decisions on your plates now.

Marmie's face tells she's had enough as she blows out a sigh, -The two of you don't agree, let's just leave it at that. Let's eat so you can get to your mother's before dark. It's another good hour ride to New Orleans and my little girl needs you down there.

Marmie and I chat over dinner. She goes on about how she should have bought that steel stock from Uncle Pete during the war until she finds herself telling the story of that chicken farm Uncle Jack had right before the war and how the women ended up having to raise and butcher all the little devils. As I watch her tell these stories again I begin to realize that it's her turn to run the show. Pops drifts off into the worlds of his past and begins to snore.

Suddenly I saw her grab the torch. She didn't say it, she never said it, but my ability to think toward her showed me she felt the weight. The prime power of new responsibility moved and glowed within her. She's the family's prime mover. Suddenly she tapped me on the head with the shillelagh she kept on the window sill to bring me back from my daydream.

-He bought this shillelagh for me when we went to Ireland. You remember, we brought back the McGhee family tree, um hmm. It was fun to trace our roots. Now let's get you going before it gets dark.

-Thanks for dinner, it was scrumptious. I'm just gonna wet the whistle and wash up.

From the porcelain throne I hear her wake him. My thoughts dance in fumes reminiscent of this morning. Oh how the body's processes are separate from, yet essential to the mental process of thought. This taboo sensory experience must be as deceptive as all other sensations. Lies that help me to meditate, to think, to divide.

I hear their voices fills the house, -It's getting late Daddy, he's leaving. Are you awake, I said he's leaving! You shouldn't be so hard on him.

-But Marj, I like arguing with Jer. I didn't realize he'd thought things through so much. How about those cookies, and a little more ice cream. And how many times have I asked you for that hi-ball? My joints are aching. Damn it Marj, it seems like every time we get ahead, there's something else, some new tragedy.

I rise up from the porcelain, a load less in my tracks, wondering what my friends are up to tonight. The living room voices intensify as I approach the kitchen. I reach the top shelf for his bottle of Canadian Club and pour some in an ice filled glass. I hand it to Pops and hug him, Marmie follows me to the car.

-Too bad he doesn't make it outside anymore,- She says, but as the words roll into the hereafter we both smile in simple enjoyment of our time without his bitter remarks.

-Call when you get to New Orleans, and wish her a happy 50th for me. What present did you get her anyway?

-What was that?

-Nothing tough wouga, you little stinker. Drive safe. Eww. I can smell the mold in your car from here. How do you stand it?

I start the engine, -I get headaches from it sometimes. I guess that May flood's taking its toll on all of us. Love ya Marm, mind you keep him in line.

I pull out hoping those Irish feet will see more seasons pass. I get on I-10 and head for the house they raised my Mom in with sunset's red-orange glow spreading thin behind me.

I felt as if there was barely time to wait or to think. I yell, -Aw. *Fuck it*. Heh!- I couldn't choose to change my self for nobody. I saw my world view as mine alone, separate from the world itself and the social situations that I had been forced to fit in with. Alone, I could revel in my visions.

I started driving West back toward Baton Rouge. This way I could count the intense colors as they filtered through the toxic sunset. As they did, an apparition revealed itself to me. The sky and sea behind me, in the East, suddenly conspired as I peered into my rear view mirror and stopped the car. The reflection showed them as one undivided whole, they appeared to be an endless void. The singular canvas of sky and sea grew suddenly into Mother Mary's virginal spirit which spoke lightly.

As she spoke, several arms sprouted from her belly and her halo became a lotus petal. She began to resemble Mother Kali. Her voice echoed, -Think before you act. You have a gift, use it wisely. You can't control your visions, you can only control how you react to them and how you apply them to your relationship with the world and those who are chained to 'normal perception.' Just remember, use this gift of creation wisely or it will destroy you.- My retinas, reversing the image in the rear view mirror, had shaken the logical foundations that determined my mind and body to be separate working entities.

I stepped out of the car to confront this blasphemous vision but as quickly as it had come, the flash of light that sprouted in the Eastern sky was gone. I could once again reason my way through a denial the connectedness of all things, After all sensations deceive.

-*Fuck it* - I say with relief.

#### 4

"It's not what we do not know but what we know that limits . . . (To see everything is to see nothing in particular) and yet we can not see that which makes our seeing possible."

James P. Carse, philosopher; *from* Breakfast at the Victory

"I thought that was a bad word. What's it really mean?" A younger one asked, twiddling her thumbs.

"What's that? What do you mean *that* word? What word? Oh, Oh yeah. Woops. You didn't hear that. Four letters, four letters, What should they

mean?

"It means Poo Poo?" asked another.

"No, it means Winnie the Pooh," added Rachel.

"Well, no. No no, C'mon, now you're playing games with me. You see, it depends on who says them. Depending on where you are, they may not mean a damn thing. Play with their order and what do you have? Nothing but sounds melting together. Anyway, don't go around saying you heard it from me. Hell, they might figure out you're getting out here and it'll be harder to sneak out. Anyway, it's as much your fault for hearing meaning in it as it is mine for letting you.

"I know, it's a hard enough hike getting out here from camp already. Can't we get on with the story?" Jimmy asked folding his arms, but Finn chose not to respond.

"So, why'd you turn around anyway?" One of the girls ask.

"Who in the hell ever said this was *my* story?"

Just then he raised the freshly printed manuscript with his right hand as if to smell whether or not they were listening. As he did an eerie feeling filled their guts. No matter how often they saw *that*, little shivers still ran down their spines. Some of the younger ones covered their eyes playfully when he wasn't looking.

"Jimmy, pass me that jug and the silver cigarette case next to it. Don't even think about it, I could land in jail if they found out. It helps me cope with the pain."

He took a pull from the jug and put the case at his side before speaking in Jerry's voice:

As I turn up North Blvd and head towards 1314, I sense the desolate nature essential to this side of town. A lonely drunkard stumbles into the street behind my car. Empty lots, corner stores, and beat up old warehouses attest the roughness of Talley's neighbors, Mr Rogers and Captain Kangaroo don't visit. This place has roots.

The empty lot across from the Box is somewhat lit, but not much comfort as the night sneaks into view; a stalking menace. An eerie black cloud swallows the stars while downtown Baton Rouge's low-lying haze fails to give in, attacking the full moon from below.

With quick, determined steps I duck into the club. Outside the door one inch black and white tiles spell out MacFadden, the original owner's name. Inside, tall pressed tin ceilings drip with a moldy decade and a half of rising notes. Snapshots of blues legends cast stern glances from the walls. Near the stage a tabby cat is painted holding an acoustic guitar, this place is the roots. Talley 'Pan' Tonic sits alone at the bar, near the pay phone. A black brimmed hat covering his bald head, he throws me a smirk that shows his pearly white teeth while he reaches out with his right paw for a shake. I feel the weighty cold of his gold rings on my hand and succumb to the power of his raw grip. His gold chain-linked bracelet reminds me of family. He says in a low, tough voice,

-Man, where you been? Wait, I know. You been missin' some good rockin' here at the Blues Box.

-Yeah you right, Talley. I been barefootin' where the grass is green, California and you know what I mean.

-Yeah you know it, how's the rest of that line go?

-New York City and Detroit too. Back to New Orleans, home of the blues.'

-Get on your pony and ride.' You know that song was writ in N'awlins. They ain't the home of no blues. Not like the blues we got up here in Baton Rouge. It should say jazz. Anyway, guess you ain't DJin' over there at Slim's no more?

-Nah, got an honors scholarship over at USL.

-Oh, up over in Lafayette.

-You got it. Who's brand spankin' new Caddy I see out there?

-I got that for my wife after my last tur, usually take the Olds wagon down here. Lots of bad shit been goin' down here man. Crime's worse than ever here now. Sad sad. People not takin' care of they self no more. Just got back from Europe with a couple of other artistses, Henry Gray playin' piano with us.

-Sounds on time.

His head tilts a bit for his eyes to stare up at the pressed-tin ceiling of his decrepit shogun building.

-Goin' over there to Europe always remind me of bein' in the service, the armed forces. I mean America is the greatest county in the world, bar none. The only thing that makes it bad, it's bad in a way of speakin', it's sort of like the old sayin' say, 'At one time the human race wanted to build a stairway to heaven, and they was buildin' this stairway to heaven, and everybody was singin', but when they got to a certain height, everybody's voice change. People start talkin', didn't nobody knew what nobody was sayin', they couldn't understand each other, they couldn't go no furtha.'

Talley keeps talking and waving his hands in the air, then holds them both up showing his big palms,

-I'm sayin' that to say this, our country's divided in lots of sections. To really understand the future, you got to have some knowledge of what happened in the past, you got to have some knowledge of what happened long time ago and a lot of people haven't had that chance to really look at their past and really have the insights. Now let me show you somethin', let me show you what makes this country so great. The race relations be poor; *he* be against him, and *he* don't like them, and *she* against him. But now you let somethin' happen, like we be at war, then everybody unites together, 'Hey man, let's go take care of this.'- He puts his hands together sliding his fingers between each other. He shakes them up and down and then looks up at me, -That's why they call it the United States. It's not just one nationality, it's a whole mess of nationalities. That makes it good 'cause a lot of friction keeps you on your toes all the time. A lot of people don't realize that shit. Every time I go Europe that just knocks me in the head.

-What's goin' on tonight?"

-Crisp was supposed to play over here with Roy Burner. You know they not really doin' the blues. The kids out there like it, the way they addin' Hendrix and what's that fella died in the helicopter crash?

-Stevie Ray?

-Yeah, Stevie Ray Vaughn. He's the one. Man, that ain't the blues. I mean, not the way we play it anyway. But Roy went and got himself arrested, all kinds of shit goin' on with these younger players man.

-Man ain't that right. They think they'd learn from seein' what that bad shit done to some of ya'll.

-Nope, they gotta learn the blues they own self. Too easy just to get it from us.

-Man, I drove over here on a whim to get a super soul shoot out and I can't even get no blues.

-Sound to me that you got 'em good then. The blues is a feelin, either you got it or you



don't. The blues, at its best, is a release from the sadness. Release for both the artists and the listeners. Release from the everyday trials of life. A way for us all to overcome today's troubles and be ready for tomorrow. Look man, like Solomon Burke says, 'Sometimes you get what you want, and you lose what you had.' I remember the way you used to watch me play guitar. Standin' right up in front. I know what you want, you wanna learn them pentatonic scales, huh?

-Yeah you right. If I could pick up on them scales, I'd be alright. Been playin' a few years now, but it's more work than I need. I can't concentrate too long.

-That's the thing, you gotta have will power. Gotta be determined and sleep with your guitar, you gotta wanna play all the time, then it ain't work.

-Too bad Silas Hogan and Whisperin' Smith ain't around to lay down that feelin' no more. Looks like you just about outlived 'em all.

-Yeah, Moses Whisperin' Smith sure could blow that harp. I ain't seen a harmonica player can fill them shoes yet. Old ones like that mostly dead and gone now. We'll see how far I go, that old hag don't wait for nobody, she just keep tickin' away and sendin' us under.

-Hold on Talley, I got a little something for you, been meanin' to give you it since before I got out of Louisiana and I almost never came back. Let me go get it out of the trunk.

Just as this thought lingers in the musty air, Crisp Tonic strolls in with his humble stride. His dreadlocks sway rhythmically as he heads toward me. The dreads on the right of his face are still sizably larger than those on his left. They're two separate parts. I guess he likes how the ones on the right almost get in the way as he plays guitar on stage. A flick of his head sends them back over his shoulder as the soft tone of his voice greets me.

-Hey Jer, long time man.

-Yeah, it is. It's Been a while.

-Say Talley, Mom wants you to call home. Got some problem with the a.c. Said she's sweating bullets.

-Alright. You still playin' tonight, right? Talley asks coarsely.

-What choice do I have?

-Not much, I tell you. Whole show's yours now.

-Yeah, I heard about it.- Crisp says quietly.

-Jer and me been talkin' 'bout some of the old ones been swept away by that creepin' old hag. About how we all just need More Time.

-Yeah Crisp, wish I'd seen 'em play, cursed with a late birth. Besides my folks only listened to jazz.

-Makes sense, I watched my Dad and them growing up, but took every chance I could to see other music. Man, I remember sneaking out to see Kiss and Prince play. I remember them old folks, particularly Henry Gray, used to always say, 'Don't go imitatin' what we doin' up here. This here's our style. You got to get up on stage and play what feels right to you. That's your job.' So, you know, I tried not to feel pressured to follow in their footsteps. I hope to make my mark with somethin' never been done before, I like to call it '21st Century Blues from the Hood.' Workin' on mixin' rap, blues, soul and anything else that feels right."

-I might have to come back later and check out some of that.

-Well, you know I don't do that here at the Box. I just play with the house musicians, my brother Tammy plays drums. Henry Gray and all those guys sit in.

-Damn straight. We ain't gonna do nothin' but the blues here at the Blues Box. Rock, Country and Western, all that other stuff, you ain't gonna find it here. When I opened this place back in the end of seventy-nine, I said it was gonna be the blues or nothin.' Music got a lot of power. What's his name, that guy cut a record and all of a sudden kids start committing suicide and goin' crazy?

-Kurt Cobain?

-No, no that ain't the one. This is some while back

Crisp chimes in, -You talkin' about Ozzy?

-That's right, Ozzy Osburn.

Crisp grins at me, -It's Osbourne, Dad. Osbourne.

-Whatever man. Ya see, these records, they got power over people and that's why the blues ain't never gonna die. I got records twenty to fifty odd years old, I listen at them and they new every time. So, like I was saying, record got a whole lot of power. Long as we got people spinnin' them, they real. Solid. Alive.

Just then I thought of my old jobs at LSU and the book, -I got somethin' for you in my trunk.

As I head to the car I imagine to smell a hint of desolation and dim hopelessness in the air. Maybe I sense this because the toothless drunk who usually watches the cars isn't there yet or maybe because the street light sends my shadow chasing after me. Almost to my car, I idly notice mammoth weeds growing out of the sidewalk cracks, "step on a crack, break your . . ."

-What ya got? An ominous voice asks.

-You needin' somethin'? I reply.

-Ya got a problem?

-No.

-Oh yeah, you got a problem. C'mon, what you got for me?

I look into her bloodshot eyes and notice her scruffy appearance, the inkling of a beard curling up from her cheek, and her red mesh Casino Rouge hat. I answer slowly, -Ain't got nothin', nothin' but this for ya. Come over here, got a lighter?

-Yeah, I got me a lighter, what you white ass doin' in these parts? Seems like you should have headed back to your sweet little Garden District by now, huh? Your savior sun done gone and sunk under ground, ain't gonna rise up for some time neither. Strange folk out here at night, baby.

-Just dropped in to see Talley and Crisp.

-Gotta have somethin' to buy a drink then.

-Oh yeah, you got a lighter?

She pulled a large metal object out of her bosom with the lighter. I couldn't see it clearly without my glasses. The sweat started to bead down my forehead. I played it cool, thinking to myself, *I ain't even got a chance* unless I pass her a cigarette. I pretend nothing's wrong, pull out trusty 'red' and pass it to her.

Finn raised an eye to find a dumfounded expression on their faces. He explained, "It's named 'red' after the late great New Orleans jazz trumpet player, Henry 'Red' Allen. Believe it or not, he influenced Miles Davis. Man he could hit those high notes, he had what they call an immediacy of feeling, a spontaneity all his own. Jimmy grab that cassette tape on the top right and play it low for us. Now where was I? Oh yeah.":

She raised 'red' to her scarred nose, -Man, what's this. We ain't got shit like this round here. Got one for me?

-It's my Great-Grandpaw's. Those engraved red letters are his initials, same as mine, JCC.

I pointed to the back bumper and told her, -There's some stuff in the trunk with my wallet. A confused look ran across her face as she said, -Well c'mon honey. Why we standin' round, we go inside, have us a drink, *you ain't even gotta dance*.

While I dug in the trunk I heard the sweet sound of air being sucked as she blazed down, I

guess she couldn't resist a smoke. She sparked the lighter again, but I couldn't see her. I turned around and clocked her in the head with the yearbook. It crossed my mind how a year's worth of writing finally came in handy. As I connected, I caught a glance of the weapon fly out of her right hand. It shimmered in the florescent rays of the streetlight so that I had trouble focusing. It chimed in time with the lighter as they clinked against the asphalt. I barely heard it because the vicious crunch of her skull against the ground resonated more fully in my mind. I looked down and saw her bloody head resting against the jagged, crumbling curb and kicked her once in the belly without thinking. Powered by adrenaline, I threw her immense frame in my trunk, slammed it, and covered her head with a bucket I had from painting Mom's house. Then I bent down low to grab 'red' and ran back towards the Box. I didn't even have time to think reasonably, it all happened so fast.

-Talley, here's your copy. Check it out good. It's a killer. I did you up right.

-Hopefully we'll start gettin' more college kids come in here when they read this yearbook. If they even read in college anymore.

-Don't hold your breath. I gotta run. What time the show start'?"

-‘Round ‘bout midnight.’ Naw, but really. Guess about 10:30. Ask Crisp.

Crisp looks over and answers, -Sounds on time.

-Gotta run. Mind if I use the pho . . .

I jump back as the pay phone rings.

Talley twists on his stool and non-nonchalantly answers,

-Talley's Blues Box and Heritage Hall. Heyyy Bru. What's happenin'?

Uh huh. You heard too. That's cool with me. About an hour sounds good. O.K. Hold on, I got one of your boys in here.

I dart to the phone as Talley grabs his big belly and hobbles over toward Crisp.

-Hey, It's Jer. Jerry Cartre. Yeah, I know. I was just about to call you. You still living at the old farmhouse? Lazy River Road, right. See you in a few. I need some help.

Finn checked his watch with a deceitful, yet innocent grin, "O.K. now, no excuses. It's getting late. They're gonna have all our asses if you little ones don't get back to camp. Those counselors'll be putting an A.P.B. out on ya soon. May the roads rise up to meet ya, and may the wind be always at your back. . ."

The most arduous ten year old, Rachel, lobbied for a few more minutes, "Oh, but you can't, not now, not yet. We won't sleep unless we hear the end."

"If you miss dinner, you'll be crucified!" explained Finn as his body bounced in childish glee.

"Na ah, we'll just go hungry," Rachel answered.

"Listen here Ray Ray, I'm tellin you. You little rich kids just don't realize. One of the most powerful forms of torture is 'just going hungry.' I tell you, I've seen enough downtown benches and jail cells to know. Hell, we used to joke about it. Jails are the best sleeping quarters for the price on cold nights, 'three free squares and a cot' we used to say. But the toilets, eww! They'll make you dream of peeing in St. Louis Cathedral alley. Both smell about as bad, a trade off I guess . . ."

Just as Finn was about to ramble past the point of no return, a discord of young cries begged, "Please, please, please, please tell us what happened to Jer!"

"Get your teddy bears and hit it!" an older boy commanded with a piercing, evil stare. "You don't want your cabins to be ransacked or your beds to be short-sheeted do you? Beat it if you know what's good for you!"

"Yeah, scram!" added another.

Jimmy explained as he herded them through the makeshift door and pointed toward the overgrown trail, "We only let you down here 'cause you're solid kids who can keep a secret. If this gets out we'll all be 'sold down the river.' Later alligators, I'll finish the story for you tomorrow when we get out on the raft and all."

The other ten year olds felt lucky just to hear this crazy old storyteller at all, but Rachel wasn't satisfied. Finn didn't think his "innocent" little Rachel would understand the rest of the story. They heeded his warning and left, or so he thought.

With a glance, Jimmy's seductive stare found Rachel's smile, "O.K. Rachel, you know the way. And remember it's a full moon, if it gets dark you can see better without a flashlight," Jimmy said with a mischievous

wink as he closed the door. He then pulled his right hand out from under his faded overalls to smell it before sitting down.

"Alright, now that we're rid of 'los niños,' let's get down to some real stuff," demanded Finn from his tree stump of a chair. "No more pussy footin' around. Who wants a fag?"

"Me."

"I do!"

"Yeah, pass me one too."

"Jimmy how about you?" Finn asked.

"Naw Gramps, you know I hate tobacco, and why can't you just call them cigarettes like everybody else?"

"I showed you how to roll a fag didn't I?"

"Yeah, but I'm no good at it." Jimmy answered walking toward Finn.

"Could you roll one for me. You're gonna learn sooner or later anyhow, might as well be from yur own Gramps. Besides, it's a pain in the ass for me since I'm learning how to do everything again with this four-digit clover of a hand. I guess that makes me about as rare as a four leaf clover."

"O.K., on one condiiton"

"What's that?" Finn asked running his shaky hands through his long greese-grey hair, then putting it in a ponytail.

"Answer my question about the fags and all."

O.K., just go ahead and call me an old fart yearning for my days of lost youth growing up in the Irish Channel. I was your cousin Rachel's age when my Mother first caught us smoking corn starch in the back alley. It's one of the few real memories I have of her. All the Irish folks called them fags back then and I'll be damned if I'm gonna use whatever word's popular nowadays.

Anyway, could you at least roll up the tarp and get a breeze goin' through here. This shack gets musty with all you sweaty kids packed in, messing up the damn place. Washington in the summer don't seem much better than the south sometimes. Hitched up here to get away from that humidity, at least this is a dry heat."

Stretching his arms up in a wide yawn he added, "Hell, I remember ridin' the rails with Boxcar Willy and Nillie Welson decades ago. Nillie wouldn't remember me now that he's a big country music star, but I was with him when he wrote 'On the Road Again.' We were waiting in the train yard, and he just busted out with it, 'I can't hate to get on the load again

. . . like a band of gypsies we go on the highway . . . makin' music with my intestines . . . Dumpin' in places I've never been . . . Peein' on things that I may *never* see again.' Must have been at least ten years later when he hit the charts with it, he changed it up for the public and the radio, for all the 'normal' folks. That's where the division comes in. Kind of a cleavage between society and those of us who run around traveling. Just about every generation's gonna have its subcultures. We had the rails and the jazz scene. Then there's the gypsies over in Europe. And hell, what do you think Christ was. He must've been running a damn three ring circus the people followed *him*. And those Hare Krsnas, they know how to eat. That's the thing though, most all of them need music to help keep them together.

"Yeah, you forgot about the hippies," said one of the boys.

"Oh, you'll just have to stick around to hear about that one. Anyway, Nillie Welson, that's my boy. Used to always talk about how he wanted to smoke a joint on the roof of the nation's capitol. He used to run with . . . ah, what's that fellow's name. Oh yeah, New Scar Billy. Now *he* was a character. I remember one time we were in the freight station in West Oakland and we . . .

"Save it for tomorrow, would you Gramps?" Jimmy said, shuffling his barefeet across the sandy, loose driftwood floor. "Aow, damn driftwood and all," he yelled, after stubbing his big toe.

"Oh, of course," Finn answered, looking down at the manuscript, "That's another story. Anyway, this last freight train I rode up the west coast on wasn't quite so much fun. Don't any of you go trying that, it's just too damn dangerous nowadays."

Jimmy rolled up the window, thinking of how he'd have to come back and clean up this mess tomorrow morning when he brought breakfast. He tried to steal his thin Grandfather three meals a day from the camp. After rolling up and tying back the tarp that served as a window, he stuck his head out to hear the breeze tickle the branches of Finn's Douglas Fir grove. He always laughed when Finn tried to claim possession of this Nature Conservancy land. He noticed the ancient fire scars at the base of the old growth trees and thought how this place held the real music. He pondered how long the wind had been playing its song compared to the "old music" his grandfather always rambled on about. Jimmy looked beneath the make-shift window to smile at Rachel and her cronies who sat quietly on the needled earth.

The cool evening breeze of the Pungent Sound swept across Orcas

Island, but always seemed to drop dead just before reaching the cabin. An air of anticipatory disdain that hung in the now smokey room floated out the window and confronted the breeze.

In a nonchalant attempt to resume his tale, Finn finished half of his roll your own cigarette only to flick the rest out of the window with his good hand. The boys bottled their giggles with drags of smoke because it almost hit Jimmy in the head and they knew the younger ones would be listening from the window as usual.

Rachel had just looked down from watching what she thought might have been a spotted owl just in time when the poorly rolled cigarette landed exactly on the part of her hair. Rachel parted her hair down the middle and its Zeppelin-shape fell in the groove of her part, resting there a few seconds too long. Her hair and scalp suddenly burning, she shook her head vigorously. She still had to keep quiet, not knowing whether she was holding in cries of laughter or anguish. A finger on her lips ordered silence from her two friends before she tasted the cigarette and put it out in disgust. As she did their three little sets of ears pricked up from to hear the chatter die down and listen to the section of the story forbidden to them. Only Finn's voice remained as he picked up the manuscript and began:

I turn left off of North Blvd. and soon find myself speeding and winding down old Lazy River Road, I roll the windows down to catch a whiff of wind coming over the levee and think how liberating it can be. That same wind traveling all the way down from the North just to fill my nostrils. I enter the darkness that separates me from the neon glow of the riverboat casino and the U.S.S. Joy C. Kidd docked by the old State Capital.

I wonder to myself how bad will she stain my trunk, she's gonna smell something awful soon. Poe, why dost thou spirit hauntingly taunt me so? I've *got* to do something, but what? I gaze to the right, toward the dark stature of a swaying tree line. The trees interrogate me from behind the levee, swaying self-righteously. They don't have any decisions to make, just catch the breezes that blow down the river. They cloak my view of the western horizon. At first glance in the dark they seem to be one continuous tree line, but everyone knows they're separate and singular entities. If I was a tree I'd never have to decide, how easy that would be. Maybe I should stop by the woods and dump her body. I think the little farm house's near. I park next to a sweet Harley, this is it.

I walk to the door and give Bru a desperate, friendly hug.

-My man, Jer, thought you'd never make it back to our neck of the woods.

-Yeah, well family, friends, music, and food sucked me back into the pit, not to mention the rent. California's expensive man.

-I hear you Jer. Let me crank up the air a bit, you sweating like a dog's making me hot. You still in school?

-Yeah, you?

-Funk the dumb stuff, I'm graduamehated brother, hated it, cross dressing in that long black judge's robe. Check it out, did Talley tell you he's gonna let me jam with Crisp tonight?

-Yep, right on. Gotta love that.

-Not much time 'till the show. It just keeps on slippin'. Talley calls time an old hag. How does he say it, oh yeah, 'Watch out 'cause she's the creepin' vine, creepin' up on ya, deaf from

hearin' everybody whine.'

-Don't I know, strangling us all, decomposing us into the future, into fertilizer. Don't have much time tonight myself.

He plays air guitar with his fingers saying, -I'm gonna go make love to my guitar for a while man.

-What you gonna play now?'

- 'I don't know, but what's in ever I play, it's got to be funky!'

- '1, 2, 3. Make It Funky.'- I yell.

-Coming to my show toniht?

-No, got some serious shit to deal with man.

-Well at least meet my house mate, Cass, real quick. His buddy, Lowol's, from Northern California. They're in the barn.

As I trample through the overgrown mosquito farm of a yard, I notice a bike wheel leaning against the fence. Next to it, an old car tire full of water sits in the grassy weeds. Under the tire lies a rusty shovel. The raucous rhythms of Rage Against the Machine blare out of the open door beckoning me to enter the dripping sweat den. First I yank the shovel and throw it in my back seat.

-What's up? I'm Jer.

Cass climbs down from the ceiling saying, -Hey, I remember you. I used to see you tooling around everywhere on your bicycle. I heard you use to ride to New Orleans on Lazy River Road? I like to get out on it myself. I get lost on the country miles on my Harley, a child of countless dreams. The only thing after me's the roar of my shadow, the rest is just dust.

-Yeah, I used to like to peddle on the levee and camp overnight on the river.

Lowol interjects, -That Mississipp's powerful too, something else, a sweeping force, raw flow. That's one thing California can't touch.

-Undertow's bad ass too. Lowol and I tried swimming that bitch once, made it twenty feet and almost got sucked under. She is a bee-atch too. It widens down by New Orleans where the current gets stronger. Imagine how many blues cats fought her curves up to Chicago.

I think about how I don't know what to do with the woman boxed into my trunk I but play it cool and say, -Buddy Guy never did make it back home to B.R.

Lowol says, -We're about to go climb one of the tallest towers in the state. We scoped it out but haven't claimed it yet. Counted twelve huge red lights, every other one blinks. My guess is the peak's 1,500 feet up. Wanna come? I'll give you some jeans and a dark long sleeve shirt. We go stealth.

-If you only knew how stealth I need to go, you wouldn't believe.

-I couldn't catch that over the music, Jer. Did you hear what he said Cass?

-It was nothing, just thinking out loud. I have to follow y'all in my beast of a car.

Let's hit it.

I tail Cass' slick black Nissan with the intensity of a thousand red hot suns. I begin to think of the sound she made on that curb, like knuckles cracking over and over in my head. Why'd she have to tell me that? *'You ain't even got a chance. You ain't even got a chance.'*

How I just want to get out, get out of this downward spin, recover from this evil blow Fortuna has struck me with. What a real load of crap it all is. I can't just let go and pretend it doesn't matter anymore. I have to act, stay solid, keep my form.

Maybe I just need to get up that ladder before I'll know what to do. Maybe that's the kind of vantage point that can help my find somewhere to dump her. After miles of cow fields and open land I begin to relax my grip on the steering wheel and say, 'She had it coming, asking for it, she would have done *that* to me.' Mesmerized by the curved path leading me astray, I fail to notice Cass veer right up a gravel road that leads 'over the levee and through the woods to' the river. If I could only just go back to Grandmother's house and that view of the golf course. Oh damn it, my stomach heard. I can't ever think of visiting Marmie and Pops without it eavesdropping. Damn



your torturous growls, not now. I hate my body for its invasion, crossing the line dividing it from my mind. When I tell it to behave, all I get is revolting protests of spontaneous action. It rarely responds to reason.

My tires screech and shed rubber before I back up to the gravel road. We park and cross Lazy River Road on foot to find two graves just off the road. We hop the barbed wire to begin our mission.

-O.K. Lowol, You take the right flank, Jer the left. Rendezvous is at twelve hundred hours under the pecan tree left of the service road.

We separate to begin the hike and I feel solitude, William Burroughs, Kerouac, and the beats can't climb this 'Matterhorn' for me. The radio tower beckons in the distance, the biggest ladder I've ever seen. A desire to run wells up inside; I run, I run, I run like I've never run before. When I reach the tree I look up to see myself flanked on all sides by the midnight hour; black as coal. I lick salty sweat off my upper lip and sit at the roots wondering if it's pecan season. 'Words could never explain. Oh how I wish it would raiyain!' I smell my arm pits, then notice my boots are covered in cow shit. I check my watch, twelve hundred, that hag's creeping in again, there they are.

-O.K. guys, remember to stop climbing if you feel the e.m.'s.

-What do you mean e.m.'s Cass

-He's talking about the electromagnetic currents radiating off this bitch. Some buddies of ours base jumped off the top light and blacked out on the way down. When they came to, they were damn near swimming in the river. Lucky for them they regained consciousness in time to steer their chutes back toward land. The cops chased them through the woods a while. They lost a shit load of equipment that night, just had to unhook and run. They say after the ladder ends you shimmy up the pole, straddle the top light, hold the open chute in your right had, push off with everything, and let adrenaline take control.

As we approach the tower we pass a group of fenced in satellite dishes, then a set of six cables as thick as I am wide that are hooked to a monstrous slab of cement five feet high. Soon we pass a smaller version of the tower's support system and come to a huge shed full of mysterious equipment with blinking yellow, green, and red lights. A high tech surveillance system perched atop the door lead me to ask Cass and Lowol -What the hell kind of scheme does Big Brother have going on here?

Cass answers, -I don't know, but I'm goin' around back to avoid the camera eye. Look we can sneak past it behind this heard of cows, watch for patties.

-Now you tell me about patties. Look at her man, 'She's mighty mighty, just lettin' it all hang out . . . That's a fact, ain't holdin' nothing back . . . She's the one, the only one, built like an Amazon.'

-What's that Jer?

-Nothing, just singing to our stairway. Maybe I'll get some answers up there, Nirvana's waiting.- At her base, I feel a release. We begin the climb and suddenly my only worry is getting up and out. The tower itself is a triangle with open sides and a lightning rod that runs down the ladder's center. The only place to rest is the platforms that hold the demonic red lights every 150 feet. Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide.

They reach the second set of red lights and wait for me on the platform. I catch our secret view of the Baton Rouge Bridge. It's amarillo lights, still higher than us, line the road to Lafayette and New Orleans. I perch like a sparrow, a voyeur steeling glances from a peaceful moving picture that I am separate from.

-What a trip! This afternoon I was on that bridge chasing cows down on my Harley. I bet cars are still sliding in the patties they left. Let's hit it. To the top!

Lowol and I follow him without a word. They soon leave me in the dust to climb at my own pace. Words mean nothing here without an audience. No witnesses. The cold wind howls fiercely as I reach the point where the first set of cables connects to the triangle. As I do, the velcro

of my watch band gives way. Thank God my glasses are in New Orleans or they'd be down there, shattered with my watch. The seasons have just passed in front of my eyes and left my mind naked although my body's clothed. I fearfully grip the ladder to keep the convection currents from sweepin me to the East. I know now why birds of prey look so graceful just before they dive. Dive, I could just dive like them, soar to the ground, free. I've lost count of what number light I'm on. *Aw, Fuck it!* I can't be far from the top now, it can't get much harder, I've got to keep going. This could be my way to get out.

Two red lights later the ladder shakes as I profess to the sky, -I am, I am who am, I create my world, a world separate and outside of me, waiting to be conquered and labeled, it's all mine! Owa, itchie itchie owa, itchie itchie owa, itchie itchie eeeuu wah!

The next triangle of red light sends off a buzz of blinking mockery. I look down and all around to find a world I have created. I didn't know the river curves so dramatically so close to Baton Rouge. It sheds time and doesn't worry about being separate from its banks. It sweeps time in its wake, continually sweeping. Beneath me cow fields give way to forest. The world IS massive and fresh with life's flesh, life's blood; more than just a cow pattie being spread out above the river by the *incessant* spin of anxious tires.

At that very moment my body cried mutiny as I dropped trow to let two loads free at once; . . . chocolate brown and pearl white, together forever. Ahhh. Both tracks cleansed I pulled up my drawers and buttoned my shorts hoping I hadn't hit the ladder. I, the rubber band man, cool jerk.

I heard a rumble from above and wondered if that's a higher voice callin'. Yes, I heard it, there IS a God in meaning.

-Jer, head back down on the double, a storm's headin' our way!

Oh, it's just them coming down, -O. K., but what's all this white shit on my hands. I guess it's from the ladder?

-Exactly that, she-it. I don't even want to think about how many birds turd on this thing, it's like a rest area for them and I'm sure they all pop a squat. C'mon, let's head down. Lowol's on his way down too.

## 6

I instinctively speed my beast of a car south toward New Orleans on the levee, then wordlessly drop down its backside to a thick expanse of woods. I try to dig into the alluvial river bank to now avail, return to the car, and pop the trunk to find her conscious. A dark red stream trickles down her neck and into the bucket. I get in the trunk behind her and use my leg strength to roll her over the edge and onto the bumper, then she thumps on the soft ground. I leave her there mumbling empty phrases in the rain. At least she's out of that box of a trunk. The Box!

Before I realize it, I'm back at The Box to get her lighter and weapon. I can't leave any incriminating loose ends, like finger prints. The Blues Box is packed. Thumping bass licks rise out of the open doorway to chase searing guitar notes. That '96 Caddy is parked in my spot next to Kenny Neal's '48 Buick Eight.

"Aw, hell, sometimes these details pass by me like the seasons. Just so many to remember. Was it a '95 or '96?" Finn asked while his eyes stalkingly searched the room calling out for a response.

"I think it was a '95," answered Jimmy, shaking his head sideways while Finn took a swig from the jug.

Rachel found that she was squirming on the soft ground. She wanted to let out a yelp, "The lady! Who's the lady! "

"Oh alright then, Any Way You Want It," Finn said as if he had read her thoughts. He became Jerry once again:

I see the lighter and grab it, but her weapon's nowhere to be found. I think, 'Oh shit, there's her Casino Rouge baseball hat,' and subtly shuffle it into a nearby storm drain. I know what I need to do. I walk into the club like nothing's wrong. As I get to the bar I see Talley showing off his yearbook story to Rafal Neal. I make sure he sees I'm back then I spot Bru up by the stage. He's dancing under the blue spotlight. I stand next to him under the red one. Talley

works his way to the stage as Kenny sets his guitar down. Talley straps on his guitar and calls out over the waves of incomprehensible chatter,

-Can I get Raful Neal up here to do a couple a numbers on harmonica. Raful still in the house? Wanna thank his son Kenny and my boy Crisp for keepin' on with the keepin' on. Give a hand for the next generation y'all. C'mon, let me hear ya!

I join the crowd with a few claps and then yell out "Raining in my heart!" but he doesn't hear.

-We gonna get Kenny's Daddy, Raful, up here. But first, I'm gonna do one of my own. It's called 'Big Fat Women.' I'm serious now, I really do love 'em 'cause they got that meat shakin' on the bone and man, them big fat women can really skin the cat.

With these obligatory words he grabs a pick and raises his right hand,

-Tammy, you got it on the two.

His hand dropping the beat through the air, he counts off,

-1 2, 1 2 3 4.

I wonder to myself how long it took him to master those pentatonic scales. What a secret to hold in. The next song finds Raful pulling a big C harp out of his top left shirt pocket. It glistens in the low light as he raises it to his mouth. All of the sudden J. Monque D. jumps on stage and starts a rap,

-Alright Baton Rouge, you all know what it's like bein' 'lone,- he sings between the high notes, -Everybody done got screwed out a love one way, some how or the nother. So can I get a little help from y'all? Me and Talley got a problem ya see, I had me a woman, I thought she was a good to me. Ou ou ee. Then I woke this mornin', and the covers was empty, all a mess ya see. I went down the kitchen, thinkin' I'd find her up on some fixins. you know what I found? That's right fellas, a sink full of dirty dishes, itchin', itchin' for a scratchin'.

He glances over at Talley and puts his hands behind his head while the guitar and harmonica wale. The jam sends his body gyrating.

-Hey Hey, I figure she must be talkin' that game uh girl talk with the neighbor yeah. I get over next store and find Talley wonderin' the same ole thang, Where's my sweet fat chicken wang? So I'm gonna ask ya'll again Baton Rouge. I know you know the blues here, can ya hep me, can ya *do* me this one little favor?

One solid voice answers and then trickles off-Yeeeahhh.

-Ya wanna know, ya wanna know what you can do?

-Yeeeahhhhh.

-If you see my Kay, please, please send her home to mee!

Raful rips up that harmonica. Up and down, side to side. Slicing those high notes like he's attacking an enemy 'till Sweet sounds fill the air.

Soon every musician in the house is on the stage for the grand finale, but Talley's lookin' around in astonishment like something's wrong.

Bru comes over before jumpin' on stage and asks me, -Have you seen Talley's wife? She's supposed to be here, and man can she blow a mean harp.

My mind begins to wonder, to wander, but not so far as to dissolve the veil that allows me to discern things 'normally.' I was wondering if I even knew what it was that I'd found up on my tower and down on their bloody curb. I wondered if the distinction between the two could help me find and light my voice at all, help me keep things separate in my head like I used to before last spring. What could all this confusion be arising out of, what could it mean? The only way to really find out is to go back home.

I'll never forget the look on Mom's face when she saw me in the hospital, all sliced up from jumping in with those Grizzly Bears at the San Diego Zoo. Sheer terror struck her square in the head when she saw me. I wanted to laugh at the fear I saw emulating from her eyes. It was a horror nestled deep within her consciousness, a horror induced by reason and furthered by society's self-perpetuating propaganda against it's mother, the infinite silence that bore it. I could

sense this in her trembling eyelids. She wasn't just afraid for my physical health, the worry surrounding her eyes hinted at my being throw on the 'other side' of the debate between reason and madness. She was afraid I'd be trapped in the silence, defenseless against 'the slings and arrows of outrageous' reasoning; a reason that engages in a one sided debate condemning silent mystics. Those bears were just trying to communicate. They motioned for me to come and play, I remember it clear as day. I just acted on impulse and that was it. Thinking back on it, it's my job to utilize my gift and discover if animals separate the world from themselves or if it's our logic that separates it for them. My job to find if it's reason that does the separating or if the world's separated already both Within and Without us. Why is Althea the only one who understands me and how these dichotomies plague me with the necessity of decision? I can't choose any one side like I used to be able to. I begin to play with the idea of accepting my nature as a mystic, then draw back in a desire to cling to the rational tenants of my culture's Cartesian paradigm.

I should probably listen to Mom more and think before I act, but *Fuck it*, where's the fun in fighting my body when it revolts? I guess it's like that old blues song says, 'A rebel child from a family meek and mild, Momma tried to raise me right but I refused . . . Momma tried to raise me better, but her pleadings I denied . . . that leaves no one but me to blame 'cause Momma tried.' The Grateful Dead do a great version of that old standard. Why do I think so clearly sometimes, and then act so irrationally when the unexpected happens? Anxiety I guess. Thank God I missed here for the flood. And if I'd have brought the beast car to Cali it wouldn't be ruined by mold.

If I can control myself, everything else should just fall in place. But what about when my body acts on its own?

I walk up to the stage, tug Bru's shirt, and point toward the door as if to say over the music, -I'm heading out. Got to hit N'awlins tonight.

He bobs his head up and down, smiles, and kicks the air while strumming an *Á* bar chord.

I guess I could get off on 'perceived self-defense.' Would that exonerate me? Wait a minute, Dad and Uncle Edmond were deliberating on that at Delzy's party last week. Perhaps a detailed description of her conduct would prove her to be in violation of the criminal code's 'stalking statute.' What did Edmond G. say that statute number was? 1440 or something. But what if she's still alive? Two, fourteen forty point two. Do I have a case at all for leaving her? Temporary insanity? I should ask Dad or Edmond. Oh God, how could I be so stupid? Like when I got caught cheating for the third time at Jesuit. I remember Mom's lecture, 'What in God's name could possess you to do this. You're in high school now, haven't you learned to think before you act yet? Damn it Jerome, I sound like a broken record. When you're about to do something stupid, ask yourself, would I do this in front of my Mother? It's like you're driving and suddenly the road gets thinner, then thinner until pretty soon you just have one lane to work with and you want to panic.'

What was that Delzy told me at her party last week? Something the Jesuit priest in her parish had said about the Discernment of Spirits that disturbed her. I could see into her thoughts enough to feel her fear of what he had said. I think his name is Father Stephen, I could imagine him at the pulpit, holding a rose with his bald head shining in a shaft of electric light, and going about his condemnation of insanity in a smug tone.

"C'mon Gramps, that's the name of the priest in California." Jimmy said throwing his hands in the air with a wrinkled brow,.

“Who do you think you are, telling me to c’mon. You think there’s only one priest named after Saint Stephen. For crying out loud, he’s only the Catholic church’s first Damn martyr. One of the Grateful Dead’s best songs carries his name. It’s got a great lyric that goes, ‘In and out of the garden he goes . . . answers are plenty in the bye and bye. . . wherever he goes, the people all complain . . .’”

Rachel’s two friends were curled up in a ball together. They’d been asleep for some time, but Rachel still hung on every word. It was getting chilly, but she was oblivious to it. All she felt were Finn’s words and her new blistered bald spot. His shack was so differánt from the empty mansion she lived in. Her Mom’s mansion was full of “stuff,” it just didn’t have the same feeling. It was devoid of personality. She liked the servants and they helped her bide time there while she counted the seasons pass. Eventually summer time would roll around and living would be easy again. With the first scent of spring she’d write Finn a letter telling him about the school year and what new camp her Mom had chosen. In her eyes her Grandfather knew so much and had been been so many places. She didn’t know what it was about him that tantalized her so much, but she lived for the summers of his stories. She hoped that someday she could travel with him and find out what they all meant. Until then, Jimmy’s explanations would have to do.

“You guys are almost as bad as the girls, never let me finnish a damn thought.” said Finn. He was growing weary and had to let Jerry’s character well up inside him for a moment before holding up the manuscript with his four fingered hand:

I’d imagine Father Stephen’s sermon would go something like this,

-It’s the spirit of *infirmity*, that’s the root of your problem, it’s no excuse. It’s merely a question of the Discernment of Spirits. One can rid himself of this *evil* spirit. Cast it out and offer your visions to God as an oblation to souls for our salvation. Your *pain* lies in Christ’s mystical body. To be part of the church, you must be strong, *militant*, triumphant: A cornerstone. A person with your problem can be redeemed, but a lack of discernment will put you in the *scrupulous land* forever! Cast out the *demon* visions and come back to rationality.

Poor Delzy, does she know she’s a paranoid schizophrenic? Doctors say schizos never really know, or just don’t ever accept their condition. I understand her, the way she sees and hears things that others say aren’t there. I guess that’s what separates my artistic genius from her, the basketcase. That ability to sense how thin the veil of reality *really* is, yet being able to create art by keeping at least one foot rooted in reason’s side of that veil. I’ve been able to explain away my visions these last few months by simply separating my mind from my body. If I couldn’t stand on the shoulders of the giants that came before me I’d be lost in the laberynth of the mind’s solitude. All those dead western thinkers, they’ve helped me filter irrational insights through a logical thought process. It all comes out in my paints and my acoustic music. A kind of catapult. When in the hell was the last time I really concentrated on my art anyway? Has it been almost four months

now. I wonder why I can't concentrate like I did before, before that Beltaine morn. Since last spring, the semester of my Beltaine. Since then my guitar, conga, and radio mostly get me through the times when my mind and body are at battle. Someday I'll go back and finish all those dusty, half-sketched water colors. Ah, water. Even my car's moldy odor reminds me of it. It rains down on everything, everything. It wraps around the continents with such force. Suddenly a sharp pain climbs up my back.

I tried not to think of that Beltaine evening and the way that Tahitian groundswell rolled in on the first of May. Suddenly I couldn't help but think that water from Under a Tahitian Moon sent those cosmic gyrations to our Beltaine shores.

The waves had doubled in size since the morning. Some storm surge from Tahiti sent us the largest South swell since '75. I got the chills just watching it perched on a beach cliff. Althea insisted that we check the North Jeddie. She said that was a mellow place to surf a southern groundswell. The first set that rolled through was about ten feet. We used the channel and paddled next to the North side of the jeddie. Its jagged rocks stood ten feet in the air, taunting me. The channel's current sucked us out to the break quicker than usual. There weren't too many guys out. Most people watched from the beach or the jeddie's rocks. The next wave to roll in must have been at least a fifteen footer. Wotta set!!

"Fifteen, huh?" One of them asks, "How big is that?"

Jimmy responded moving his hands around like an orator, "You see, a wave's measured from the backside and all. A fifteen footer turns out to have about a twenty-five to thirty foot face, depending on how steep and deep it is. Ever checked out my surf mags? Most all of them have at least one picture of Hawaii, usually Pipeline or Backdoor. Does that give you some idea of it's power?"

"Wow," the boys said almost in unison.

A bit frustrated, Finn continued:

Althea took off and got a fast ride off the first one. The other two guys in the water split the next wave, one went left, the other right. I was alone, bobbing in the ocean like a dingy. I threw my hair back and it caught me off guard. I panicked. If I would've only chosen to go left or right. But no, I couldn't decide. Stuck in the Middle, I thought, it's too big. The lip started to peel over and I remembered thinking, '*Aw Fuck*, ride it or get slammed.' I don't know what possessed me to separate Mom's warning and heed only the half that had become useless: think. Think, yeah right. Not at such a sublime time. If I would've just not panicked.

Althea scrambled toward me, pulled me onto the beach and preformed CPR. We must have been a sight, my leash still velcroed to my ankle with the back half of my board trailing behind me like a silent child, split in half, orphaned.

As I came to the first thing I heard was Althea's voice, -I know first aid, are you O. K. man? Can you move your . . .

I responded, caughing up water, -Yeah, yeah, just a sore neck.

-That's her, man. That's her. Mother Kali dude. She's creator and destroyer. You know my little statue with all the arms and that halo looking thing?

I gave her a look that asked if she was even worried about me before answering,

-Yeah. I've seen it.



She caressed my hair and playfully rubbed my arms, -Feel that? Can you feel your arm. I tried to nod 'yes,' but my head hurt.

-It's O.K., just relax. Anyway, Kali dances on the breast of Shiva for eternity man, it keeps him under her power. She's the Mother of all life so she can't play favorites. You're lucky man, Mama Ocean broke the rules and showed you compassion. Let's hit Mad River hospital and get you all checked out. Stay put, I'll get the wagon and drive it over.

I remembered thinking how she must have been worried because she hated to see ass holes driving over the dunes. And I remembered telling her on the way to Mad River how it felt like I was engulfed in the womb, how I almost gave up when my wetsuit zipper snapped and I sunk from the extra weight, and how when I was drowning words and rational thought just fell by the wayside and I became one for almost a second. I remembered telling her how I just stopped fighting the washing machine so it could take me. She told me that was probably what saved me. I remembered it all so vividly and blamed the whole thing on that sudden anxiety attack.

I feel the bump. Even if you were sleeping you'd feel the bump that says 'you've reached the point of no return,' the thirty mile bridge. If I would have just gotten on the bridge earlier tonight. If I'd only had my glasses. If I'd have seen that it was a harmonica. Thank God she didn't bleed much. I pull over and read the yellow sign and black letters, 'emergency use only.' I toss the bloody five gallon paint bucket and the shovel off the bridge and into the water.

As the night slowly gives way to a not-so rosy-fingered dawn I cry for Athena to hold back the morning sun, but that myth only holds true for Odysseus and Penelope busy working on hide and seek. Hide the salami's more like it.

Back on the road, I slide my left hand under my overalls to pass the time. California life was easy. Rode my bike anywhere I needed, painted, read, and surfed all day. Then I played music with Althea and our gang all night. I remember that vernal morning of Beltaine so vividly. We woke with the dawn and paddled out even with the break at Camel Rock. After a good surf session we put up the boards and swam back out past the break to climb the Camel's cliffs. *Oh primavera dulce*. Finally we reached the cliff's edge where our tree waited. That tree was our live Maypole. A month later I'd be on a bumpy flight back to Louisiana. We knew *all that* would be bottled memories before long. Our oak still grows over the ocean, roots nestled deep in the edge. It juts out from the earth, almost horizontally, and splits into two huge branches the size of most trees. One branch grows over the ocean, while the other sways above the cleavage between the Camel's two supple humps. What a view. We started smooching at the split and cuddled together in its natural seat for a while. The ocean branch eventually curves up to the sun. It's smaller branches fan out like a spiral stairway. We climbed it, and I tell you, we spent more than just seven minutes in heaven, it's an earthen stairway to heaven. She told me how the sky and sea are one mid-day whole to her, continuous; but I mostly saw separate entities. Can't believe I drifted asleep stretched out on that thick branch, it felt like a natural hammock. She held tight, keeping us from falling and then nudged me until my eyes opened. As I came back to consciousness I was off balance, but she caught me. And the descriptions of her world. So innocently vivid.

I picture her lips immortally uttering, -I can't live away from Mama ocean, I'd cry and cry. She pulsates through my veins, so kind.

I point to the base of the sharp coast line, -Look how hard that rock works to penetrate her wet roar. It rises up solid, fights to hold back. She gives way to its form and wraps it then eventually conquers it over aeons. Slowly, in time, rhythmically.

With a funky stare Althea reveals defiantly, -But they're not separate, not at all. She gives way, but her vast hidden power won't let her give up because she knows that *even she* is the rock. Together they create raw energy, they create the Chi that's rooted in our bellies. They're one that way, man. One in the same. Why is that so hard for you to realize. It's all one holistic mess goin' on within and without us. I feel it. The universe is a pregnant green dragon, man, and you can't

even see her flames fryin' us up, willing us into her history. See those dolphins getting down on them ups? The first surfers man, riding the waves. They're so right on, they just ride on.

-Wow, even when most folk don't see 'em, they just are. Exactly, just like Admiral Joy C. Kidd wrote, 'The INELUCTABLE MODALITY OF THE AUDIBLE . . . there all the time without you and ever shall be, WORLD WITHOUT END.' Joyce Creeley wrote about feeling it pulsate all around.

Althea made a face like 'whatever' and clenched my neck with her hand to lean my head over. I looked down the cliff into the cave hidden within its base.

Her sandy mount hair dancing blonde and all full with salt water tastes she said, -See that, that's the earth, man, giving birth. Look closely with those binocs because I don't need them. See that stone oval of a cave? It fills with, then releases water as each wave reaches the end of its journey. That's her. Those two rocks perking up are her breasts and the seagull shit's got to be her nipples caught lactating.

We must have had that chat a hundred ways on a hundred waves in a hundred surf spots, but never so vividly until that Beltaine morn. From that day on I began to really see into other people's thoughts. People *incest* that we're brother and sister. Insist, insist. Hanging out with her made the visions I have seem normal in their own way. She put it all in perspective for me, made it all O.K. I don't get it, I come home and my family thinks I'm some circus freak. If I told Mom 'all that went down, it'd probably burn off both of her ears'.

Just then my 2/14/94 Dupree 'Moses-Mason' Garsea Band bootleg that I recorded at the Warfield Theater moved from Dylan's lucid "Forever Young" groove into "Like a Road" with such grace. That's right Dupree, "Like a road, like a row a owed, leading home . . ." Seeing this show with Althea, we thought hard and long toward him and he did it just like we asked, he opened the second set with 'Everybody Needs Somebody.' I'll never forget Dupree band doin' that old Solomon Burke tune, dipping into his trick bag of solid soul. I still can't believe he did it, like he knew we needed to hear it, he heard our thoughts, he felt them. Sneaking all that taping equipment in the show by stashing it in our drawers was one hell of a fun job, even if we had to walk bow legged. Some of the shows I've recorded represent big moments in my life, 'Never had such a good time baby, in my life before, I'd like to have it just one time more. One long train from start to end, I'd like to take that ride again.' How I ever need Althea now, she'd get me out of this bucket o' hell I'm in.

It's just so much cheaper to come home and graduate. Besides, that mother of mine's been a wreck ever since the flood. That house is like flesh and blood to her. I can't imagine raising my kids in the house I was raised in. How can she stand it? Every time Marmie and Pops come visit they act like the place is still theirs. She wouldn't even leave that old pile of bricks when it was inundated by three feet of water. So many roots to tie my soul, kind of like Dupree sings in that new Dead song he wrote last year, 'So many roads I know . . . all I need is one to take me home . . . So many roads to ease my soul.' They better take that one into the studio before he kicks the bucket.

It's so rare to see a Dead show in the south. Have to drive a good ten hours to get my next Dupree fix. Now that he's really dead that'll be it for the Grateful Dead. His artistic flare was their heart and soul. And all those free spirits chasin' the Boyz around the country? Dead Tour just got so big in the end, a roving band of 100,000 Deadheads following them as far as Europe and Cairo. Three shows in front of the Sphinx in '78 and a lunar eclipse on the third night. Like wow man, I really need to make a trade for some of those tapes, I'd even give up my copy of the outdoor Washington show when Mount Saint Helen erupted in the distance behind the stage. I wonder if the stories are true about how the ashes blackened the sky after the Boyz had already started playing Dark Star. A video of that would be like a golden apple. I hope Althea sends me that Paris '90 show I left in California. Why did I leave so much of my stuff with her? I used to be able to organize and ship my gear no problem, but lately it's just so hard to keep it all together.

Then there's all those con artists and rats 'mingling with the good people we meet' and destroying our circus with their gate crashing and bunk tickets. As the next song on the tape plays, I wonder if Dupree had chosen to play it that night as a prophetic gesture. Was even he sending me back home to my family? I sing along with the tape, 'Just a song of Gomorrah . . . Get out, get out, Mr. Lot and don't you look around . . . I heard a voice telling me to flee, same old voice I always believe.'

Then I lament on how easy it is to get by on Dead Tour, just scam a ride to the next show and work the lot. Damn I made some fun cash unloading cases of tasty imports and microbrews outside the shows with Althea. That old voice on the tape 'Said: A lot of trouble coming, but it don't have to come to you. I'm sparing you so you can tell the rest what you've been through.' Who the hell ever said that crap about how freedom comes with responsibility anyway? Shakespeare, did he get that from the Bible? What the hell did he know, he could have been a she for all we know, probably a mother.

All that freedom, that wander lust to roam seems to be filtering into some salty dream, like it all happened to somebody else. The Dead sing about that in 'Box of Rain.' 'It's all a dream we dreamed one afternoon, long ago.' I got that song on the show I taped in Denver '91. Funny how after four years I have to be coming home to figure out what that line means. Where's that tape anyway? *Aw Fuck it..* That whole summer tour was crazy. 3,000 miles in Dad's Chevrolet Cavalier to catch a month's run of fourteen shows. At least I taped them all and can play them over and over. That was the only time when the Boyz let Bruce Hornsby jam with them for a full tour. His grand piano, such a full sound on that picture perfect Denver night when they encored with 'Box of Rain,' first time I ever heard it played live. Last show of the tour too. What a blow out, just a 'Slow Train coming . . . Picking up passengers from coast to coast.' No freedom here today though with Dupree gone and all the crap going on in this family. Does that woman really expect me to live here all my life? Doesn't she get the picture by now? She's gotta get out, she 'Might As Well,' won't she ever leave before she ends up a Marmie without a Pops?

All these thoughts pass through me while Dupree Band blares out of the speakers, "*Anny* day now, any *daay* now. I shall be released.'

It makes sense why Dad left her. She's so damned over-emotional, she never could understand why he had to quit the lawyer thing. I don't blame him, he had to get out of that grind, just get out. He seems happy now, but his big ole paycheck sure as hell wouldn't have hurt Jacques and me.

## 8

As the sun splits the southeast horizon, I roll onto Shakedown St., toward those taunting red bricks.

My numb legs proclaim -Athena, you tramp, letting the Strugglin' Man down again, steeling the night. Me roba, me robaba. Aw Christ, it's a quarter to four in the mornin' and she's awake.

The front door, marked with a clear flood stain, suggests a battle of cosmic proportions. It opens wide as she comes to greet me barefoot in her baby blue sweats.

Her wrinkles perk themselves and *Get Up*, molding into a smile while her frazzled curls

*Stand Up* in a Medussa-like nest, -Oh sweetie, I've been so worried. After Marj called I waited up for you. I've been in hysterics all night. I called Pepe and had him put an A.P.B. out on you. I thought you were dead on the highway and do you know what he told me? He said even though he's a Senator, there's still a quota on how many times the state troopers will hunt for you. I told him, I say 'Do what you have to, but find my 'bucket o' gold'.

-Jesus Mom, must you always insist that I've reached the extreme limits of possibility, can't I ever just dabble and 'inch my way through dead dreams.' Look, I feel as if I've been tied to the rack all night and then some bones crushed by an Iron Maiden.

-How many times have we been through this? All you had to do was call.

-I don't think, I don't think so.

-That's just it, you don't think.

Trying to walk past her, I realize that she's had the outside bricks whitewashed. Once I reach the scent of growing mold, she turns and holds out her arms, -Can't I just get a hug from my favorite boy? When you were little and I asked you how much you loved me you'd answer with arms held out as wide as you could, like you loved me more than the whole world. Back then you needed my loving arms to hold you tight.

-Yeah, well now I'm just wearied. I'm going to sleep off this loathesome night.

She sneakily caught me off guard with a bear hug to squeeze her large bosom against my frail frame. -Jer, just shutup and let These Arms of Mine hold you while they can. What happened last night anyway? Did you stay at your Dad's?

-Oh, how conveniently we forget the pact that arose out of your scandalous reading of my journals. You are aware that oral contracts stand up in a court of law. Are you not?

-I did that for your own good, I was worried.

Her hug evokes in my head a struggle to escape, to evade Marmie's last interrogating glance that asked what I had gotten 'her little girl' on Mom's 50th. -Happy Birthday Mom, I bought you this hug, hope you like it. What's the best time of day to go to Galatoire's?

She answers with a glow in her cheeks, -Anytime you want, my love. What about Delzy? You know it was her 75th last week and I missed her party.

-C'mon Mom, she's a mental case. It takes her an hour to order, then she volunteers her life story to the bus boy. And once she's inebriated it's all over but the spilling.

-She can't help the way she's made and she doesn't have anyone. I just feel sorry for her and she *is* family.

-Whatever, - I say as wrinkles puzzle my brow.

-Noone understands her, give her that much.

-Before my nap I'm going to 'shit, shower, and shave' as you so crudely like to put it. Arouse me in a few hours and I shall arise. Oh, where'd you put my glasses. My world has been a haze of misconception without them. I told you not to let me leave them here! You know how much of a difference they make in my world view. My self has been orphaned in solipsism without them. I thought you were supposed to mail them to me. Did I get any mail?

-I'm sorry doll. I didn't mean to . . . forget. This house. It's such a mess anymore. I can barely get around with all the clothes and furniture scattered everywhere. I can't ever find a thing half the time. Can't even sit on the sofas because they're still propped up by box fans. This damn mold gives me headaches. And those FICA ass holes. Getting our insurance money is like pulling teeth. Eight of them interrogated me in my nightgown and said they'd be back. If you and Jaques were here it wouldn't be so bad.

I blew a long sigh before saying, -Mom, not now. We painted for two weeks and do have our own lives to deal with. Just wake me up, lunch is on me. Do you still have fans circulating air in all of the closets? It's been months now. Oh, and how *did* they all fit in your nightgown anyway? Can't we sue for harrasment of some sort?

-They told me to leave the fans running as long as I can, but I moved them to de-funk the sofas, except in *your* closet.

I laugh to myself at the simplicity of college life compared to this and ask mockingly,

-Don't you think we should just get new couches?

I'm asleep and dreaming about climbing the spiral staircase of an old stone tower like in Hitchcock's Vertigo with my surf board in one hand and a large bag of spilling acorns in the other when Mom shakes me and puts some coffee on my nightstand,

-Wake up. Up up. Upsy daisy, I'm all powdered and puffed doll. I picked out a clean jacket and slacks for you to wear. Rise and shine. C'mon, I found you some argyle socks and a nice leather belt, just up to par with their dress code. Oh, and I had all your clothes dry cleaned since the flood my love.

-Give me some time, I'm still dabbling in the depth of my dreamscape, -I retort, pulling a pillow over my head to block out the noon sun. She had to open those blinds, torture me with light as if that dream time tease wasn't enough.

The dream slides beyond my consciousness, no point in chasing it. Hope I can coax it back up when I need it. It's all just part of some larger cosmic plan anyway, -One entity; right Althea? I know you hearin' me, 'man.' We share that ability to will things into existence, that rare power of suggestivity. You always said you could think towards people while letting situations tell you about them. You must be here somewhere. I can sense your presence in this house. It's the link we have. Things others can't see pop up in plain view for us. It hasn't always been that way, I don't know exactly when I began to hear and see under the surface, to percieve those things hidden from most people but it hit me hard just after my 21st, during the semester of my Beltaine.

She came back into my room in a flurry, -Drink your coffee and get up doll. As soon as you come back with Delzy we'll be ready. They don't let you make reservations at Galatoire's, but the lunch crowd should be gone by the time we get there. I know just what I'm gonna order.- She puts her palms together and wraps her fingers around the top of her hands as if she were praying, then rubs them together like a hungry fly, -The best soft shell crab and creole hollandaise sauce in the city, with a side of soufled potatoes. You look so handsome in your nice clothes. Doll, you'd find another girlfriend in no time if you just cut your hair and dressed nicely.

That spring in her step points toward one of her sneaky plans. Something's up, I can smell it in the coffee.

-Althea says for me to leave it long, she says it's an extension of my soul. Your allergic to caffeine, this is not decaf. Mom, you've phoned her, haven't you? Haven't you! How could you?

-Who, Althea? Don't be silly, I don't even have her number.

-No, Delzy. You know how I detest that drive from out here on the lakefront. All the way up Bayou St. John to Carrollton. I even have to pass Jesuit High for Christ's sake. And can you even grasp the excruciating nausea suggested by those million dollar homes lining St. Charles. It's on your shoulders if I am accosted while parking in the hood. Her decrepit shotgun house on the corner of Napoleon and Tchoupitoulas is an eyesore, built over the Mississippi's once alluvial flood bank. God knows when. Hell, I would've been better off taking a boat from Lake Ponchatrain. If they only wouldn't have filled in the canal seventy odd years ago . . .

-Jerry boy, I'm the birthday girl. Remember? No questions asked. If you don't have something nice to say, don't say it at all, besides you could be halfway there by now. We don't have to do this if you don't want to. It's never easy with you, is it? Sometimes I just don't know why I love you like I do.

As she lunged for another hug, I grabbed the keys to get out. The T.V. held an eerie image. The newswoman's voice still resonates in my head.

<<<<<<<<<This just in from Baton Rouge. Police have found a woman this morning staggering towards New Orleans on Lazy River Road. She has suffered a substantial head wound believed to be caused by a severe blow. Reports indicate that she's out of the emergency room and recovering. The wife of local blues legend Talley 'Pan' Tonic has two sons, Crisp and Tammy Tonic. Remarkably, she has been quoted as saying, 'I done been hit harder than that many a time.

Fidgety boy's all scared I ain't got no family an's gonna rob him. Ain't 'nough cops on the beat's the problem. Glad I got family's all.' There you have it . Angela Athena of Eye Witness, zap . . . >>>>>>>>>.

-Damn clicker keeps getting lost! - I hear Mom yell just before the image shrinks into it's central point, blackening the screen, -You were at *his* house weren't you?-

-My whereabouts are none of your business- I answer, turning beet red while I walk to the T.V. and flip it back on.

-I can tell,- she said with an index finger raised toward me. -You come back from your father's with that blank stare like you don't want to be around me. That's *his* stare, I know it all too well. I can't erase twenty years just like that. Does he scare so much that you'd turn on your only Mother?

I stare up at the track lights that play hide and seek behind the four-armed ceiling fan. She yells just as my eyes focus in on one of the circulating blades, -Jerome Camile Cartre answer me, you answer me now! Look at me. I show more compassion to his family than he ever has. They joke about how I adopted them, but it's true, He has shut his family out from day one. *He* orphaned them. I thank my lucky stars for you and Jaques, but that's all he's given me. That whole family hides their pain under an umbrella, a devilish comic icing they spread over their stale birthday cake.

I leave her in a pool of her own angst. She just doesn't understand me, not like Althea does. Althea and I, we're made from different stuff.

Once in her car, I move the seat back to find a manila envelope done up in watercolors. Althea's flowing letters jump out from the page. She's been hiding this from me! The lengths that woman will go to! She's been trying to keep us apart ever since Althea's Christmas visit last year. Althea shouldn't told all of her wild stories about getting out, how her parents took her around the world as a child.

-Delzy! DDeellzzyy!!

-Who's that? I'm not supposed to answer the door anymore.

-It's Jer.

-Who?

-Jerry!

-What?

-JJeerryy CCAarrtttree! Your great nephew!

-Oh, Jer. Why didn't you just say so c'mon in, have a seat dawlin'. What you doin' back in N'awlins I thought you'd never come back. I was just about to make some groceries over at Schwaggefinn's, wanna tag along?

-I'm here to pick you up.

-What for?

-Didn't Mom call you about lunch at Galatoire's?

-Now let me see. Lunch, no, nothing except the Catholic Daughters callin' to ask if I had a bunch dat gay lit drawers and you know Jer I had the darndest time figurin' out what a bunch dat gay lit drawers could be. I looked all over the house and couldn't find any of my drawers that look as festive as that sounds, I mean I'm the only one who knows what my drawers look like anyway.

-Well, I wonder why you couldn't find any, Ha. I can barely tell the pattern on this Persian rug you got from Pa Pa after he passed on. With all you've got stored up in here there's got to be a bunch of dat gay lit drawers somewhere. You know, the kind that those gays wear down in the French Quarter.

-I sure don't know what kind of drawers those gays wear, but I couldn't imagine what they do with lit bulbs flashing all over their drawers.

-To each their own.

-I don't know about that and what would the Catholic Daughters want with that stuff anyway? I mean I don't remember asking for stuff like that when I volunteered to run their phone bank last year I'll just have to call Rose and see what's behind all that.

I cheerfully wonder if she has any idea of the power of diction and hear her chuckle as she closes and locks the old door. Suddenly I hear a thud and put one of Pa Pa's engraved cigarette cases back on the cracked marble table. The only dustless spot on the marble points me back towards its home. I turn around to witness her second most physical activity. (The first being that three story spiral climb to her apartment) There she is, rolling her short pump body back and forth on the newsprint that's spread across her rug. True to form, she keeps rocking back and forth in her weeble wobblish half role.

-Crymanee, I have more trouble with that darn door. It gets stuck and when I pull it back to shut it, it wants to thump me in the head. Usually in the same spot, right here on my forehead.

-Here, let's get you up off those dusty newspapers.

-No, it's O.K., the doctor showed me how to roll myself up after a fall. This is the time of the month I fall most. I'm good at it though, you just have to know how to fall.

I help her up. She wipes the sweat off her brow with a fake satin hanky tied around her wrist, the same hanky that would soon be wrapped scarf-like around her neck.

-Alright Delzy. Let's go, Mom's waiting.

-O.K. Let's go Jer. Why don't you just have a seat first? Want some coffee? It's Community. You know I used to date the boy who's Daddy ran that company. Why don't you like the name Jerome? You know your great grandfather, Pa Pa, always went by Jerome. You should too, out of respect for him. After all, you weren't baptized 'Jer' were you?

-Actually, uh, uh huh. I don't remember.

-Yeah, neither do I, but I'm sure your mother does, let me sit down. You know it's been so long since I had company, the last time I answered the door for some boy scouts they robbed me blind, took my jigsaw puzzles off the wall and everything they even took the ones I didn't get

to finish yet!

-What, did they hold you up at gunpoint?- I ask sarchastically.

-I went to count change in my bedroom locker. I tell you this neighborhood just isn't what it used to be it just is not. Thank God for the Blessed Virgin because I had just hidden all my money under the mattress. I wouldn't go out at night if I didn't have the Blessed Mother to protect me she's gotten me out of a few jams. Remember when I fell off the pirogue at the '84 World's Fair? Wasn't that something thanks to the Blessed Mother the concussion wasn't too bad. I can't tell you, my last car wreck I just took down the fella's information called him and he sent me a check for the damages. He seemed a nice colored fella so I'm glad he didn't have any insurance, they might have taken away my license. Your Daddy calls me gullible I guess 'cause he was my favorite one to watch grow up, boy he and Edmond used to raise some hell.

Her incessant rambling ons begin to weigh on me, -Delzy, you ready. Next time don't go hunting through your locker with strangers in the house.

-Alrighty then, are we going for Chinese?

-No, just Gay lit drawers, I mean Galatoire's.

As she laughs the little black and white hairs that protrude from her upper lip dance in confused glee because she has just wiped off the beads of sweat that mat them to her face,

-Aw Jer, cut it out.

The old ceiling fan transmits rhythmic shadow that chase each other from wall to wall. It mesmerizes both of us long enough for her to construct what began as a solid thought.

-I almost forgot, I wanted to ask you something about my answer machine whatchamaddoodle. The strangest thing happened to me last night just after dark, I remember it was just after dark because I had just guessed double Jeopardy and that program on Anne Rice's house, the Myrtles Plantation, and other ghostly places was coming on next. I'd been waiting all month to see it, then I went to use the little girl's room and suddenly the answering thingy went off. Did you try to call last night?

-Not that I remember, and I remember most everything about last night. Let me take a look to see.

She trails me to the bedroom rambling *incessantly*, -So I sat right here on the bed next to the phone and just before I went to tinkle I heard you mumbling something about Easter and wanting to see your Grampaw Charlie.

-I must have left that message last year just before Easter break.

Saying this, I look toward her and into her thoughts. I 'sense tears welling up from deep inside like her heart 's got a big break, a feelin' of loneliness so sharp and painful that she could never say.' Then I think of how she's been through this lost brother routine one too many times.

-Poor Charlie, I know he wasn't the best Grandfather to you but he was the only brother I had. At least you've still got both of your mother's parents but your father and I will never see Charlie again. I hope he's up there with Pa Pa now, he used to joke and tease with me. He and your father had so many variations on that skit, you know the one. Charlie would always start it off saying something like, 'Chuck I admit, you and I may be missin' a few planks off our piers.' Then Chuck would answer with his round faced grin, 'That's to be expected, look at our bloodline! Ha! We're all either lawyers, judges, or just plain looney.' Then Charlie would chime in again, 'Yeah but dingy ole Delzy wears a different wig every day. We may be missing the planks, but she doesn't have the pilings!' Of course your Daddy always has to have the last word so he'd finish it off, 'Yeah, a raft floating across the sea with no foundation.' Then all you little ones, thinking it was the funniest thing, would play pranks on me all night, I tell you, those two were like Frick and Frack, Pete and Repete. Boy could those two instigate and call up the fires of hell when they wanted but I just know your Grandpaw's in heaven with Pa Pa I wish you would have known PaPa better.

-Well Delzy, I don't know much about heaven, but I sure hope I didn't get your genes. I don't know if I can rock and roll on my back wth that much style. Maybe that's why those



Catholic Daughters asked for your drawers. We're enough alike that I *could* fit into your jeans, if it wasn't for the difference in our rear ends.

-Oh hush up you, just like your Daddy with your jokes, and don't tell your Mom I didn't recognize her voice.

-No but seriously, I got to know PaPa a little bit, I was about ten when he died. I remember him always handing us a couple of bucks and saying with a smile, 'Little ones, when I was your age children were to be seen and not heard. Not anymore, I can barely hear myself think in today's world.' How was it to live with him your whole life until he died?

-What was that last thing you said after the thing about children I couldn't hear because I was thinking about how glad I am the flood didn't come all the way up the steps to my apartment and how lucky I am to live on the top floor because I don't get robbed as much and . . .

Thinking she's trying to pull a fast one on me I say, -I don't believe what they say about you being schizo.

As this joke slipped off my tongue she instinctively curled up into a ball in the corner of the bed and yelled,

-Don't you believe a damn word of it, you hear! You hear me! The grace of God and the Blessed Mother in blue are my protection from the demons after me.

At that moment my concerned voice on the answering machine faded with a Beep and I envisioned myself on the phone. There I was, with Althea in California, feeling an odd sense of concern. A flash, an inner experience told me all was not well with Grampaw. I found my self calling him, Dad, and Delzy. Without a thought I had acted, but none of them were home.

After the beep, his voice, which I thought I'd never hear again, projected through the room,

-Delzy, I don't feel up to Easter dinner at Chuck's. A book on paranormal experiences came free in the mail today, you can have it if you want. I read through it but can't believe in all that crap, unless the spirits appear as a sphincter bound bloody steak followed by a beloved ice cream bar. HehHeh. Thinking back to vet school, they really missed out by denying me in '46. A medic in the war, I wouldn't have had any problems. All that screwing around we did when I was at Loyola and you so young, still in high school. PaPa worked hard to cover it up. If I'd only seen Pa Pa serving me my own head on that silver platter, 'Take over the legendary Jerome Cartre firm son.' The staunchest of all the staunch drawer lawyers, my own Father. I'll never know if I was more than just that black judge's robe I wore all those years? I could've really lived. Remember how he used to insist, 'Call me Jerome' in front of Huey Long. And all those stories about him tutoring Huey for the bar exam. Huey P., I never could figure out that comic deviant. He sure spent an awful lot of time with Ma Ma though. No questions raised by Pa Pa though. Do you think Chuck ever knew he was ourbeeeeeeeep.

Delzy yelled, -I didn't hear *that* last night. Jer, I didn't hear that message last night. How did you do *that* ? These new fangled do-hickies are beyond me.

-Yeah, something's wrong with the mechanism that plays the taped messages. You should get a digital one, this thing looks about ten years old.

I left her in hysterics and ran to the car because a sudden desire to open the package welled up in me. Ah, just what I thought, she finally sent my journals. I wondered how long Mom had hidden this from me. Suddenly I hoped Beth had read some of the deep thoughts I'd kept in it. Between its cover and the first page there was a folded and crinkled letter. It was written on rice paper. It was divided. The first half was in red ink and the second half in black. I wonder why she

signed it in blue ink.

Dear Jer:

Sorry it took so long to get you your journal. I haven't read it, but I sense confusion vibrating through it man. Check it out man, I've been reading Fritjof Capra's *The Turning Point* and it's helped me realize that we've both got special gifts that help us see deeply into things about the world that the veil of humanity hides. The thing is that since last spring you've been experiencing a perception of reality that's letting anxiety run amuck. I mean, like would you have jumped in the bears' pond at the zoo if you weren't about to move back home? You've got to tie your insights into a coherent world view before you can filter them into your art. I'm worried that going back to that hostile family environment will isolate you. You've gotta work your 'out of the ordinary experiences' into your daily life and society. Whatever you do, don't panic! But you really should come back to Cali where you're appreciated. Man, you should be with me in my teepee. Dude, did you know that half of the beds in mental wards are taken up by diagnosed schizophrenics? Our visions aren't what worries me man. Society's reaction to them's the problem. You gotta pretend like you're 'normal' or your folks'll put you away. Who the hell chooses what's normal anyway? Some psychiatrist in an ivy league tower. Right? You've gotta play their game if you want to get by. Game my ass. Some shit-ass game heh? If you get on the side where the hot-cash is, then you win the game. But what about us on the *other* side. Us, we're the *others*. They won't let us win because we'll topple their precious little stairway. No game. There's still some cultures play the game fair, some aborigines waitin' to tune us in to the world out there. I just got back from the Hoopa's 'White Deer Skin Dance' ceremonies. Every year around the end of July these Native Americans have two weeks of spiritual time. Good stuff, I wanted to study under a Medicine Woman, but you have to be born into the tribe.

Anyway, Capra's research says you might be stuck in what they call a 'double bind' situation. He says that a schizophrenic often invents because he or she is in an unlivable situation and 'can't win.' Maybe you can't live a normal life because you're reacting to cross signals your parents gave you as a kid. Like maybe they didn't practice what they preached. Dude, maybe that's why so many of us just say *fuck it* and follow the Dead.

Anyway, Capra writes about how R.D. Laing found that when schizophrenics trip out it's a response to severe social stress. It's part of a struggle to keep integrity in reaction to 'paradoxical and contradictory pressures.' He says it's part of the new bootstrap theory and systems approach to psychology. All these names might be too much, but come back to the coastal Redwood forest and we'll channel your gift holistically, then we'll travel. We can brush up on our Spanish and do up Latin America. 15 foot tubes in Costa Rica man! Oh yeah, I got some poetry from Lao Tsu's Tao Te Ching that says it better than I can:

#### Meditation Thirty-Two

The Tao is forever undefined.  
 Small though it is in the unformed state, it can be grasped.  
 If kings and lords could harness it,  
 The ten thousand things would naturally obey.  
 Heaven and earth would come together  
 And gentle rain fall.  
 Men would need no more instruction and all things would take their course.

Once the whole is divided, the parts need names.  
 One must know when to stop.  
 Knowing when to stop averts trouble.  
 Tao in the world is like a river flowing home to the sea.

It's like in the chapter three of the Upanishads, 'Small as a grain of rice is that Self...yet greater than all the worlds.' You know your inner you best, don't betray it. Don't let them widdle away at the uncarved block of your fragile youness. Follow your dreams. You can, you must.

besos y besos; kisses kisses,  
Althea

I dizzily fumbled through the pages of my journal until I suddenly found it, the passage,

Fri., April 18, 1994,

Yesterday I blew some cash to fly in from California for Easter break on a whim. I did it because I sensed something was wrong. I called Dad. He picked me up at Mom's house, then we got Delzy. We ate seafood at Sid-Mar's and then went to visit Grampaw. He hadn't answered the phone for two days. We had to get the key from the front desk and found him dead in his condo's bathroom. He lay strewn across the toilet white and cold with his head leaning over the bathtub. Limp. So helpless and pitiful. And that playboy on the floor, open to Miss May I think. Why does Miss May's red lingerie stick in my mind? His last thoughts? I wonder. I wonder if he heard my message on his answering machine. 'Happy Easter's' all I really said, nothing too heavy, not even an 'I love you' or a 'Hope to see you soon.' Mine could have been the last voice he heard, I could have said more. His spirit was pasted all over the walls in his house, 'Charlie, Charlie' everywhere. He lived and died alone, that must be the materialization of Schopenhauer's philosophy about how 'your character is your fate.' I realized that Grampaw's belongings etched out a character I had forgotten about. A huge Gray wolf stared me down from a picture frame. I can't erase the memory of yellowish-green body fluids dripping from his right ear, down the side of the tub and toward the drain. It looked like mucus. And the two Italians in black suits who took him away to the funeral parlor. They even seemed lifeless and mechanical, going through the motions. I bet they had a long black limo, he'll get another one today. After his body was gone, my Dad cleaned up the mess in the tub, he looked at me in despair saying, 'It's the least we can do for our own flesh and blood. I don't want some maid to have to do *this* for us.' I never really believed all Althea's ramblings about the Chi, the vital life energy. But Grampaw's was leaking out before my eyes, down the drain. A Chipeway Indian chief and a Winebago medicine man stood frozen in time on his wall all clad in moccasins and skins. I took them today while we cleaned out his condo. I think I'll give Jacques the Winebago one. The Chipeway stood so proud, a red circle painted on each eye. His name underneath, Okee Makee Quid, cried for lost truths to be discovered. It must have been Grampaw's pride that kept him from getting to know me. But I never even came by to hear his stories, I'd just call and he'd say he was tired or something. I don't even know what these paintings mean, and all the lost stories. I didn't even know how to resolve our conflict, I didn't even know what it was, except that he always told me to cut my hair. There must have been something more, something he never explained. I could sense it in how the scent of his death lingered. I could feel him hovering over us just so he could laugh while his sister cried. I guess that was his last big joke, the way he went on the shitter like that. He was a rare bird. I had forgotten all about his connections to nature. When I was little, he used to talk so much about animals, he had a way with animals. Not so great with people though. I guess it's harder to insult animals, it's not as easy to verbally abuse them. I love him now more than ever. I always told myself I'd listen to his stories. I bet we had a lot in common. He's flying high now. I'll never forget it. Hanging above his desk was that framed painting of a bald eagle soaring over the Grand Canyon. It said underneath, 'Save the Bald Eagle, a symbol of our freedom,' I took that one too. Gotta go get ready for the funeral.

I ran upstairs to tell Delzy I had to walk to the river, alone. This time when I got to the Mississippi, it's roar taunted me. Industry and technology surrounded me. The river here was full

of machinery and boats. I began to drown in loud and unruly commercialism, such a perversion of my view perched up on the secret tower. Down there I couldn't be naked to the world. Suddenly something started strangling me with the hint that I was the secret spawn of incest. That must be why Grampaw wouldn't let me near him, he was scared I'd call his bluff. He sensed I'd think toward him, see into him, and find his sin. Why? How could Delzy be my Grandmaw? Maybe Althea's letter told why she's so eccentric. Where else could I get this power to think towards people and suggest their thoughts for them. The voices in my head came from her genes. Could Dad know? He sure got out, this family would send anybody running. At least he stayed around and helped me out. I'm different. I guess no matter what Althea thinks, no matter how far I roam, I'll never get out of the family, or get the family out of my head. Althea's smallness in Lao Tsu's poem must be that short time it takes the swimming sperm.

Looking into the river currents, I saw them. Ten thousand squirming spermies heading downstream and upstream simultaneously not needing to know which way to go, not needing knowledgw, just going. They squirmed into each other and fused into one. Finally they separated again to follow the flow downstream. Then I saw so many of them just die, belly up and poisoned by the city's sewage being dumped into the river. I suddenly saw humanity killing itself off with its own bodily excrement. I thought of what such an 'excremental suicide' meant and how I could paint a watercolor of it. 'If I could just do it up in paints' I thought as I crept past the bank and was soon waste high in the river's pull.

This attempt to record the splashing image into the boxed frame of my thoughts, this attempt to contain it *All* sent my mind's eye spiraling until I lost the clarity of the vision. It had slipped into the hereafter, dead. I had had no witness to prove its existence and suddenly pissed into the river's abyss. Thinking that Althea probably saw or felt this episode, I backed out of the river's swirling undertoe and lost my glasses to the current's power. This time I knew when to stop, I backed up and sprawled out on the bank, left with only the vague shadow of life's meaning, meaning that was just so fleetingly vivid.

My sparks of genius had always flickered with momentary brightness only to lapse and hide away again behind reason's veil. For the first time in my life I saw the world for what it was, a squirmy sperm cell in this green dragon of a universe are. I could finally question my cultural foundation in the divided separateness of all things. The basic tenants that root the mind in what most call 'normal experienc' became trivial. I had lost sight of the thin veil that allowed me to separate myself from the loonies, the water, or and the world itself. I became shrouded in silence.

## 10

"You can't just do that to us," said the oldest boy.

"Yeah, leaving us out in the cold like that," said another, plotting some rebellious scheme, "What happened to Jer, did he like go deaf or something?"

Finn was getting cranky and frustrated because he saw they weren't getting the big picture, "Well, believe whatever you think. Just get the hell out with that attitude. I never asked you to come throw cigarette butts and start fires all over the damn place. I bet you didn't know this little island was the peak of a huge mountain 12,000 years ago! That damn Puget Sound out there is just orphaned glacial carvings. In other words, this granite doesn't soak up much water and here you are trying to burn us all to hell."

Finn unleashed these words on the night with exposed vengeance partly because he was thinking of how could never forgive Jimmy and Rachel's mothers for hiding them from him. His only chance to be with his Grandkids was in this little shack next to their summer camp. They were the only two kids who stayed for both camp sessions. He made sure to check his P.O. Box in San Francisco between growing seasons because it felt good to read the mail they sent. He especially loved Rachel's awkwardly written letters. When Jimmy mailed him a letter he would always pull her section out first. He often wondered if they visited him because they liked his stories or just because he was off limits, a taboo.

It didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was trying to alleviate the weight of the noose-like albatross that his daughters had slipped around his neck forty years earlier.

The boys rustled around the dark cabin looking for their polar fleeces, Gore-Tex jackets, and pocket lights in the shadows of the candle's flicker. As they hunted Finn grabbed Jimmy's thin arm and said, "If my daughters ever find out I was here with you kids she'd yank you both straight out of camp. Years ago I tracked them down and they forbade me to ever see you. "

"I know, this *is* the third camp they've sent us to," Jimmy responded on his way out the door. Finn knew his time was up for the day, "Oh, and Jimmy tell her to bring paper and a pencil next time so's she can write down all the words she doesn't know." He hoped Jimmy heard him and prayed he'd still be there when they returned the next day with their buddies trailing behind to see 'the old freak.' Finn glorified the mythical day when Jimmy and Rachel would be rid of "those two hags" (as he liked to call his daughters.) The day when they'd be free to create a world of their own and run amuck with their Gramps to see all the fabled places of yore his words took them to. He thought about how he would have had to sacrifice the freedom of travel just to make ends meet for his two daughters. Decades ago he had talked himself into believing they'd be better off without him. He never forgot the day he sent that anonymous letter about the twins to the adoption agency, but had no idea that his "Grandkids" themselves were both adopted. He also failed to realize that his kids went by names not found on their birth certificates. Those aliases were Camile and Delzy. It was Rachel's idea, she only used these nicknames during the school terms.

Just then an Olympic Salamander darted across the cabin floor, and pulled Finn out of his daydream, but it failed to outsquirm old Finn. He grabbed it and threw it in the pot to season the stew that the kids had stolen from the camp cook. The stew was their payment for his tales. The salamander's colors began to change as it boiled. Although he couldn't put his finger on the poet, he suddenly realized what it means for the child to be father of the man.

Finn reached up for the ladle that hung above the pot. He tapped it with his nub, being still awkward at having only four digits on his right hand.

He thought aloud, "What a pleasant treat awkwardness is. Once lost,

it's never regained. Good thing there's always a new awkwardness waiting to be found."

As he thought toward the suggestive power of desiring such childish awkwardness, the ladel fell, cracked him in the skull, and knocked off his eye patch. He reached for his hand-carved wooden cane only to be mocked by the children's giggles and the sound of little feet pitter patter on the Doug Fur needles.

"Only Mason's Children would pull that," he thought as he yelled, "Scram then why don't you, ya little bastards." He stroked the worn down zen buddhist carved into the handle of his great-grandfather's cane. He heard distant high-pitched laughs and thought about how he had been duped. Try as he might, he just could not keep a straight face. He looked out the window to see Rachel and Jimmy, the last two to run back to 'Camp Westward Ho,' arm in arm. He was alone.

As they ran hand in hand, he thought, "Those kids 'have worn me past the endurance of a block.'" The only friends he had until tomorrow evening were his portable radio/tape player, his stew, and the fresh lump he blamed on the kids for having willed him to receive it. He didn't want to understand why his daughters forbade his Grandchildren from seeing him, he only wanted to know if he had righted his ancient wrong yet. He had left the twins in need, but society had no place for him. His life was to follow the harvest seasons. Apples, soybeans, oranges, cotton, he'd picked it all. Years ago he thought his daughters would hate him if he dragged them from orchard to farm just to make ends meet, he had nothing to offer them. Now he just wanted enough time to make amends.

Suddenly he pulled out 'Red' and spoke to his reflection that was split by the engraved red monogram, "I could always head down to Slim's Lower Tavern and listen to some more of those stories that DJ from New Orleans likes to tell. Man that kid's a gold mine of stories once you get him going. Oh, and I need to bring him back his manuscript. With all of my changes and additions he'll probably get pissed off. *Aw, Fuck it* if he does! It ain't right till it's sung to a witness anyway. And I never did finish telling him that dirty story I started last night about those Chilean girls. He'll be my witness tonight, el testigo de mío.

Words After:

Mason's Children

Mason died on Monday  
We bricked him in the wall  
All his children grew and grew  
They never grew so tall before  
They may never grow so tall again

We dug him up on Tuesday  
He hardly aged a day  
Taught us all we ever knew  
We never knew so much before  
We may never know so much again

Mason was a mighty man  
A mighty man was he  
All he said: when I'm dead and gone  
Don't you weep for me

The wall collapsed on Wednesday  
We chalked it up to fate  
All his children ran and hid  
We never hid so well before  
Swore we'd never show our face again

Thursday came and Friday  
With fires tall and bright  
Mason's children cooked the stew  
and cleaned up when the feast was through  
Swore we'd never had such times before

Take me to the Reaper Man  
to pay back what was loaned  
if he's in some other land  
write it off as stoned



Mason was a mighty man  
A mighty man was he  
All he said: When I'm dead and gone  
don't you weep for me

Words by Robert Hunter, poet and lyricist  
Music by Jerry Garcia, guitarist  
(Song rarely played live by the Grateful Dead and never recorded in the studio. Tapes of live shows containing this and other songs are being traded on the internet as you read this )

Beltane: (also beltine) 1) The first day of May in the Scottish calendar.  
2) The MayDay festival once widely celebrated in Celtic lands with bonfires on the hills, dancing, and various rites.

Beltian: [Big Belt and Little Belt Mountains, Montana + E *-ian* ] Of or relating to a division of Proterozoic geologic era in No. America -- see GEOLOGIC TIME table