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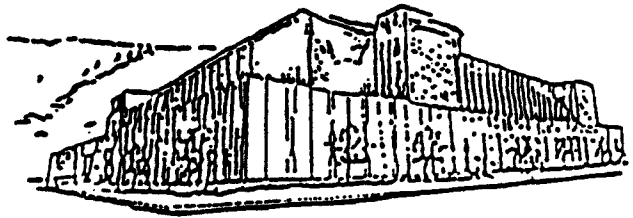
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The Myth of the West

A Collection

by

Matthew Skinner

B.A. Santa Clara University, 1990

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

The University of Montana

2000

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The Myth of the West

"For all its troubles and dangers, and despite the fact
that
it must pass away, the frontier had been a better place."
William Cronon

I've had just about all the 'fishing is life, life is fishing' stories I can take. They make me nauseous—that same nausea one experiences returning to the wharf after a long time away: the smell of raw fish in mass quantities, fresh fish guts, rotting piles of decaying fish putrescence all smashing like a forearm of stink across the bridge of your nose.

Most people around here fish, and by that I specifically mean flyfish. Mention the rod and reel and you won't even be allowed to read one of those fish stories, much less kibitz about its poignancy over a yellow beer. It's cool, man. Waders and felt-bottom boots, \$900 Winston rods, a weather-beaten cap, vests with stuff on 'em. The key, though, really, is where you fish: "Okay, so I'm up at one of my favorite spots, you know, right around this craggy bend on one of the rivers right out of town, so close you can smell it!, but I don't know I'm the

only one ever there, and there's this eddy you see, and it's like I'm out of my body man, like the line snaking out is my arm, and God, God man I swear leads the Rainbow to my #8 nymph."

I ran into a buddy of mine downtown, inquired as to where he'd been. He pulled out a sleeve of Kodak moments he was carrying around in his work bag—shots of him knee-deep in slow moving water holding some damn fine fish. He wouldn't even tell me what *State* the river was in. I hadn't realized fishers were worse than skiers and their powder stashes. "I'm not a fisher," my friend said. "I'm a catcher." Apparently a long list of secret holes, which may be mentioned but never with any actual specific detail, is the proof of how much a fisher you really are . . . kind of like how grocery clerks prove they actually have Ph.D.'s by listing off all the shit they've read.

But these fishers, I've come to find, are part of a larger network—not exactly the cults perceived to pervade Montana by the rest of the nation, but a collection of local little sinister bands—like scaled down cults, most of them without guns.

Missoula is cliqued out. I have several groups of friends here. They don't know each other, and they talk smack about each other. I've tried to mix them at parties,

and it doesn't work. Everyone remarks on the diversity in the valley, in the next breath slamming some poser jackass from across the road. The perspective gleaned from this lays over me like a warm quilt, each square with the word 'cynicism' stitched in a different tongue, a tenet guaranteed in our nation's Constitution: at least I know that wherever I go in Missoula, judgment will be swift.

Among the cult groups more puzzling to me is an otherwise eclectic band who gather up Pattee Canyon or out Blue Mountain whenever the valley isn't snowbound. Frisbee football took on the ridiculously arrogant name of 'Ultimate', but frisbee golf got dubbed Folf. And I just learned that they don't care whether the valley is snowbound or not—reports rushing in that they have literally stomped the cross-country trails up Pattee Canyon out of existence. Your standard Folfers: Texas or hiking boots, baggy faded shorts with big pockets, a ratty t-shirt from a String Cheese Incident concert at the University Ballroom, wrap shades, maybe an old style sky-blue golf hat with white pinstripes, maybe long hair pulled back into a ratty pony-tail. Some, the pockets not being baggy enough, carry small hip-packs so they can bring the big pipe. The discs they throw are emblazoned with Mantas, Sharks, Stingrays. Don't ask me why they have fish on them, instead

of, say, birds. The bigger the fish, the bigger the disc. Sharks are used for drives, minnows for putts. The discs are the denominator for this crowd: i.e., carrying a 175 Discraft, an Ultimate disc, is strictly rookie league. These 'gapers' are classed way below even those who bring a single official Folf disc, which are smaller, heavier, harder, and certainly useless for throwing and catching. Folf discs are little missiles intended to hone in on and slam into three foot steel towers with steel hoods or baskets, so when you hit them they go 'Gong'. Anyone who owns more than one disc gets pissed when I scoff at the claim that Folf is actually a sport. I consider a raised heart rate intrinsic to anything defined as a sport, whether from pressure or exertion. I don't consider a raised heart rate from three pulls of Oregon kind through a two foot Graphix valid. All Folfers will eventually be seen at Charlie B's.

It was actually at Charlie B's that I experienced my most recent crash and burn with a Missoula girl who wouldn't have me. I unknowingly doomed myself with her, innocuously asking, not if she folfed, but if she skied or boarded, looking only for some common ground, or really ground where I could shine. "I snowboard," she said. Moments after, she mentioned how she had a longtime crush

on a good friend of mine. She then explained to me that she CANNOT STAND how on every date she's been on in this town the third question out of the guy's mouth is about skiing. "It's like a cult," she said, "a little IN club. Everyone just expects that you do something on snow, and you better had to fit in." "I'm from Atlanta," she continued. "I'm learning to snowboard—I broke my arm the first day I went last year. I've started telling people NO! I don't do anything in the winter. And I've been enjoying it." Later, I figured out she belonged to the cult of intellectual arrogance, which I have come to realize permeates a good number of the other groups in town, especially the cult of waiters and waitresses.

But in this land of the more popular in-clubs, very few people, namely gear stores and corresponding big business and advertising, actually hate skiing. In fact, whereas the intellectually arrogant have very little in the way of a 'market draw,' these Children of the Snow are prime targets. And due to advertisers' fear of leaving any snow market inadvertently 'out,' combined with 40 new winter magazines with names like 'Freeze' and 'Core,' skiers and snowboarders can now be grouped into one fancy new overall category—winter Riders.

Within the Riders, Skiers themselves can then be divided into telemarkers and alpiners. Alpiners are the most competitive, telemarkers are the most exclusive, and snowboarders are the most stand-offish. Alpiners respect telemarkers for their effort and skill, but rip on the snowboarders, who screw up the bumps and the tree lines and the steeps, and, being less maneuverable, have a tendency to run over people. Telemarkers, 99 percent of whom were alpiners at one time, look upon those with their heels still locked down with disdain, as poor folk missing the real truth and beauty of the true spirit of the true winter-free your heel, free your mind, man. Snowboarders don't give a shit, so long as you snowboard. Snowboarder: "Bro, did you see the way I ripped that face, like that half-ollie tuna-canopener I threw was the bomb!" Telemarker: "You're not putting any weight on your back foot, you're just faking it. You're making alpine turns. Whatever. Got any gear for sale?" Alpiners: "It's all about the speed man, or the steeps where only we can rip, where everything blends together in those perfect arcs. Now get out of my line." The snowboarders dress like skateboarders, ten years behind California, nothing that's actually waterproof. Skiers can be spotted by the perennial zip turtleneck and either a Conti or Descente

woven hat with a small beanie flipping from the top. The coolest telemarkers wear leather boots—although some are finally giving in and buying those fancy plastic boots, and those fancy kneepads at Ace with the plastic tops, because they actually work. Some of the older alpiners wear hideous matching jackets from a local ski shop with eagles emblazoned on the back, sporting the inscription 'Catch Us If You Can'. Telemarkers meet early at Bernice's and generally ride the less demanding Discovery basin. Alpiners meet at the Sevenar, drive way too fast up Snowbowl road, and glare at anyone traversing the moguls on Angel Face. Boarders hitchhike from the Sevenar, and when a car doesn't stop for them they scream "SKIER!" with a raised fist. I tell you, it's all love. The Riders, as others, do tend to come together at local watering holes, although it's Charlie's for the Alpiners and Boarders, more at home with the pictures of homeless dead guys covering the walls, and the telemarkers gather at the Old Post, smoke-free.

At some point I managed to wander out the backdoor of Charlie's, and I discovered that 53 bars are conveniently located in a six-square block radius. "Maybe," I thought, "this place comes without tags, without ribbons boxes or bags. Maybe this community has something more. Perhaps it

comes through Jack Daniels, until your face down on the floor."

One night I had drinks at the Union Hall. I was sitting with an old family friend, a Master's candidate in History, hanging with the Thursday night post-seminar crowd. Another group sat at a large round table near the t.v. When I inquired, Mary just waived her hand in their direction, her green polyester sleeve tugging short: "Oh, those are the writers. They're cocky," she said, sipping her bourbon, "and snotty." I said "Oh". The most pervasive cult in this town, I found, the one that meets in the dark recesses of the Union Hall on Thursday nights for drinkin', Sunday nights for readin', the one everyone just has to roll their eyes at in the wonder of its glory, is the writers.

Everyone in Missoula is a writer of sorts, everyone has that token publication in Guns & Ammo, Powder, Fishing, maybe even on the Internet (which by the way pays better and quicker, and the grammar doesn't even have to be all that great, and words like 'dude' are allowed).

Later that Fall, sitting again in the Union Hall, having a bourbon at the round table after Fiction workshop, one of my newly met colleagues turned to me. "You haven't suffered enough to be a great writer," she said.

In last year's welcome letter to incoming MFA's in the university's creative writing program, if I hadn't mentioned it, one of the community's prize eggs, ranked right below the school's football team, the greeting read that all writers must flyfish. That immediately made me think I must be missing something about flyfishing. Hell, my catcher-friend practically dedicates his life to the little club. There is a nice rhythm to it. The gurgle and flow of the water, the serenity of the surroundings must carry one deep into our own natural state of being with the earth. But, as opposed to hiking, I find it very difficult to ponder the missing scene or the deletion/inclusion of that comma while ceaselessly tormenting fish. Salman Rushdie sees fishing as a battle of wits, that the thoughts of the fisher pass down rods and lines, and are 'divined by the funny creatures.' How on gods' green earth, considering that writers generally tend to focus on tension, trauma, shock, and other glories of living to move their stories, could a writer ever catch a fish? And what about the fish? Hanging with some buddies, trying to wriggle in there and eject my little cloud over that egg cluster so some more little crooked-back salmon can foist themselves on the world and, wham, some guy named Rinella has hooked me through the lip for the second damn time.

So I wonder, What is it about writing and fishing that necessarily go together? To start I ask myself, 'Where are most of the writers in Missoula from?' All over, not here, generally not the Northwest. All right then, maybe the line is just a way of saying 'You came here to write, but don't miss everything that surrounds you out there.

Experience the glory of nature, be energized by it and infuse it into your work.' So the line then may actually be a cliché. 'Yeah, I'm going up to Montana, live in the mountains with the bears and the chipmunks and fishes, get out into the 'Golden Country', where the people are still real as the day is long.' My old neighbor on Long Island tagged it the 'Golden Country'. Do you think that this is what he envisioned, a place with a cliqued out society and a hammered ecology, or is this simply the Myth of the West?

When I say Myth of the West I think it could mean two things: One, I am considering the possibility that people envision life out here as it was a hundred years ago, with cowboys and rangeland and wild country in all directions, maybe even some 'redskins,' bands of vigilantes and the occasional Sunday hangin'. I have a colleague who said of Missoula, and I quote, "I thought it would be more rustic than it is." Since when, if ever, has a town of 50,000 people been considered rustic? And rustic nowadays seems

to apply more to those reconstructed downtowns in Breckenridge and Cody and Scottsdsale with Gold Pan Saloon facades covering modern buildings, where they sometimes even have high-falootin' wildwest shows right there on Main Street. Hell, Charlie's might be the prime example of modern western authentic—not only lacking any kind of a façade, but any kind of sign whatsoever.

Two, more likely, perhaps folks envision the West as in "A River Runs Through It", with pristine rivers and unclimbed mountains (set in Montana, filmed in Wyoming). But I take a hard look around the valley, and I see three of five rivers literally dead from mining and mills, the Blackfoot one of five rivers to be named twice in the last fifteen years as 'Most Fucked Up In the Country' by American Rivers; I choke on sulphur from the paper mill on crystal clear spring mornings; I see the forest hacked up into a patchwork of clearcuts, which, by the way, show themselves beautifully with the first snowfall; I don't see any Alp-style peaks hanging over town. I wonder if any of those writers, or anyone moving here for that matter, envision it as such when making the decision.

Either way, I guess I have a problem with this whole 'Myth of the West' thing. I am from this part of the country, and I never heard about any myth. I am one

generation off a ranch in southern Oregon: ranches, cowboys were and are real, maybe not as pervasive as a hundred years ago, but still around. Pristine rivers and unclimbed mountains? Perhaps not entirely pristine or unclimbed, but still wild Nature, still solitary and un-despoiled enough to give you an enveloping sense of solitude and to experience the quickening of living. So there seems to be something real behind this Myth, it's not just a simulation of an original that does not exist. But what, then? What "Reality"? "Nature"?

A battle is actually raging among eco-philosophers, cleverly disguised by an ongoing war devoted to figuring out who really is the smartest, as to what exactly this 'Nature' thing is. The current general consensus says that Nature is a human created concept, and that in creating it as such we have unfortunately placed ourselves outside of it: The idea of Human vs. Nature, that we treat Nature as Other, defining ourselves since the Dark Ages in this opposite, alienates us from the realization that we are an intrinsic part of an interdependent earth . . . We put ourselves outside the system that allows our existence, with little success, as we are realizing in the current episteme.

Nature then— a construct, a fairy tale, dare I say, a myth? The Myth of Nature . . . could then this be something akin to the Myth of the West? Is this Myth of the West merely a veil as well, a construct, a poorly tabbed moniker that has kept us Other in face of the holistic Whole? Are all those easterners out there fishing (not necessarily catching) really part of an interdependent pan-system? Do we necessarily have to treat them as Other in order to define ourselves? Or must we necessarily look at and to the whole to find a place in it?

The question then: Can we go on treating other groups as Other and survive? Or do we need each other to survive in the 'Last Best Place'-- diversity, land, and all? Are Folfers, Skiers, Boarders, and even Bowlers really not opposites, but comembers codependent on each other for their very existence? Do fishers, and perhaps even writers, really then have a tap into the energies of this whole?

If, then, as a whole this is true, ain't Fishin' Life?

ACME

I quickly turn from the 300-pound lummoX who has just slapped me upside the head and, with animated speed, write the memo, stuff the envelope, lick the stamp and pass off the letter to postman zinging by on his extra-tall scooter. Before anyone can react, the brown clad UPS man, frighteningly similar looking to the postman, steps inside the door of the bar, passes me his clipboard, I sign, he hands me the brown box. I unpack the swing-arm extension thumper with the 20-oz boxing glove option, aim, and blow the lummoX through the back wall of the bar.

Sitting naked on a warm rock next to the hot springs, our toes dangling in the scorching water, the pale Smith co-ed says, "You're not going to try to kiss me are you?" Filling out the order form in a flash, I hear the whine of the postman's scooter, fwip-fwip-fwip, the manilla envelope drops from the helicopter squarely into my hands. I tear it open, pull out copies of our SAT scores, tell her to "eat shit," grab my clothes and wander up to talk to her best friend.

Standing at the mercy of the Hun (a 5' 2" guy in a Giants jersey, Lawrence Taylor) at the salvage yard, I pull

out my electronic pocket organizer, e-mail getgearnow@acme.wb, play coy until the brown-clad savior knocks on the door, open the bread-size package and SPROING, out leaps a mallet the size of a school bus, apparently weightless.

"Wrecking yard? I'll show you wrecking yard!" I yell, and proceed to bounce around the lot, flattening cars, trucks, '72 AMC Pacers, '81 Chrysler K Cars and husks of a variety of Chevy Econoline vans.

"Stop!" Lawrence Taylor yells. "I'll rebuild that Trooper door for you, and give you 10 percent, as promised. Oh, by the way, thanks for taking care of those cars for me; saved us the crushing costs. You'll be shaving with them in no time."

Fidgeting from foot-to-foot at customs in Nogales with the contents of my truck spread out over a series of tables, the good cop is asking me about the engine of my '84 Ford 150. The bad cop is tearing open a couple of boxes that had been packed by a friend.

"Do you mind if I make a call?" I ask the good cop. "I'm going to be late getting into Phoenix."

"Sure, pay phone's over there," he answers.

Dialing 1-800-555-ACME I time the walk back perfectly as the rope ladder snakes

out of the Harrier jump-jet, the wings slowly rotating forward, engaging thrust, whisking me up and away from the stunned customs agent, me smiling and waving on my way to Brazil, a country that coincidentally has no extradition treaty with the U.S.

Sitting naked on a warm rock next to the hot springs, our toes dangling in the scorching water, the skinny hippie-boy pulls out his SAT scores, of all things, and tells me to "Eat Shit." Filling out the order form in a flash, I hear the whine of the postman's scooter, fwip-fwip-fwip, the brown box drops from the helicopter squarely into my hands. I tear it open, pull out a digital camera showing his last extraordinarily brief sexual encounter, say "PLEASE," grab my clothes and wander up to talk to his best friend.

"Griffey, you suck!"

"Steal home you wuss!"

"What are you waiting for, your mama!"

"Beer man, get your ass back over here!" screams the unshaven, unshowered, 450-lb, or 122-lb, scruffy-faced lout in the Rockies windbreaker. And it is only the second inning--of an exhibition game. Whipping out my flip-top credit card-sized cell phone, I dial the home team and feel a cool breeze as a shadow passes over section 124 at Osprey

Field. The crane arm reaches down and seizes the ruffian by the scruff like a mother lion, dumping him out in the bleacher seats with the rest of the armchair Olympians. The bulk of section 124 proceeds to buy me one cool beverage after another, and later, I have the crane drop me at home.

Watching the light turn red a hundred yards in front of me, I curse volumes and ease my 1957 Buick Roadmaster into the standing queue at Malfunction Junction. Without hesitation I use my Star Trek style communicator to get ahold of the the aerospace division, the bike messenger pulls up along side and drops the brown box through the window, I pull out the toaster-size Time Machine. Hurtling back to a dimension beyond sight and sound, Rod Serling narrates as I come face to face with the jackasses who laid out Missoula, I do some minor headslapping, lo and behold I'm back in the Roadmaster cruising through a town where the streets all run in the same direction, not a casino in sight. There is great rejoicing.

In the end, I suppose, all we have is our wit.

But wouldn't it be nice.

Elegy

It is 86 miles from Boise, west across the border into southern Oregon, to Jordan Valley. The area was settled by two men—one was our great-great grandfather Benito Eiguren, whom the toll road was named after, and the other was Silas Jordan, killed by the Paiute in 1878. The valley still survives by its ranches.

Driving into town, it looks the same as it has since I can remember, the newest thing a five-year-old Basque restaurant on my left, across from the broken down pelota court. I turn right at the intersection, and drive past the bar and the market, the gas station, about a mile down to the ranch house. The sheriff is parked in our driveway, and as I pull in he leaves his hiding place and heads west, continuing down highway 95.

No one has lived in the old house for years, a two-story box with a barn style roof, surrounded by an ancient black wire fence and a moat of green lawn. My father and uncles are in the process of remodeling, a little at a time. Two summers ago, we all came over to paint it, and it still shines clean and white. I took a picture of my

dad and his four brothers out front of the house, spotted with paint. The black and white gives it an illusion of timelessness.

Inside, the house haunts me in the fading light, from when we used to race through it, exploring the dark corners and closets, playing hide-and-seek. It doesn't smell musty, but of old, sweet wood, and brings to me the image of my great-grandmother—she's wearing a green smock, smiling through a face more wrinkled than as a child I could imagine, watching from the door of the kitchen. I climb up to the second floor in the dark, remembering that there isn't any power. I feel my way to the door that leads to the back deck, and walk out into the last of the evening. It is warm, the air dry, carrying hints of sage and juniper bush. I sit on the railing and watch the stars come out, looking back over the dark shapes of the barn and corrals.

Eventually, I arrange my sleeping bag on the deck, almost afraid to stay inside.

The morning comes all at once, light and heat at the same time. I can see the house now: a hundred-year-old wooden frame, with bare rooms half redone, sheetrock on the walls, big windows looking out to the mountain across the way. I putter around the kitchen, sticking my head in the

old salt locker, the hanging racks still intact for the slabs of meat my forbears would bring home from the hunt. Out in the backyard, I climb up onto the old buckshaw. I rock on the springs in the seat, and finger the old spoke wheels. The picture hanging next to the one of my dad and uncles is of my brother Tom and me, sitting in the back of this old wagon, barely five and six. The wagon used to be the centerpiece of fierce Indian wars with our cousins in the front field. The wars ended with an expedition out to the creek, or up the small mountain on the far side of the road. The best trip to Jordan came every May, when most of the family, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and kids, drove over for the rodeo. One aunt would completely drown our pancakes in syrup at the town breakfast, and Tom and I would grind the whole plate into a gooey paste, and then sneak them into the garbage. At the rodeo grounds we would hunt all day long under the bleachers for cans people had dropped, to turn in for their five-cent deposit. We would take our booty down to the town market, where mean old Mrs. Telleria would accost us, without fail: "You Eiguren boys, do your parents know you're down here?"

Out on the old wagon, the sun shines bright and hot, parching, and I wish for some of my great-grandmother's lemonade. My brother was killed, at sea, down near the

krill beds off the Antarctic coast, thrown against the bulkhead when his ship rammed another. My first reaction was why not bury him at sea, but I wasn't the one to take the call. My father reached me up in Montana. I threw a few things into my car, and started on the road over Lolo and down the Lochsa. I could not cry, choking, finally having to pull over to throw up. I slept along the Lochsa that night, guarding a few moments alone, before I would be submerged in the rest of my family's grief.

Jumping down from the wagon, I head out back towards the barn, the dirt feather dry and kicking up. I can hear the horses inside, and know my uncle will be back soon. He promises to build a barn out near his place every year. Inside are Blue and Musker, and Clio, my favorite. The rest must be out in the pastures near the cabins. I walk to Clio, and remind her who I am. I take my time saddling her. She seems eager to come out, and doesn't fight me. I walk her back to the house, tie on a sleeping pad and bag, stash some food and water, and climb up. We ride out the back, past the barn again, south away from the road and town.

Waking with the cool surge of the Lochsa in my ears, I threaded my way down the Salmon and the Payette to Boise.

Tom had taken me rafting on the Cabarton run of the Payette for my birthday the year before. At home, my usually stolid parents had little to say. We were told the day after I arrived that it would be at least a week before Tom's body arrived. Friends called, asking me to come up to the corner bar, ostensibly to console me, to hear that it was all okay, but I could not.

I stayed at the house, mostly in the basement. Restless, doing laps around the quiet rooms, opening and closing closets. Old toys, old trophies, our walkie-talkies. Papers from school in the store room, drawings, photos from soccer and ski teams. I went up to the livingroom, muffled sounds from the tv audible down the hall through my parents' cracked door. The bookshelves held our diplomas from Boise High, our degrees from Washington and Oregon, a picture of us in matching uniforms the year we ski instructed in Colorado. It was after that season that Tom returned to Boise to enroll in the university's Forestry program. Our father had chided him once, for doing so much green work in Oregon during his undergrad years, just offhand teasing 'What about Idaho's trees?' The remark stuck with him, and so Tom had gone home. I moved to Europe to ski awhile longer.

"John," my father's voice surprised me. Mom stood

next to him in an old terry robe. He had the tea tray in his hands, and we sat on the couches.

"We'd like you to meet the body at the airport," my mother said.

"Okay," I said. "What do I need to do?"

"Just meet the body, 'take possession' they said. A hearse will be there, you can escort it to the morticians. From there they will take the body to St. Johns."

"We're having the funeral in the Cathedral," I said.

"Yes. And Tom will be buried up at Morris Hill, with the family."

"We considered other possibilities." she said. "But in the end we decided that was the best way. We didn't ask you I realize."

"I still think he should have been buried at sea," I said, but I didn't know if I believed it. We used to promise each other we'd spread each other's ashes high in the mountains.

"We thought of that, but couldn't bear the idea."

"Yes, but I would prefer--he would prefer that to sticking his body in a hole in the middle of the city. Why don't we find a place to put him out at the ranch," I said. "Under a tree."

"No, son," dad said. "Your grandparents wouldn't like

it. And we think it's best to put him up with family."

"That doesn't serve him at all."

"Tom belonged to your grandparents, and to us, in the same way he belonged to you," mom answered. But I didn't agree. He belonged to me more than to any of them.

"The Basque community will be there, your friends will be there, the family."

"Well, it doesn't seem enough." I got up to leave, I felt badly.

I had asked to be allowed to gather his things, but for two days I had not. My brother lived in an old Victorian on Hays Street, on the edge of the North End, where it starts to creep into downtown. The house is big and spacious, with a high peaked roof. Sometimes on warm summer evenings Tom and I would sit alone out on the porch, on a ratty couch covered by an old and faded indian blanket. We'd talk mostly about mountains, or people.

I stayed over only one time. Tom and I and two others had come back late from a winter trip in the backcountry. Exhausted, we slept on the livingroom floor in front of a cold fireplace. The trip, supposed only to be a simple two day in-and-out, had turned into a trial. Because of the snowpack, the four hour hike into the yurt had taken twice as long. Tom had been having a tough time early on. I

dropped back before the biggest climb to make him eat and to help him up the hill. By mid-way we were taking only five or ten steps at a time. I was carrying his skis strapped to my pack, mine in my hands. The snow was shin deep, and the sun dropped behind a ridge. The pair in front of us chose a switchback route up the steepest part of the face. Foolishly, we broke from their trail, and started up an easier looking moraine to the right. By the time we crested the hill it was nearly dark. Hyndman Peak glowed red across the valley. We looked where the tracks should have met at the top, but there was nothing. The wind had been blowing, and we debated as to whether the tracks had been filled in, or if the others had turned off before the crest. It was about dark. We hid our packs in a small clump of trees and hiked up to the true peak. We hoped to see the glow of a fire through tent walls, or head lamps out searching for us. It was beautiful. We weren't cold despite the wind, and the sky was full of stars we couldn't see from the city. We found our way back to the packs, shining our brightest lights in hopes of being seen. We put our skis back on and made a lap of the peak and closest ridge. I mentioned the option of returning to the cars. Tom refused to consider it. A loud 'EIGUREN!' came down at us from above.

"Fucking Tom and John," our friend Andrew said.

"Standard."

I waited in the hangar, because they wouldn't let me out on the tarmac. There was a small cargo plane, but little else in the expanse of the place. It was cool in there, cooler than it looked out on the runways, where the heat vibrated off in thick waves. It smelled of jet fuel, acrid. One man in a suit waited with me, and the driver of the hearse. Several others unloaded the crate. At length, they wheeled a silver box up. I stared only for a moment before going for the clasps. The man in the suit put a hand on mine.

"We can't open the box, sir. It's sealed and must be opened at the mortician's."

"I thought I was here to identify the body," I lied.

"No sir, only to take possession. You can verify the body at the mortician's." I signed the form. They watched us walk away, myself and the driver, pushing the silver box. Fighting back the grotesqueness, the physicality of that box, I let the man work it into the back of the hearse.

I went in at the mortician's—I had to see. I waited in the nauseating outer room, where the caskets were lined

up like boats in a showroom, while they broke the seal. Finally a man came for me. I saw the marble face of my brother lying in the silver box.

That night, with the reality of my brother's corpse, I was able to face our friends, to tell them, that, yes, Tom was dead, and that they were important to us.

The cathedral filled to capacity, and it took a long time for the people to file past the open casket. A near mob gathered at the cemetery. Sitting in the first line of chairs, hot in a black wool suit, I could only see the faces of the first few, but could feel the numbers. I lingered after, shaking hands with many people whom I scarcely recognized, but the feeling was warm, and I felt that I had known them.

The reception was held at the Basque Center downtown, and all of the matriarchs and patriarchs of the Basque community were there: the ancient ladies who play cards in the corner of the kitchen at holidays, the men who watch sports in the living room and drink bourbon. Tom and I used to hide under the kitchen table, a fort amidst giants at the holiday gatherings. We would make fun of the old lady shoes, and the half- high white stockings, trying to keep silent, pretending perhaps that they didn't know we were there. We could always tell our great-grandmother's

shoes, but recognized her especially by her voice. She and the other ladies would trade stories of times back in Guipuzcoa, of their voyage across, of the things that had gone on settling in the American West. Grandma's voice mesmerized us, her accent thick, coming out a smear of sounds. Before long, we would hear our father calling, time to go home, without realizing our legs had gone numb.

My uncles stood all around me. They were telling my grandfather about things they used to do at the ranch when he wasn't around, laughing, but I'm not so sure my grandfather was amused. The youngest was talking about learning to drive in the old red truck, three-on-the-tree, on the roads back by the cabins. Tom and I both learned to drive in that truck. The last time we were out there together we had climbed a small nearby peak and slept out. We didn't really sleep though, as we hadn't seen each other in awhile. We could still smell the heat and sage long into the night. Later, when it was cool, we sat wrapped silent in our bags, staring out into the countryside slowly coming to life under a rising moon.

"Can you feel them?" Tom asked me.

"No. Who?" I said, looking back and and around into the blackness.

"Just stay quiet. Coyotes," he said. "Out there

beyond the rim of the fire. Watching." And after a time I thought I did, the green eyes, long before a wailful howl broke the night. We had a game we played when camping with friends, a kind of hide-and-seek in the forest at night. We stalked each other through the trees and hills in bands of two or three. The idea most times was to see how long you could shadow someone without being seen or heard. At first, they always split us up. One night sitting around the base fire a friend remarked that he hadn't seen Tom in awhile, and asked if I knew where he was. I said I figured, and turned around, clicking my flashlight onto a spot about fifteen yards away in the trees, directly onto Tom's face. He laughed and slipped back into the forest.

In pairs and threes our friends came by, cousins I hadn't seen in years, friends of the family from Jordan, crazy old Gus, and the Paiute John Grey. The elders took a moment to pass by, helped on the arms of grandchildren, and I was surprised when they shook my hand specially. I hadn't realized they would remember me.

The *txistu* players gathered in the far corner of the hall, and a couple of people my parents age picked up small drums. The shrill flutes cut the air first, solemn, and were then joined by the drums, a slow, deep rhythm. Two lines of dancers, four to a side, led by one in front came

out of the far door, moving with each beat. The worn soles of their leather slippers made no noise against the floor, but I could hear the shake of the bells tied at their knees. Each wore white pants and shirt, with a red sash tied at the waist, red scarf about the neck, and a black beret. The lead dancer wore a green sash. He raised his sword high, and the music stopped, the soldiers lined perfectly still, blades at their shoulders. He was perhaps twenty, with shocking black hair. He lowered his sword, and the music began again, somewhat faster. In unison they began a series of kicks, each line rotating from back to front, each dancer in turn raising the kicks a bit higher. The drumbeats quickened pace, and soon the txistu players fingers were a blur over the small holes, the dancers now beginning to sweat. The lead dancer kept pace in front, his eyes locked on the far wall. He raised his sword and again the dancers froze, but the music upped the tempo another level. He continued, kicking, spinning now after each kick, raising his leg higher each time, finally brushing his ear. He seemed at the end of his balance, on the verge of losing control, when with a mighty beat the music stopped, and he froze in place. Two dancers stepped in behind him, their blades sheathed, and caught him as he fell back. Another draped an *equirina* over him, the long

flag shrouding him to his ankles. The two raised him above their heads, ankles and shoulders. The music began again, and the three remaining on each side raised their swords to rest on the body of the fallen leader, kicking again in unison, high as they might. The music slowed evenly, and, continuing to dance, the procession made its way out the end of the hall. Tom and I had once performed that dance in front of 12,000 people at halftime of a college basketball game, drunk on cheap wine slung from bota bags.

The txistu players began a *Jota*. The children crowded the floor to dance, and so did many of the adults. I went with my uncles and joined the group, remembering the old steps.

My mom came up after awhile, she put her arms around my waist and held on to me.

Later, after most everyone had gone, I slipped out, avoiding the eyes of my parents. I drove within a mile of my house, but continued on towards the highway. I stopped at a service station in Caldwell and left a message on the machine at home, letting them know that I would be in Jordan.

From the creek at the back of the ranch, a couple hours of open plain stretches towards the mountains,

turning from pasture to rough high prairie. The heat is stifling as the sun climbs, Clio is sweating beneath me, and before long I am soaked. More buildings, and more fences, cut into the landscape than I remember. We have to jump two of them, barbed wire, but I know as long as we keep aimed at the butte we will eventually run into my uncles' cabins. Early in the afternoon we come over a familiar rise, the butte hanging overhead, and I see below the twin specks of the homes built by my uncles, rough hewn by hand. Steve left his and moved to Boise several years back, but my uncle Rick and his wife still live out here, working at a nearby mine and keeping an eye on the ranch. Coming closer to their cabin, I see it is more of a house now, that they have added a second story. The addition looks out of place, regular wooden siding sitting on top of an old log home. I see the rest of the horses running hard in the far field, excited by our arrival. I climb down and pull a stalk of rhubarb from the garden, letting Clio drink long and hard out of the trough. I unsaddle the sweating horse, and turn her loose into the field. Filling my water bottles at the pump, I start again on foot, southwest now.

The orange glare of the falling sun is so blindingly bright I have to walk with my head bowed. The smells of the plain, the dry sage especially, are muted by the

brilliance, but as the sun disappears over the horizon the scents return, and with a coolness that makes them stronger. I come to the foot of the hills and begin to climb.

Before the light fades completely I find the place I am looking for, and set up camp back from a small outcropping. Below on the valley floor I see a group of elk making their way across, looking for a place to conceal themselves for the night.

I sit out on the precipice. The warmth is fading with the light, but it is still pleasant. The rock smells of the heat, and warms me through the blanket. The horizon wide glow gives way to pin prick luminaries. I wrap myself in my bag, and watch a great disc moon come up at an angle. Carefully, I take warm ashes from the edge of the flames and release them, the night breeze carrying them far off. I can feel my brother out there, beyond the rim of the fire.

Four-Cylinders of Funk

I drive a maroon, four-cylinder, 1986 Isuzu Trooper II with one gold door. It looks like a giant toaster, has the flattest windshield I've ever seen on a vehicle that is not an army Jeep, and sports old-style round headlights. I have never named it or assigned it a gender, reminds me too much of how people name their genitalia. I just call it my 'trusty steed'. The '86's and '87's are notorious for having bad engines, mine went the way of a loose main crank. From January to March last year I searched wrecking yards and junk piles, haggled with middle men, and fought with an hotheaded Argentinian auto mechanic named Mike. Finally, I managed to get the 1.9 liter power plant replaced, and my trusty steed was back out on the range, better, stronger, faster.

I spent this past summer working as a dive master at a resort in San Carlos, Sonora, Mexico. I boasted all season that, had I had the time, I would have preferred to drive the Trooper down. My good friend Eric worked there with

me, in fact is the one who got me the job. Eric is a big kid, physically large, but also the kind of guy to whom everything is "the best thing ever!" One day, while we were saying goodbye to a busload of guests, I saw Eric talking to a girl at the reception, a tall Mexican with wavy reddish hair. She had come to work in the boutique. They got engaged about a month after I left. Eric called me about halfway through October, saying he had arranged a way for me to come back down, be there for the end of season party, get paid, and get a little vacation in—I just had to drive down, pick up some band equipment, guitars, amps, keyboards, and bring it all back to the States. I looked the route up on the internet, saw that via Phoenix it was 1600 miles. I remembered then that I lived only three hours or so from the Canadian border. I called Eric back and told him he was insane.

Eric explained that he couldn't bring the stuff himself, had to go to Mexico City to meet the family, and that as his best man, etc. etc., plus, if they were going to have to pay to ship the equipment, why not pay me? I looked back at the map. A.A. has a term called 'Doing a Geographic', kind of a self-styled map making to mark your location within the parameters of what you consider to be valid 'Living'. I saw how much of the North American

continent I would be traversing, and thought, "Now **that** is doing a 'Geographic'."

I left Missoula, Montana at 10.30pm on a Tuesday night. I'd taken the trusty steed on a few day-trips, but nothing of this magnitude, not since I'd had the engine replaced. Excited for the fresh adventure, I was apprehensive as to how the truck would do over the next two days, and a nagging 'You really are insane!' buzzed in the back of my head. An hour into the trip I turned up Widespread Panic's 'Space Wrangler' and thought to myself, "I am 1/25th done, I only have to do that 25 more times. Can I really do that 25 more times?" A voice on the radio broke in to give an update on a small earthquake in Western Montana, signed off, "This is Michelle Markovitch, 94.1, Butte." She had once helped me to fondle her breasts while dancing in a gay bar. "I should try to stop by on my way back through," I thought.

At 4.30am I pulled over at a rest stop six miles south of Pocatello, Idaho and parked where I thought I'd be out of the way of the big rigs. I folded down the back seat and spread out my sleeping bag, then ran down to the bathroom. In the space at the bottom of the stall I could see a pair of heavy black work-boots, black jeans around the ankles, and some seriously white legs. It kind of gave

me the heebie-jeebies, so I finished as quick as I could and got back to the truck, locking all the doors. At 7.30 my small alarm pierced my head. I was freezing. I warmed my clothes up in the bottom of my bag the best I could, got up, got out, brushed my teeth in the half-light. I ran back down to the bathroom, and walking in, I noticed that the heavy black boots were in the exact same position. "Body." I thought. I banged on the side of the stall, "HEY, are you all right?!" I peered up over the side of the stall. A 45-ish year-old man with white hair half-sat, splayed back, his head against the wall, face bluer than a hockey rink after the Zamboni has passed. I dropped down, didn't look a second time, went out to find a cop at the weigh station. A trucker was walking towards the bathroom.

"There's a body in there," I said. He just nodded queerly and walked on in. He came right back out.

"Man, that guy's been in there over an hour," he said, wriggling from foot to foot.

"He's dead," I said. "Been there since at least 4.30."

"Shit." The trucker half-sprinted to the weigh station, started blabbering at the woman about some guy drunk or dead in the 'head' and he'd be glad to stay and make a statement if sheesh he could just use her bathroom

right quick. She obliged the trucker, then turned and asked me how long the body had been there, and got on the phone. The trucker, back, was talking slower now, but constant. With two of us there, I felt I'd only be staying for the spectacle if I did, so I asked the woman if she needed me, and she told me no. I got in my truck and drove straight away.

"Dead body," I thought. My first free-range dead guy. When I was twelve years old my dad came and pulled me out of class at St Mary's School to tell me that my great-grandmother had died. At the wake my siblings and I were scowled at because we came with my mother. Violet Glover Skinner, Gaga, lay in an open casket. Her hair was marble gray, her face colorless except for a thin streak of cheap pinkish lipstick. I think her glasses were on. My father remarked only that it didn't look like her, that she was normally smiling.

After that first funeral, they seemed to come in bunches, but this man on the toilet was the first one out 'in the bush', 'on the front line'. And, boy, when we talk about 'Least Desirable Ways to Go', I think a heart attack in a public shitter on a highway outside of Pocatello, Idaho ranks right in there.

My truck rides on four Cooper 31x10.5 steel belted radials on 15-inch rims. Or, as the physicist at Les Schwab told me, my truck actually rides on the 200psi (4x50psi) of compressed air inside those tires. The big tires tend to grab onto any grooves worn in the road and pull the truck one way t'the other—as a result you herd the truck down the road more than steer it.

All of northern Utah is under construction. From just inside the border to south of Salt Lake City, the highway is two lanes-with-no-shoulder-and-six-foot-walls-on-either-side-going-seventy-miles-an-hour. I had to keep a tight rein on the steed. I stopped at a Cracker Barrel outside of Provo and unclenched the wheel. I vaguely remembered how the stereo had abruptly stopped somewhere near the turn-off for the Temple in heavy traffic, and tried to turn it back on. Nothing. I played with a few wires, no luck. So far, dead body and all, nineteen hours to go, this was the ranking tragedy of the day. At breakfast I asked for a phone book and quizzed the waitress as to where I could find a car stereo. The nearest place was thirty miles back north. At the on-ramp I duly aimed the toaster south. I hadn't realized up to that point what a lot of noise big tires make on the highway. It's almost a buzzing, mesmerizing.

I forgot to mention that the odometer and speedometer haven't worked since I got the engine replaced. On the road, distance becomes time rather than space. I figured Phoenix was eight or so hours off, my friend Karen was waiting there. She used to date the guy who was getting married, and I used to date her best friend. It had been awhile coming around, but on the layover flying home in August, sitting in a college-brewery-type bar, we were talking and all of a sudden boom it was on the table that we might just be interested in each other. An hour later I was on a flight to Missoula.

I wanted to know what kind of time/space I was making, so I busted the calculator out of my backpack and started timing the miles. Okay, if one mile takes 52 seconds, then sixty miles takes, no, wait, then how many miles in 3600 seconds, numbers too big, wait, a lot of sixties here, now remember how those chemistry equations worked, okay so get the ratio 60 seconds divided by 52 seconds then multiply by 60 miles-an-hour and boom, you're going 69 mph. Not fast enough, so I had to increase the pitch of the hum of the tires against the highway one level. I repeatedly pushed the on/off button on the stereo, hoping it would come on,

that the short would be miraculously fixed. That used to work in my old car.

The sun was setting as I crossed from Utah into Arizona, driving over the suspension bridge that hangs above the vertical expanse of the Glen Canyon Dam. The dam was completed in 1963, plugging the Colorado River just above the Grand Canyon, forming Lake Powell, the second largest human-made lake in the United States. The lake is 185 miles long and has 1,960 miles of coastline, more than from Seattle to San Diego. It took 10 million tons of concrete to build the dam, and it holds back 8.5 trillion gallons of water in what was once Glen Canyon. I thought of Ed Abbey's The Monkey Wrench Gang, in which the hero Heyduke is from some town that was inundated by the building of a dam. Myths, both, the town, the hero, in time, submerged, but there.

I pulled the car into a dirt lot and ran back out onto the bridge. The face of the dam is enormous, adrenalizing. I, who normally prefer deserted mountain tops, felt the awe of something so enormous created by human hands. I remembered that old movie "Earthquake" with Charlton Heston. Once, when I was about nine, I was over at my friend Scott Donnelly's house watching it on an eight-millimeter projector--we rewound and watched the scene of

the dam breaking over and over. I remember coming upstairs hours later to find that my parents had already gone home, assuming that I would stay over. Scott died in a car accident, a mile from my house, when we were fourteen. The two of us and the driver of the car had gone to St. Michael's Preschool together and had been as inseparable as five-year-olds are capable. I learned to ride a two-wheeler at Scott's house. Like any kid, I spit off the edge of the bridge and watched the glob wind its way down the face of the dam. The edges of my vision encompassed by that steel-gray face, I started to get vertigo, felt my body list, grabbed the railing, and looked up out across the flat of the lake to regain my equilibrium. I jogged back to the truck, drove by Page and on into the orange-red glow of dusk.

During the day I didn't really notice the absence of the stereo. At night, in the pitch black of high Arizona desert, the silence was narcotizing. I can't really sing, I don't remember lyrics, how funny is it to tell yourself jokes you already know the punch-line to? I thought about skiing, thought about biking in Montana, thought about the dead guy, thought about diving in San Carlos, thought about sex. I sifted through the books-on-tape I had picked up and pressed the on/off a couple hundred more times. I

listened to the hum of the tires, thought about my old girlfriend from college, the first love, who I had seen the week before after three years. I had found out about her divorce the year before, that she had moved back to the Bay area, and that she was dating one of my best friends all in the same conversation. Now they were engaged. We'd met this last time at a hot springs along the Lochsa River in central Idaho—she was in Lewiston on business, and it happened to be the midpoint between there and Missoula. I fucking hated, and loved, that she cried--that she cries every time we see each other, and gives me a kiss that tastes sweet and rich like an Italian olive grove. I think that will have been the last time.

So, in the immediacy of the moment, I went back to thinking about sex. Karen, my friend in Phoenix, and I existed in the nether world of living apart but lusting for the other, and I wondered, hoped, whatever our chances for a relationship, that we might get the chance to let loose and ravage each other. It was Wednesday, and if I could get there early enough we could hit Phoenix. I didn't realize, but a good chunk of northern Arizona is mountains—Flagstaff is at 7000+ feet. Four wheel-drive toasters with four-cylinder engines and big tires do not go uphill fast. The hum pitch drops about two full octaves, the volume

halves.

RRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrdownshiftRRRRRRRRrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrover
erthetopRRRRRRRRshift and so on. I got to Phoenix about 11
pm, Karen was already in her pajamas and had to work in the
morning. She was appalled to hear about the body, sorry to
hear about the stereo and the expanse of jack-shit (as
stereo shops go) between Phoenix and Salt Lake. We watched
some bad t.v., spoke little, and crawled off to bed. We
smooched for awhile, slid cool hands over smooth skin, and
then she turned over to be spooned. In the morning clothes
started to come off and then she was late. She gave me
directions to a stereo shop, kissed me, and left. Ah well,
I'd see her again Monday on my way back through. I found a
Wal-Mart on the way to the stereo shop, and stopped. I
began undoing all the wires connecting the stereo, popped
open the only one I'd ignored the day before and found a
blown fuse. I rejoiced, focusing only on the future and
the ease of repair. Five fuses cost me 94¢. I celebrated
with two quarts of 10-40 weight motor oil and a fancy sport
wrap for my steering wheel. It took me fifteen times
longer to put on the wrap than to replace the fuse. I put
the Allman Brothers into the deck and pointed my trusty
steed towards Nogales and the Mexican border.

Within two minutes of crossing the border, I had my windshield washed for the first time, and gave the waif a quarter. Nogales on the south side of the border reminds me of driving in a big city—narrow lanes and no rules. Two of my best friends, my roommates for most of the last few years, were killed in September in an 83 car pileup outside of Denver. The newspapers had made a big deal out of the fact that they were newlyweds, but to us they weren't even married yet. Chantal was Canadian, Dan from Virginia, and after leaving Mexico the same time I did, they had trouble getting her into the U.S. As soon as she got her visa, Dan drove to Montreal in his blue Jeep to pick her up. They were married by a JOP the next day, and then flew back to our house in Colorado. They told me on the phone the night before the accident about the ceremony planned for May. The third passenger in the Jeep, Spencer, told me she had been reading Bride magazine, for real, when they hit, and that I couldn't imagine the impact. When Spence found her body lying at the side of the road, he lay down beside her on the cold frozen pavement. I saw the wreck on the news, the Jeep crushed, the plastic top missing. I knew why the top was missing—Dan and I had fastened it down with only a couple of screws, in a hurry to get it on one day laughing

in a rainstorm. I wasn't able to get to the wake. The things I still had to tell them haunted me.

Having made it through town, I found I had to stop again to get a Mexican tourist permit for the car and, of course, 'Mexican Insurance.' I handed my green work visa to people at five different windows, they put a sticker on my windshield and let me go.

The Sonoran desert is not exactly as one would imagine—it is not barren by any means, but covered with stalwart, coarse vegetation. It's all about head-high with big thorns, I mean like an inch or more long. I know this from direct experience, as I tried to summit one of the mountains outside of San Carlos and had my ass soundly kicked off it by the overgrowth. Don't get me wrong—it is dry, these plants are tenacious. It's still desert.

Ecological digression at 75 mph: The Colorado River drains into the Sea of Cortez, and as you can imagine the building of Glen Canyon Dam seriously affected the flow. The Sierra Club is supporting a movement to drain the lake and remove the dam. They say the water, power, and tourism provided by the dam are negligible, and that habitats from the Grand Canyon down to the Colorado River Delta are being grievously damaged. An estuary that once thrived on the Sea of Cortez has nearly been destroyed. Some people say

we should keep our water within our borders, not let it pass into the hands of the Mexicans. The estuary, the delta, and the entire Sea of Cortez are protected as wildlife sanctuary by the Mexican Government. Lord knows they might really try to bottle that water and sell it to the Cubans, instead of replenishing their dying habitats and parched farmland.

Mexican highways are a different animal from their American cousins. One must pay attention. Shoulders do not exist, the white fog line is painted on the edge of the asphalt, from there it's chewed rock and a steep bank. The roads are not bad, but they are not good—you've got to keep a sharp eye for dips, bumps, ruts, the occasional turn, and large buses going way too fucking fast. Herding the steed, as you can imagine, was a vigilant process. **DISMINUYA SU VELOCIDAD AUGMENTA SU SEGURIDAD NO TIRES BASUR** signs appeared regularly out of nowhere to warn of turns, Pemex gas stations, small towns, or just shitty roads. I was glad for the big tires now, and, possessed, passed 47 cars on the home stretch between Hermosillo and San Carlos.

It is completely different walking into a bar, driving a road, or coming to a place after the first time. You know the rules. You know what to expect, to a degree. The long, dark buildings stood just the same, the central pool

quiet and lit, the black puddle of the lagoon, dark like a pupil, stretched out to the faint the crash of surf on the protective arm of sand beyond. Eric, his fiancée, and a couple of our friends were at the reception to greet me, all in costume.

I'd walked in on a Halloween party attended by 450 gay men. Even though it was Thursday the 29th, Halloween was being celebrated as all the guests were leaving on the 31st. And it turns out 'all the guests' were a gay men's group who had rented out the village for the week. Eric warned me I better put on a name-tag, so I wouldn't be mistaken for a member. The group put on a costume contest. It lasted well over an hour—there were M&M's: 'Candy Gone Bad', the most gorgeous drag queens you've ever seen, two guys dressed as roller coaster, slaves, masters, Snow White and the Seven Dwarves—the Dwarves in black leather thongs, boots, and biker caps, tethered together with a chain held by Snow White. We wondered how they decided who got to be Snow White. It's a strange thing to look out over a room and know everyone's sexual orientation. This doesn't happen in any regular setting, straight, gay, lesbian, biker bar, whatever. This is what the group came for though, knowing all the rules for a week, the relaxation of judgment and stigma, as well as the removal of that first

step in getting to know a stranger. Many of them were 'still in the closet', suits who were afraid for their jobs, husbands unable to tell their families. Here on vacation, in the little bubble of the resort, they were unafraid. This of course also allowed them to be much more aggressive than usual, which combined with testosterone was a bit frightening. One pair, dressed as the Ambiguously Gay Duo, cornered me at the main bar, precipitating my move to the night club. Out there, the only other guy in the place with long hair attached himself to my shoulder. He took the "Give it a try, once you go guy, you'll never go back" tactic. I took Eric's advice and put on a name-tag.

Eric had me tell the story of the guy I'd found in the bathroom. Some early 40's grey-mustached bastard snarled, "You don't know anything about death," and I felt the front half of my head go tight and my eyes blur like it happens and suddenly I'm observing myself do or say things from the outside that I know I shouldn't but every part wants me to and so I do. But I didn't punch him out, because I'm basically a coward about fighting, and so I just started listing off people close to me that had died listing the causes off in my head until I was stunned and the fuckhead was apologizing and I still really wanted to bash his face and hurt him anyway. Fucker. Natural causes, head vs.

concrete, car crash, skier vs. tree, plane crash, skier vs. avalanche, AIDS, boat vs. swimmer, natural causes, cancer, car crash, car crash . . .

The end of the season, the closing of the resort was a welcome relief for those who had put in the long haul of work, time to relax, time for vacation, but it turned the place into an eerie ghost town. For a couple of days it was just the employees, just friends where before there had been hundreds of people to look after. The pool area was stripped of its chairs, the wind blew unmolested over barren concrete. On Sunday morning I walked out to the beach. The lagoon was a mirror reflecting the two mountains that created the cove. I sat, completely alone, where sails used to flap in the wind, where Dan and I used to laugh and bullshit before we took the snorkeling boats out, where we used to throw disc, trying not to smack anyone in the head. Spooky. It was no less beautiful. The same mountains that loom in Catch-22 and Zorro still hung over the surf, and the sun burned in a clear blue sky. A light breeze picked up from the north, which would turn into a 25 knot gale by afternoon, when we would pull the catamarans back out to race them. But for now I was completely alone on the long expanse of sand, where I had answered a thousand questions about where I was from and

what I did back in 'real life'. One dreams of being alone on a deserted beach. But if that beach once had people on it, their voices echo.

I had a moment after my Grandfather's death when I felt myself reflexing to the thought that he had gone to some better place, and it comforted me for just that second. I looked around the Basque Center: the old dance hall, the dark low-ceilinged bar, two-hundred dark haired people, the old-ladies who played cards in the kitchen at holidays, my uncle Benito and his daughter who I played soccer with when we were nine, my uncles in the corner laughing, no doubt some kind of commentary going on. My dad, the eldest son, was being well-wished by every passerby. I had not been home for years, but many of those well-wishers stopped to speak to me as well, most of them knew my name.

On Monday we loaded amps and guitars and keyboards into the back of the Trooper. It was full, had that telltale back-slant of a loaded car, but I could still see out the back. As it was the second time leaving the place, it also came a little easier. I would see Eric and his fiancée in six-weeks, at the wedding in Colorado. And I

had Phoenix to look forward to at the end of the day's drive.

I passed Querontoranda, Agua Moranda, Agua Caliente, Santa Rosa, San Francisco—a small shrine across from a truck stop. A small clicking started inside my dashboard where none had been before, right behind the steering wheel. It was the Day of the Dead, a bigger holiday than Halloween or All Saints' in Mexico. Instead of billboards warning about reckless driving, Mexicans build shrines on the side of the road commemorating those who died there. This day flowers littered the side of the road, the cemeteries blazed with color, and pictures of individuals and couples who had died marked the shrines. I slowed down. Dan and Chantal had been a fantastic couple, fairy-tale the newspapers said. I had known them through breakups and long-distance separations and moments watching t.v. and on mountain peaks and in small boats on ocean swells. Tongue in cheek, people quietly remarked that at least they had gone together. I agreed, the brutalized cliché about 'having loved and lost' is crap. Those were definitely the words of a selfish, cold-hearted, weak bastard. I didn't know what to think about my old girlfriend, Martha. I had never gotten over her, not completely. In some ways our memories together, my

memories of her were finite, as with the people I had lost, as with the time I had spent on that beach the past summer. Even if I had tried to return, the space in time was gone, the ideal in my head would never match the reality that the present would carry with it. Too many things, people, would be different to produce the same vision. I still held onto an ideal memory of Martha, and of my friends and family that were gone; I savored an ideal memory of times laughing on that beach.

I was stopped twice at roadblocks by men dressed in green carrying semi-automatic weapons; they both asked if I spoke Spanish then waved me on. The clicking continued at odd beats, fast, slow, so I beat on the dash with my fist. Everyone has stories about bandits/cops on Mexican roads, but I had no troubles. At the border, however, the American cops took the back of the truck apart.

"What year's your Trooper?" the good cop asked, while the bad cop pulled open boxes and bags.

"'86," I answered. We made small talk about engines while the bad cop systematically gutted the truck and left everything spread out on long tables. Finally, the good cop smiled, and then watched me repack the back of the truck. I got in, started the car, and drove into the States without turning to nod my head.

Phoenix. I got to Karen's house about 8pm. We sat on the couch and suffered through Ally McBeal with her roommate. She asked if I had eaten, I said no, and Barry White said, "Yes, let's go out."

"I thought we could order Chinese," Karen said.

"All right."

We ate California-style Chinese and watched The Wizard of Oz with Pink Floyd's Dark Side of the Moon as the soundtrack, because I had never seen it like that. Yes, it was uncanny. In bed, with most of our clothes off, she stopped and pulled back.

"We're not going down that road," she said. "You live in Montana."

"It's a shame to meet someone you think you might have chance with, and you know, not have a chance," she said. How could I possibly argue with that. In the morning, standing in front of the bathroom mirror, me behind with my arms wrapped around her, she smiled at me in the reflection. That image stays with me.

I had never been to the Grand Canyon, so I detoured at Flagstaff after a relatively 'not bad' climb up to 7000 feet. I reached the East Rim Road in late afternoon, just as the shadows were beginning to get long. I stopped at every lookout. It is indeed huge, and I knew the photos

wouldn't show the half of it. I shot a bunch of sequences that I'll hopefully be able to paste together into a large panorama when I get the film back. At Yavapai Point a group of French joked loudly about the 'large American Hole', American women, a toilet, the poor-taste gambit, but they didn't realize that I understood. I didn't say anything, because I remembered once standing in the gardens beneath the Eiffel Tower laughing loud about the 'large French phallus', how ironic, impervious within the armor of language. At the last lookout at the end of the canyon, Desert View, I had a couple from Ohio, with a visiting cousin from Oslo, take my picture.

CHIEF YELLOWHORSE BLANKETS FRIENDLY INDIANS AHEAD

BUY FROM THE CHIEF 10CENTS/MINUTE PHONE CARDS Coming back through Page I picked up the local NPR station, 'All Things Considered'--Tuesday, November 3rd, Election Day. I had voted absentee before I left. I listened as the Democrats won key spots, listened as the polls closed and the numbers came in live. The moon was a day from full and rising in the east as I crossed Glen Canyon Dam. To the southwest the glow of the sun had not yet faded, and it hung over the Grand Canyon, the same as the lights of a big city reflecting off of midnight clouds. Even as the glow faded, the moon was so bright I could see the sage brush covering

the bluffs along the side of the highway. When I lost the radio station, I listened to Garrison Keillor's The Guys on tape, and laughed. Early morning in Utah I realized that the clicking had stopped sometime the day before. At a stop I looked down the vent behind the wheel. I found a small green scorpion, dead, multiple scores in the back of the dash where the stinger had hit.

U.S. SHEEP EXPERIMENTAL STATION BIG HOLE BATTLEFIELD
 (outside of **WISDOM**) **WILD ADVENTURE CORN MAZE. Dolence**
Apiaries written on the side of a tanker truck, took me an hour to remember 'apiary' had to do with bees. The pistons chugged up and down, slick in the cylinders, hot and tired. I sang Foreigner and Rod Stewart songs at the top of my lungs, unembarrassed, as radio stations faded in and out, and listened to Call of the Wild on tape. I reached for my calculator to figure my speed, but I realized I'd left it back in Mexico where Eric and I had been adding up the *Frequentation* for the season, the numbers of people who'd passed through our programs. I passed the rest stop where I'd found the body. I enjoyed the solitary time on the road, finite, coming to a close, and I looked forward just the same to having a double-bourbon with my friends at the Union Hall. Passing Butte I turned the radio back to 94.1, but only heard an add for Michelle's news program at 8 a.m.

the next morning. I stared at the limp speedometer, the lifeless odometer, I was only an hour from home, 1/25th to go. The wheels of my trusty steed hummed against the road.

**THERE IS A GREATNESS
WAITING FOR YOU.**

We are busy, we are distracted, we are cynical, but this greatness waits. Through a speech by Dr. King or the story of the Grinch or even a bumper sticker,

**THIS GREATNESS
FINDS YOU IN A**

moment, unlikely or untimely, and suddenly you find yourself connected to humanity in a way that shocks you. And this greatness will hold you up so high and strong that any previous version of

YOURSELF SEEMS FLIMSY.

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to say anything about anything other than boots. We're not ministers or gurus; we're not philosophers or politicians. We are simply boot-makers who have found something to be true.

THAT TRUTH IS SIMPLE:

Every single one of us has a chance to do something big with our lives, something bigger than any coach or financial consultant or personal fitness trainer ever told us. And by waking up to this potential, and acting on it, amazing things happen: to other people, to ourselves. This has nothing and

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Shoe Companies Are Ahead Of Me

I suppose I don't have any great fear of remaining the whitebread, middle-class boy with limited rhythm that I've always been, but, as with anyone, there is a something that nags at me. I was taught that I could do, and therefore have, anything I want. As a youth, that's confidence. Approaching thirty, I see it more as arrogance. Allied with my parents, my teachers instilled in me through about my sophomore year in college the idea that I was something special, not a genius perhaps, but a 'cut above'. I didn't realize at the time that the majority of parents and teachers in this post-'free love' society attempt to instill that in the majority of children in one form or another. Combined with the fact that I score well on standardized tests, I of course thought that I certainly was that cut above. In the end though, this manifested itself as the unalterable path on which I must pursue my fated end: I must distinguish myself from the herds, I must do something, one thing, to prove I am indeed unique, a special talent. Maybe I could just spend the rest of my life taking standardized tests.

In the fourth grade, a guy we called Deacon Don made me privy to the fact that there wasn't any 'gospel truth', but many versions of truth. I discovered then that I had a talent for examining things from different angles. It's not something genetic--my father is a lawyer. Through many dinner table and post-broken-window cross-examinations I learned to examine all the possibilities before opening my mouth. Deacon Don made me realize that I couldn't just run my life by what others told me was the way of things, but that I would have to discover and unpack and think every bit of it out for myself. What a glorious power to be imbued with in the fourth grade! And, why, I realized could help other people to see different ways of being as well, those who hadn't been taught to look at all the angles, or who didn't score well on standardized tests, and so, perhaps, in one form, my writing career began. Perhaps it was arrogance even then.

My shadow is still with me, the seed planted in Deacon Don's theology class, shaped by years, velcroed, or perhaps now fastened with a locking carabiner to my fated path: I want to stand out by saying poignant and clever things, I want to challenge people's minds, I want to cause people to examine their perceptions of humans in the world, I want to write at least one entertaining essay that doesn't rely on

a gratuitous sex scene. These are the only things, besides flying super-fast airplanes, that I've ever really wanted to do. I realize that my life goal is a cliché. Everyone's cliché. Ingrained in the system. I made a choice when I was seventeen to give up the dream of flying really fast jets because I refused to place myself in a position that included even the remote possibility I might have to fire a weapon on another human being. I accepted early on, through the same liberal/idealist indoctrination, that money was only to be a means and never an end. The years following college I battled philosophical burnout by 'bagging peaks'. I sent my parents photos home from the summits, kept a distance as the world was still safe from the instant gratification of e-mail. I lived, as my current non-fiction professor described it, 'the life people dream about'. But I didn't get very far--the fourth grade nag led me to give up that life in search of intellectual verification, shape of abject poverty and unpublished prose.

The limitless arrogance with which we deem it necessary to raise our children in 20th century America frightens me. We teach our children that they can have, be, and do anything, so long as they desire it enough. From the outset I will agree that this method is necessary,

although this conclusion itself is suspect for the fact that I was raised that way and can't clearly see a better alternative. It makes sense that without this kind of upbringing the potential of a great many people will have been lost. The cost of such an attitude, however, comes in the shape of casualties, who, despite believing they can do anything, fail for any number of reasons, people unable to survive with the equipment they've been given, and unable at the same time to change it in for better parts. The question as to the extent of social determination has been fought since the Age of Enlightenment, and perhaps even earlier, disguised under religious garment as questions of predestination and responsibility for action. As we allow more and more credibility to the nurture side of Nature vs. Nurture in the modern context, the question has focused on the extent of independent will beyond the machinations of society and culture. Are the choices I make truly free, creative, or but an extension of the self-perpetuating machine of culture?

I

"What if history was a gambler, instead of a force in a laboratory experiment..."

Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

The generation of questions in queries such as this is not insubstantial, and can even be entertaining. That is, right up to the moment when it becomes the tiresome loop that philosophical inquiry normally bogs down in, lack of any conclusive empirical evidence. This has not stopped philosophers time out of mind from taking a stab at the issue, in the attempt to vindicate their own ideas as something, if not absolutely definitive, at least original, new, created, 'produced knowledge', and so be recognized as the incredible super-geniuses that they are. But, with such a plethora of choices, which theory is the most right-on? Who hit the nail on the head? Which teapot called the kettle black? Is it as Kant says, that humans are members of both the scientific (phenomenal) and moral (noumenal) orders, partly determined yet partly able to choose? So is it possible within the nature of the dichotomy 'free will vs. determinism' to have a degree of will? If it is granted that behavior has been influenced in some measure (i.e. determined), does it logically follow that belief and thought structures, produced by the same cultural machine, have also been determined? Can we reconcile the Whiteheadian view that accepts determinism in regards to

past and present events, but does not necessarily apply it to the future—the old 'it's free will up to the point of action, fate afterward' cliché?

Poststructuralist feminist theory "emphasize(s) the constructed nature of human subjectivity and demonstrate[s] how ideological discourses interact to figure (and disfigure) human subjects." (Benstock, 319) Combined with the Marxist idea that power creates the value of exchange in a one way exchange, the question of someone being 'manacled to her fate' does not seem so far fetched. We have seen in history many times over the power of a society to create the value of exchange (e.g. the 19th century courts of pre-revolutionary France, as we have seen in the histories of Louis XIV and in modern films such as "Dangerous Liaisons" and "Ridicule", became so engrossed in the way the game of society was to be played that the starving masses became second in importance), to thus create the moral system by which that society functions, and by which the individuals of that society are not only judged, but judge their own self-worth. We are able to see how the 'web of fiction' can have tangible effect.

Is it true, as Goethe stated, that, 'A good person, even when plagued by dark desires (urges), is conscious of the right path he should be following.'" (Hutchinson, 3) Is

there some instinct built into human animals, a moral structure innate to human consciousness? The very idea sounds absurd: crime, differing moral cultures, the evolution of morality, all contradict this idea. By default then, moral structure, decision making apart from interaction between humans, i.e. the functioning of a human in society is a learned phenomenon. The question then falls to the amount, if any, of the leeway we have--is creativity a real phenomenon, or merely a copy and extension of things past? Is the human consciousness able to process presented information and create something, an idea, an artwork, a way of acting, entirely original? Are such works, the choices we make ever really unexpected?

Take, for example, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*: the heroine Lily Bart arguably commits suicide in the final scene due to her inability to function in society as she perceives it. Janet Gabler-Hover and Kathleen Plate suggest that "Lily Bart is prohibited from the self-invention she seeks by socially constructed conceptions of who she must be." We find throughout the book examples of her inability to make crucial decisions with any kind of view beyond her own narcissism. The fault does not lie simply with immediate pressures of society and socially constructed conceptions, both internal and external, but

with those same pressures as exerted and combined with her upbringing, resulting in Lily's inability to define herself in their midst. Regardless of whether Lily recognizes the social forces at play, she is still unable to act in any decisive, self-defining, self-sustaining manner. Even if there were such a recognition and realization, awareness of the social forces once again does nothing to change the situation of Lily's, or any person's, identity--she still moves to her fated end, brought on by cultural forces both tangible and embedded in her makeup (sic). The frightening question this raises asks to what extent this work of fiction is not only a realistic cultural commentary, but also a tome proliferating the very ideas it seeks to examine.

What of the great variety of human life proliferating beyond imagination? If society were indeed a self-perpetuating machine, would not the general diversity become more and more stagnant? Really, does the environment ever influence two people in exactly the same way? How then can we possibly judge individuals by anything but their own experience? Does this suggest that, as things obviously change, people cannot be entirely determined by culture? Donald Pizer asserts that all characters/people are exposed to and influenced by

conditioning forces, but come to different ends. The idea that the 'environment', these conditioning forces, culture, must affect people in a standard way, that it must be one thing or behave in a standardized manner, is oversimplified. Just because the environment, a culture, does not affect two individuals in the same way does not preclude the possibility of that culture driving each individual to a specific end. If Lily knocks herself off, and I don't stop until I own half of Manhattan, why can we not both be socially determined? The Annales school thinkers concluded that, "texts affect different readers 'in varying and individual ways,'" (Benstock, 329) and so it goes with the proliferating agent of those texts, culture. Even if environmental/cultural influence is relative, this does not necessarily conclude that this influence is not, cannot be, pervasive.

What each of these critics ignore, in their willingness to allow for external brute forces (culture society economics politics), is the unbreakable link between these external forces and internal 'brute' forces-- desires, needs, fantasies, and, most importantly, the system by which we judge worth-right/wrong, proper/improper, good/bad, essentially the system by which we base our decisions and corresponding actions. External

forces shape internal structure through our environmental and cultural upbringing--this structure does not appear on its own or in any consistent manner, proof positive in its inextricable link to specific culture. Why do these critics attempt to separate internal and external brute forces? Because if they are inextricably linked, then the decisions we make may not be essentially our 'own', but only an extension of society, the person as tool of the machine, of self-perpetuating culture. No human wants to give up that power of decision, give up what reduces to free will. The question can be boiled down to figuring out why I'm wearing a pea green shirt with blue stripes, blue jeans two sizes too large, and blue suede Adidas. Why don't I have Timberlands on? Was any true creativity involved in my choices, or was 'I manacled to my fate', driven to wearing this puke colored shirt because it's 'in', that perhaps I have even convinced myself that it does not irritate my aesthetic sense of color coordination.

II

Why I Write:

- (1) Sheer egoism. Desire to seem clever, to be talked about, to be remembered after death...
- (2) Esthetic enthusiasm. Perception of beauty in words...
- (3) Historical impulse. Desire to see things as they are...

(4) Political purpose. Desire to push the world in a certain direction..

George Orwell

The ad you read on the opening page is for shoes. It involves the Grinch and MLK, Jr. as the bridge of cultural ideal, the mythical bridge spanning the gap between individual and universe. And when you cross it, oh my! Such fulfillment, even if ephemeral, will cause your former self (the person you are now) to seem flimsy, a mere wisp of the person with the new found perspective. But what about those people, hypothetically speaking of course, who, for any reason, don't ever quite feel that connected to humanity and the universe? What are we saying to them, the Lily Barts of this world...that they are flimsy, unenlightened because they didn't like the Grinch? That the self you are right now is still only a shadow of who these Timberlands might make you? I owned a pair of Timberlands, but I hadn't realized that, like so many toys in the world's Cheerios, 'Spiritual Peace' had been included with my shoes--maybe I forgot to include the two box tops and the UPC symbol with the coupon, or worse, forgot to register my product within ninety days of purchase. And now, years later it seems they have improved

on the product, including 'Spiritual Enlightenment' in the very leather of the boots, but, since my warranty ran out, I don't think I'm eligible for the upgrade.

Ellie Sullivan states that "Lily Bart's tragedy lies in a kind of innocence, the innocence of the neurotic who continues to obey parental dicta in adult life as if she were a child." (479) At first glance this seems to be a valid point, that Lily was never able to act beyond the views given her by her parents, never able to exercise independent thought or will. But is the implied truly possible, that anyone ever breaks entirely free from those thought structures impressed into us before memory? The question of degree, of Kant's noumenal and phenomenal come immediately to mind. Is it possible to both be determined and to have an independent will? Would we then be saying that Lily was conspicuously lacking in the noumenal (moral, will), or is there any noumenal at all? Does the way we are raised produce a degree of free will that varies with each culture, each generation, each family, each child, or none at all?

With the child raising war cries of 'You can do anything' and 'Your happiness is what's most important', my generation has been imbued with an extraordinary confidence. We are willing to try anything. We've come to

believe that the only error one can really make is in underestimating or wasting potential. The shady b-side lies in that we don't necessarily turn an inward critical eye when things go poorly; we do not feel entirely responsible for our woes, even though we make the choices leading there. This allows our egos to proceed relatively unscathed, to forge ahead and fight the good fight, but at the same time seems to imply a lack of necessary learning.

We are the first generation to be raised with such mantras. Our parents experienced something entirely different in their childhoods, and learned through the revolutions of consciousness in the 60's (results of their childhoods of the Fifties) these catch-words by which they would raise us. Freedom, choice, happiness. But for all the surface idealism, the parents' childhood of the Fifties still lurks: our parents do not expect nothing from us but our happiness. When they say 'Do Anything', the corresponding clichés "Do Something", 'Make Me Proud', and 'Realize That Limitless Potential' are still implied. Humans are far too attached to their offspring. Expectations, at the same time less specific than ever, are greater in magnitude than ever, limitless.

"They have trouble making decisions. They would rather hike the Himalaya than climb a corporate ladder.

They have few heroes, no anthems, no style to call their own. They possess only a hazy sense of their own identity..." (Gross, 57). How did this happen? Why has 'Generation X' balked at the values the Baby Boomers, our parents, held dear? Because we were taught to place personal gratification first. The idea of work as a necessary sacrifice or contribution has been replaced with the idea of work as necessarily fulfilling. The unlimited possibility of the Sixties, backlashed with the crass materialism of the Eighties, has produced a generation not necessarily wanting more materially, but demanding possibly unrealistic amounts of personal satisfaction spiritually. We have been presented with unlimited possibility as to what we would like to do with our lives, with the not-so-hidden addenda that certainly we can DO anything. Our whole society is permeated with this arrogance. We have seen in the twentieth century the realization of just about anything we put our minds and energies to: automobiles, airplanes, moon landings, computers, atomic bombs, Rogaine for men and women. This has left us like the kid at the mile-high candy counter: slow in deciding, overwhelmed by the possibilities, thrilled by the possibilities, paralyzed by the sheer magnitude of possibility, convinced that any decision made will be the right one regardless of ending up

with coconut in the chocolate, but with the lurking knowledge that each choice in turn will produce, and eliminate, entire schemas of future choices.

Lily's fatal flaw was the inability to establish a solid identity from which to base decision and action, inability to decide How To Be (Sullivan, 464). We see this repeated throughout myriad texts: Ellison's nameless protagonist in *Invisible Man*, Hemingway's Jake Barnes, Joyce's Bloom and Dedalus, Silko's Tayo. We see this in the deconstructive postmodern as well, with Rushdie's Omar and Pynchon's Oedipa Maas [[plausible, Brady?]] Why so? This is the oldest metaphysical question disguised: Why are we here? What are we to do? Who are we? Even in light of the current trend to answer this question with 'there are no such answers', the quest of 'How to Be', the 'Who are we to be,' does not disappear. It is a part of culture at its very least, and reminds me of Pascal: "All the unhappiness of man stems from one thing only, that he is incapable of staying quietly in his room." We, I, need to define ourselves, myself.

But living within a generation notoriously unable to establish an identity, the prospect seems daunting. Is it determined that we shall never cohere? Will this Generation X produce more casualties than members,

individuals unable to manage their fates within the shadow of the great cultural machine? Or are we able to recognize the forces at play, and, unlike characters created in our cultural lexicon, act positively to progress beyond them?

We have been so conditioned to believe that every life experience, especially work and play, must be imbued with passion that we tire of things as soon as the 'honeymoon' period is over. We are so jaded on this point that few things have the power to raise the kind of expected passion. It is to the point that every single thing must possess some glimpse into the greater energy of the universe--especially shoes it seems. With this idea of spiritual fulfillment permeating society to the point of shoe ads, the effect becomes apparent on the way individuals judge their self-worth. Although we as a generation have arguably been handed the planet on a silver platter, the personal challenge is more daunting than ever. Fulfillment comes only with complete inner peace, with a constant connection between your self and that all mighty flux of the universe. If one does not connect with that flux, then wherever or whatever that person is doing is not as valid as something else might be, that person becomes 'flimsy'. It becomes a goose chase, that the American psyche is taught that only the ultimate fulfillment is

worth chasing, and that the degrees between, well, fall short. With this kind of mentality it is not surprising that the identity of this generation is slow-developing, not surprising to find a great many casualties lost in the flow, talented people stuck on the couch smoking pot playing Sega, angry or apathetic as to the fate of culture. Perhaps it is merely our job, with the advent of a new, and limitless mentality to put a face to this possibility. Perhaps like Lily, we need merely to find an identity, to answer the old metaphysical barb for ourselves--one cause or idea that will enable those following us to act more decisively than ourselves. And perhaps the machine of society has the majority of our group marked out as casualties in the marching-on of consciousness, a necessary but destructive step on the way to a next generation's empowered perceptions.

We have no war by which to define ourselves, ritual and ceremony binding community and family have been reduced to weddings, funerals, and television. We have been equipped to do anything, but we have been equipped to do nothing specifically. The only specific actions we take are to fix problems we see left us by previous generations: ecology and education (Gross, 57). What we apparently lack is direction (and possibly discretion?). What am I as an

individual realistically capable of? Can I change the world? Does changing the recycle pick-up day count as changing the world? What, ultimately, will satisfy my ego to the degree that I feel I have fulfilled this 'destiny'? Why do I feel the weight of a destiny as necessary to satisfying my ego? Reading over this, I feel a slight twinge of what could possibly be read as whining in the subtext, but the question I am asking is, Why do I find so many intelligent people disengaged?

For me, I couldn't bear the idea, even if I became KING of the Ski Instructors somewhere, that I would not then truly distinguish myself from the pack, and we are speaking intellectually here. Some days I sit here in debt up to my ass, breathing sulphur from the paper mill and wonder why can I just not be content working a steady job, teaching people how to enjoy themselves in the mountains. What is it that I figure I'm going to do with my intellect? Enlighten people as to the false pretenses of modern religious institutions? I think the most I could hope for now would be to strike a chord that might make someone laugh, or say, enjoy themselves just a bit. So where is the difference from ski instructing. Well, perhaps in that no ski instructor ever started a revolution, but many have had their stories adapted to made-for-tv movies. It all

goes back to the fourth grade. I find flourishing in myself the same expectation my parents subtly layered in underneath the idea that they just want me to be happy—I'm not going to be happy until I turn that DO ANYTHING into a DONE SOMETHING.

So, with this parentally instilled drive and combined cultural dicta, is it unavoidable then that I become my parents, or an extension thereof? Marxist theory states that an economic infrastructure provides the basis for a superstructure of art, philosophy, religion, law, and politics. "Consciousness, without which such things as art cannot be produced, is not the source of social forms and economic conditions. It is, rather, their most important product." (Benstock, 362) My parents provided for me the infrastructure upon which my superstructure developed. The shape of my consciousness then is a direct product of both their infrastructure and its corresponding superstructure.

If one looks at a culture, or an individual human as a text, or a work of art, then we can see in Marxian terms that 'web of fiction' as a "product to be understood in broadly historical terms," that on one level "enforces and reinforces the prevailing ideology, that is the network of conventions, values and opinions to which the majority of people uncritically subscribe," but also as a "work that

does identifiable work of its own." (Murfin, 360) Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser agree that texts function as implements "to (re)produce the existing relations of production in a given society." (Murfin, 367) Gramsci also termed the concept 'hegemony', the "pervasive, weblike system of assumptions and values that shapes the way things look, what they mean, and therefore what reality is for the majority of people within a culture (367). Such a hegemony (culture, society) will always be fraught with contradiction, variation--not a coherent consistent force (367). 'Free will', as a comparable concept, also cannot be viewed as a coherent, consistent force, but as web of power relations specific to background and situation. Therefore, a text, an individual, an individual case of will, will not exist as an ideology, but in relation to that ideology, and so "like all social forms--has some degree of autonomy." (367) Pierre Macherey drives this point home, citing people and texts as products that don't only reflect their creating ideology, but act as fictions as well: "What kind of product, Macherey implicitly asks, is identical to the thing that produced it?" (367)

On the one hand the 'text' is determined, unavoidably a part of the self-perpetuating consciousness of a culture. But the text also does work on its own, as the House of

Mirth, Invisible Man, and The Snows of Kilimanjaro cause us to examine our own roles in culture, and it is impossible to predict what kind of effect that text will ultimately have, with each individual or on a cultural whole: The culture and individuals will have their own programmed conditioning affecting their reaction to the text, and it is in this dialectic that perhaps something original is produced. Consciousness not only perpetuates, but evolves.

This example is readily apparent in the differences between the Baby-Boomers and Generation X. Can we accept that each unique generation is proof positive of a free and developing will? As culture is involved in the dialectic, is it not a viable possibility that individuals are just products of that greater developing dialectic? Or are we making the mistake of considering culture as a static, one-faced entity? But, not to miss the forest for the trees, individuals are what constitute a culture. It is the slow developing 'will of the masses' that causes such change in a culture. As consciousness is a product of the social forms and conditions, social forms and conditions also take their development, through art, through opinion, from individual consciousness. As a creative dialectic, we are able to see in this light the possibility of a creative

will. Perhaps what our parents have been trying to tell us is 'Don't forget to Vote'.

By giving us the world of possibility, they neglected to include any kind of form with the function. As the 60's was a time of great experimentation, this generation, the children of those trail-blazers, have become the biggest experiment of all. We are seeing a radical change in the way children are raised, positive reinforcement breaking the way. As the first of this new approach, it is not surprising that we don't fit into the molds of old standards, that dated viewpoints are concerned about our identity, or that we have yet to put a definite shape to this evolving consciousness. It is not surprising to have casualties of ideology--surely we are not the first nor the last to be 'lost'. As the dialectic varies with each ideology, individual, and culture, it is not surprising that in some cases some individuals will be tragically unable to manage their fate. Some, on the other hand, will carve out creative new space. A hegemony by definition includes all the range of the spectrum. No doubt remains as to the shaping influence of culture, of parenting, but in an ongoing conversation that produces such broad-ranging variation, one cannot but help feel the smallest drop of

creativity plunging along in the flood. I'm going to buy some shoes.

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