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The log of the white wog: a diary of voices

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THE LOG OF THE
WHITE WOG

A DIARY OF VOICES

JACK HO
The gods seemed to have possessed my soul and turned it inside out, and roadside images seemed to invite me from every corner, so that it was impossible for me to stay idle at home.

Basho

_The Narrow Road to the Deep North_

My life became much mixed up with these gentlemen, and my brother officers fell to calling me 'white nigger'.

Captain Richard Burton
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At nineteen, it was Jack Ho's first time out of his home state. After that he hardly went back.

'Jack Ho' exists before me as a metre's shelf-space of scrapbooks and diaries. They contain the traveller's usual outpourings of juvenalia, bad verse, worse postcards and other people's anecdotes. Hardly a page would bear reproduction as is, but, as the rough notes of a story which emerges eventually, and only, as a literary construct - or re-construct - they are an entertaining, chaotic first draft of a life. They cover sufficient terrain, topographic and cultural, to offer a few insights into both far places and closer times, to which, already, we cannot return. For instance, Jack's hippified Haight-Ashbury of 1968 no longer exists - which, after reading about it, you may not feel is such a bad thing. (On the other hand, if you believe in the saying 'if you can remember the 'sixties, you didn't really live them,' you might think of Jack's work as a social service for those who really did live out that era to its neurological conclusion.)

If gravity sucks, order pecks. At some time, each of us has been made to feel the gaijin, gringo, farang, extranjero, ausländer, infidel, wop - the unworthy Oriental/Occidental gentle/rough man/woman. And so it was with Jack, a white Australian, destined (or so it he thought) to be above racism - because his race, thinking themselves to be both egalitarian and on top of the heap, assumed themselves to be beyond such reproaches. Kanaken, melon, djävla utlänning, vláchos, slant, spic: born to be wog was the fate of others. Those hatched under the sign of Godzone Oz would walk the earth as godlings. But, as history and Jack's log show, this was not to be so.

Wai guo, yiftos, buitenlander, round-eye, honky, long pig, gweilo, whitey, ghost, blanc, wog, terresti ... many spat sounds come the way of the stranger. The odious title of Jack's diary should be taken as intending offense to no one in particular, but to everyone in general. For he who is god will later (or sooner) be wog - or bicaud, slope, terroni, morroquini, svart skaller, etc. - and should thus watch his lip now.

Being a traveller, in the sense of being a viajero, a voyager, seems to the non-traveller like a life without work. In fact, although it may be a life without apparent employment, travelling is unrelenting work of its own kind. To document that life on the road is both the overtime of the job and its salary. As the work of a chronic scribbler and someone who seems to have
travelled solo - even when in company - Jack's record of travel and travail bears out his observation that (at least for him), 'Travel writing exists because there's no one else to talk to.'

The diaries of this 'roadwork' are as telling in their gaps as in their continuities - sometimes months of silence follow weeks of words. As with all diarists, the basic subject-matter is the self - and so it is with my reconstituted version of Jack's logs. The story's structure is simply his trajectory through the landscape; its theme, momentum. The work introduces itself as 'a diary of voices' (some readers may also think it a diary of vices): Jack sometimes tells a story from the perspective of his travelling partner, Crane. It is a device which reminds us that even the first-person episodes can claim for themselves only the status of 'story,' not 'truth.' History, as ever, is mutable. Despite Jack's admonition that this was a time of 'You Can't Go Back', we shall try.

J. H.
1966: THE YEAR OF YOU CAN'T GO BACK

Last things first ... I kiss Marie goodbye as Crane and the crew drop me on the Pacific Highway somewhere north of Gosford. Her mouth - teeth inlaid with dreams, one drop of diamond saliva, a tongue that could teach a saint a month of mortal sins - is a terrifying ramp from which to be launched. It pushes me out of the car, that known and goofy womb of friends, and into the face of the neanderthal thing which stalks the ways, dogs the days of all our foot-falls, The Journey.

From which you can't go back. I turn towards Queensland, take a deep breath and point my hitch-hiking finger at fate.

... then, gulp! this was it, the rah-rah road to the far north, with my thumb hitched to its pole star. To wits and wisdom - or at least to Coolangatta. The sheer possibility of it all rose like an adrenalin sundae in my throat. One thousand miles of mornings awaited me: to be stuck for god-knows-how-long beside what cane fields, which gas stations, cop stations and napalmed sunsets? The Journey, old serpent in the helix, turned beneath my boots and slithered down the phylum of memory, towards the abyss at the edge of the eye. My first time out of this state of not-quite-grace, New South Wales. I had waited nineteen years for this.

A sports car passes me. Male driver, female passenger. She's just a silhouette, tilting her head, raising a hand to tease a top-knot curl. A simple gesture, completed and graceful. And yet it splits open the road with the whole other half of freedom's possibilities: the otherness, the constant outsider-ness of the traveller. Here you stand in the moving margins of everyone else's fixed lives, between the town and the tar, a prospective citizen of the alien nation which sleeps in parks, dosses drunk in doorways.'Adios' to marriages, fast
On Hero Road there really are none.
Their holiness lost by a generation
or reincarnation,
in the park,
benighted bums sleep it off
- the morning sun.

A lift in a meat-truck (blood on the door-handles) distracts me from this creeping, self-prophetic gloom. For the first ride of my great leap forward this seems a very anticlimactic beginning. The driver, a boy in a blue singlet, says 'Howzit goin'? Whereya goin'?' and little else. We roll on through an Australia of late afternoon light, across burnished rivers unrattled by the their troubled bridges of rusted iron, loose planks and the occasional fatality. An hour later I jump down to re-commence the wait-ride-wait alternations which are the rhythm of the hitcher's road, the playing out of the musical score written in the stop-start white dashes of the centreline.

In the darkness, a tiny Renault crowded with four young nurses stops. Already an impossible press of thighs, laughter, scents, breasts and white dresses exists within it. They're heading to Macksville on a joy-ride, something to do before night-duty starts. Once my pack and I join them, there is nowhere for the last of these sisters of mercy to sit but upon my lap. She snuggles back against me. I re-arrange my grip a little. She seems to not object. For forty miles Nurse Lapp and I maintain an amiable banter with her three companions, and all the while each of us gently fondles this stranger who has appeared out of, and will disappear back into the secret-keeping night.

The Macksville 'Star' is a very rough gem of a pub. Built of cedar, by and for the cedar fortunes made up-river at the end of last century, it squats on the banks of the quiet Nambucca River and remembers its past glory as the finest inn on the coast. Nowadays its wide verandahs and surviving wrought iron harbour as cirrhotic a crew of space-wastrels, village idiots-in-training, and
general blow-ins as could be found in few other places on the Pacific Highway.

It is late and rainy when I tip-toe past the last of these boozers and brawlers, up the stairs to the overnight rooms. Finding Number Five unoccupied and open, I slip in, lock the door, open the window out onto the roof (in case of the need for a quick escape) and slowly lower myself onto its creaking bedsprings. Room at the inn! How delightful. Instead of counting sheep, I start to follow a thread of fantasy which seems loosely attached to Nurse Lapp's white buttons. However, I am to lie neither straight nor long in this bed.

'Open the fuckin' door, Derek!' hisses a woman - certainly not the queen of my present dreams - who is Indian wrestling the door-knob of 'my' room. Her volume and vigour increase, masking the sounds of my panicky getaway. I'm half-way out the window and onto the roof when the light in the next room flicks on. Its occupant, the aforementioned Derek, has awoken from his whisky dreams. He opens the hall door and loudly informs his Nora that she's got the 'wrong door, ya silly bugger.' They creak down into their long-suffering bed and beat each other to sleep with half-hearted profanities and a Johnny Walker chaser. I return to my bed.

Nora's bladder isn't as strong as her vocabulary. Every half hour or so she's off down the hall to the ladies loo. Each time she makes the journey, the door to their room blows shut; each time she has to roar and rattle the poor addled Derek out of his slumbers. On the last of her relief missions Derek simply cannot be roused, so she clambers over the balcony and across the corrugated iron roof until she reaches what she figures to be her window. Instead, it's mine. Halfway through it, she sees me sitting bolt-upright and bug-eyed in bed.

'Aw, shit. Sorry, love. Wrong room!' she giggles, and is gone.

Reaching her own window she scares Derek back to life with a rousing blast. These walls hear everything. Derek and Nora belabour each other by various genital nick-names for the next few minutes; then we can all fall asleep. Too nervous to be a good petty criminal, I sleep fitfully until five a.m. before tip-toeing back
downstairs in order to avoid the publican's wrath. I meet a Nambucca morning drenched in scents of river mists, jasmine and rain. On the road again.

Back then Highway One was a yellow-bellied black snake slithering one way through our escape route dreams. North. Never south on this mythic route. To Queensland, to anonymity, to evade the bailiff and the alimony, or just the sting of southern winters. *Up there*, things promised, things will be different. The sun forgives, the southern police forget, the cane-rows close behind you. The Reef. The Gulf. The Isa. The proper names of legend, replete with ease, prosperity if you want it, and, if you need it, invisibility.

But this is July, and instead of rogues and rakes, lurk merchants and runaway princesses, the roads are full of superannuated Victorian lawn bowlers. Be-flannelled, be-blazered old bastards in this season's heart-attack machine, the 1966 Valiant. They are not my kind of people. More to the point, I am not their kind of person. My first girlfriend's parents were bowlers and did not wholly approve of me. Other bowlers can perceive this subtle stigmata of Previous Lawn Bowler Disapproval, and take appropriate evasive action. A reflexive snort of Bowler Disapproval escapes Aub's nostril; he (Dorothy never drives) white-knuckles the wheel and stabs at the accelerator; they both stare straight ahead, while the white lie of their body English says, 'We didn't even see that hitch-hiking bludger, did we, Dot?'

*Two barrels of this highway
 to blast you through the blue.*
*One goes crooked to heaven,
 the other straight to you.*

*Two lanes upon this highway
 to ring you like a bell:
 one goes straight to heaven
 and the tourists can go to hell.*

Thus, all parties are relieved when, at the Big Banana near Coff's Harbour, a lowered, shaved, bored, wide-wheeled, British Racing Green Mini Cooper 'S' slews side-ways to a halt, showering
my pack with gravel and my path with blessings. The Great Lawn Highway is relieved of the mutual odium of Jack High versus Jack Ho, and I am on my way to the border with Greg, an apprentice printer from Canberra.

'Annual leave. Going to Coolangatta. A week at Greenmount. Oughta be great! Hey, watch this ...'

He drops it back a cog. The gearbox screams blue murder, the exhaust pipe haemorrhages another baffle, the sump cover showers sparks: a true Mini Scooper. In a perfectly controlled four-wheel drift just south of Grafton I see two sets of figures: a speedo reading of 85 m.p.h. and a speed advisory sign of 45 m.p.h.!

'It corners great, eh?' he says.

'You bet.' I answer. 'But how about the forty-five speed limit?'

'Hell. That's the minimum speed they allow. Go any slower and they'll book you. And, mate, I've just missed-out on being drafted into "Nasho" - so no uniform's going to get me.'

We're heading for the border. All I have to do is to lay back in the reverie of motion, feeling like a mobile tape-head humming down the endless magnetic strip of Highway One, in 'Record' and 'Replay' simultaneously, feeling the ten-thousand images of the journey write themselves somewhere within me, singing me on and on. The road records everything which has passed its way. The windscreens discloses its phantom pentimento of footprints, ringbark, drills, drays, flivvers, graders, C.W.A. ladies, reps, cons, truckies, Pioneer buses, bankers, cranks, publicans, Studebakers, FJs, rabbitos, villages, Valiants, and the odd hitch-hiker or a thousand, plus his diary

... shards of blown-out truck tyre transmogrify into an echidna, then shuffle back to Goodyear-time. A bridge stanchion turns into a hitch-hiker; a walker's white scarf into a seagull around her shoulders.

... those riverside, god-green, gods' garden dairy flats, like the flood-plains of heaven, all contented cows and reincarnation milk. (When a better a better chocolate malted is made, the N.S.W. North Coast will do it.)
... the centreline a sliver of sunlight. Blades of grass on fire in the late light. Catseye Highway coming up in the dusk. And what have I learned today?
... a cathedral of trees arches its spandrels above the black-top nave. Sistine-high, a million-tiled mosaic of green-gold leaf, to which velocity is our only homage. Say Yea! and keep the needle on the ton. Fear and joy. The Year of You Can't Go Back.

From just north of Grafton, then up through Ulmarra, Cowper and Tyndale to Maclean, the highway runs beside the south arm of the Clarence River, through a huge green pulse of sugar cane fields, and smack-bang into magic. Here the ordinary world is netted by a web of rhythm-cracks in the concrete road and by red earth seams between the endless cane-rows. The big river steams like an upturned iron. The roots of giant Moreton Bay Figs weave the mists into the web. The road runs off the map, and just beyond the river-bank a parallel universe diverts things familiar into something else.

Beautiful white farm houses stand four-square, solid, verandah'd and abandoned. Cattle and mares are still in their post n' rail yards, cows in the bails, the chimneys on the silver roofs are warm, the front doors ajar as though in welcome. But no one lives here, for the road and the river run too close to their doors. The sound of one and the no-sound of the other, drifting through kitchen hearths and bedroom hearts and through the eyes of their occupants, always draw those eyes out; out, once too often, to watch the receding rubies of tail-lights and portside-lamps disappearing in the night, to endless gypsydom. Those doors of the ghost houses of the highway stand ajar not in welcome, but in departure.

It's not even a line, just a sign: State Border. But for me, it's a frontier, the Rubicon to the world. Another state. So ... this is Coolangatta. This is what Queensland smells like - all frangipani and fish-heads. Greg heads off to the lovely ramshackle guest-house which sits like a white pagoda upon the grassy knoll called Greenmount. Surf fans at its feet, Norfolk Island pines shade its walks. Pre-postcard prettiness. I sit on my pack until dark. Dusk folds down across the sea, and above it, a bruise of clouds crosses
the cheek of the cardinal point. East of the earth and just west of night people on the shore wander the interstice of the remaining light. The starry tango above winks knowingly, betrays no endings. A couple disappears down the beach, traced only by the diminuendo red glow of the cigarette they share.

The next few days I spend in wandering the shore from Rainbow Rocks up to Currumbin, matching reality against the romantic fantasies conjured during too many years of surfing magazines and enforced Sydney-ness. Yes, the Gold Coast sun does shine brighter than a Sydney winter's. The local girls are strawberry blond, chocolate brown, deliciously pretty - the usual menu of mouthy metaphors. And true, the sea is warmer. Waves fan around Greenmount like a little corner of dreams with fields of Elysian foam in the wake of their perfect curls. But I have no surfboard.

There are also the same tawdry beasts as found in the monochrome South, but which never emerged in my Kodakchrome Coast fantasies: chipped Laminex, nervous-tic neons, a hamburger diet, rev heads in rust-bucket utes, bag people, slags, dags, hoons, shonky evangelists and looking-for-trouble cops.

Three days of sleeping on the concrete balcony of Coolangatta Surf Club and of eating fish and chips at a take-away joint, dubbed by the beach kids as 'Chew n' Spew' (or 'Heave n' Leave', or 'Chuck n' Chunders'), is hardly the escapee's grail which I've come chasing. And by now, that old sense of not-belonging-here - which is sometimes the jewel, but usually the bane of The Road - has settled-in as my constant companion. It squats upon my soul, as attractive as a cane-toad on the shoulder. Whatever its jewelly possibilities for pen, brush or song, they've done a bunk on me. The Muse here is lizard-skinned, a squamous squaw in a faded green bikini, slouched against her boyfriend's van, sucking on a fag and a Fanta. Split ends too.

A trip up to Surfer's Paradise confirms this morbidness. From Coolangatta, Surfer's juts above the horizon mists like either a cluster of gravestones, or stacks of casino chips. Either way, a premonition, I figure, of its future. From close-up the impression is
confirmed. It seems to me the death of kindness. All right-angles at the wrong angle to life, slicing it into grids and Bar-B-Q griddles, real estate fiddles and sub-sub-divisions. A place of the plastic pox and gauche southerners in long white sox. Bad-taste beach shirts. Mangrove waterways being strained and retained into 'canals' and 'island estates.' No irony here in its 'Paradise' title; no, just some po-faced Joe selling the Miami disease.

It's a relief to get back to semi-under-developed Coolangatta, and, since it's Friday night in this first and last resort, the relief is tragi-comic. It seems to me that the principal function of the Gold Coast - and probably most other tourist towns - is to give people a chance to foul someone else's nest: all the comforts of home, and after a week of laying it to waste with animal acts you'd never contemplate in Parramatta or Pymble, you can hop back in the car or bus and leave the wreckage behind. Such is a Fri'dy night in the 'Gatta.

Wally from Moorabbin ('came up here with the olds, haven't seen 'em for three days - they're gettin' blind at the RSL') has third-degree sunburn on his nose, is sixteen going on sixty, and tonight has already twice been refused entry to the Coolangatta Hotel beer garden. I buy us a few bottles of Castlemaine and we sit on the sea-wall talking surf and music.

'Thanks for getting this.' he says. 'Here, I'll open it with me teeth. Any cops around?'

'No. Why?' I ask.

'They tried to bust me for it before. Not for drinking. For opening a stubbie with me teeth. Told me to fuck-off.'

Rip. Guzzle. Chuckle. Wally spies two fourteen year-old damsels approaching. With limbs akimbo and spastic bravura, he gallantly sweeps clean the footpath before them with his beach towel. He focusses on the pretty one with the cascade of blond curls.

'I noticed you 'round here this morning, with those, you know, spunky shorts an' all.' he goofs.

'Gee, Sir Walter,' she replies, unfazed, 'you'll embarrass me. But ... go on.'
Her plain girlfriend, who's not copping any of the action, hisses ‘Come on Vanessa, we'll be late.’

‘Hey, how'd you know my name?’ Wally yells after them.

Vanessa throws a wicked wink over her shoulder. In their wake Wally rotates his arms like a jilted windmill, clutches his heart and dies on the spot of true lust.

The two girls time their run for the beer garden. While the bouncer is adjudicating on whether a buxom dame in a bonsai’d bikini top is 'properly attired' or not, because of the thongs she's wearing, the girls slip past. Wally the Gallant's in love, and no bouncer's going to beat him. The last I saw of him, he was climbing the trellis fence of the beer garden. In a flurry of shandies, beach towels and blonde hair he crashed onto Vanessa's table, grabbed a quick 'pash', then hit the toe for the door, with the bouncer in hot pursuit, and an intrigued Vanessa soon to follow. The Easybeats on the juke-box P.A. were the sound-track to his night and his life.

Tonight. I'll lose my head
Tonight. I'll spend my bread
Tonight. I've got to get ...
To-ny-yi-ight ...

Next afternoon while hitching back from Kirra I jumped into a car. Too late I saw its two-way radio. The plain-clothes cop had it covered with his hat as he offered me a lift. And so it's down to the station for questions, and several hours of alternating boredom and anxiety. A phone-call south proved that I'm wanted for nothing. I had sufficient identification and money to save me from a vagrancy charge. Mostly they didn't like me sleeping on the beach without having been caught in the act by their beach patrol. I don't bother to tell them about the Surf Club balcony. Might spoil it for the next traveller.

'Righto, Jack,' says Detective Byrd (whom I've dubbed 'Pyg-wyng', and of whose power I am terrified), 'you can go now. But if we catch you 'round here again, it's a vag charge, OK?'

Not OK. The following morning I put the road into rewind, walked across to Tweed Heads and twiddled the one-thumb mudra for a safe passage south.
It is in departure that the road becomes The Road. *Arrival* and *The Road*, I decide, are mutually exclusive. I'm feeling good again, even though the lawn bowlers continue to treat me like the Leper of the Left Lane, as do the four-pack families and the caravan set, to boot. But, beside black road, beneath blue sky and surrounded by a green riot of palm, pine, fern and fig, who's going to let this Melbourne suburb-on-wheels bring him down? All I lack is a companion. I scribble in my diary: *Travel writing is caused by not having anyone to talk to.*

Soon enough I *do* have someone to talk to. An audacious red E-Type Jag burbles to a halt. Its driver is a non-stop talker, and he's heading to Ballina. For some motorists, having a hitcher in the car is like driving a personal confessional booth with a free, but captive confessor. All sorts of things come out, and half of them are half true. Red E. Jag starts telling me the story he'd heard from a bloke who knew a bloke who knew a Gold Goast bank manager '... who was slipping across into New South to play the Tweed Heads pokies a bit too often, getting himself into trouble on cash he'd borrowed from his own bank. Instead of winning his way out of the hole he found himself going further down the gurgler, and starting to attract attention. He decides the only way out is to go the whole hog and to knock-off a hundred thousand quid's worth of fixed term deposits - which would give him time to get to Brazil before they matured and were noticed.

So, he does the evil deed; even has the airline ticket to Rio. And then he loses his nerve. So he finds a solicitor - someone who doesn't know him, a bloke from Southport, that he won't be ashamed to face - and tells him everything. Says he wants to confess, and could the lawyer somehow negotiate a reduced sentence if he returned the one hundred big ones?

"Come back tomorrow", says the lawyer, "and bring the cash with you." The lawyer contacts the bank's legal branch and asks them if they knew they had been embezzled of one hundred thousand pounds? (Christ, no!) And, would they like the matter settled out of court? (Shit, yes!) And out of the papers? (Yes, yes.) With the voluntary retirement of the embezzler? (Well, naturally.)
Plus the return of something more than half of the missing sum?
(Oh fuck! OK, better than nothing.)

The next day, after the banker had dropped-off the hundred grand, the solicitor drove up to the bank's Brisbane head office and handed-over the "something more than half of the missing sum", to which they had agreed. To be exact, he handed over fifty-one thousand pounds.

He went back to Southport and called in the by-now ex-bank manager. Who is still hoping to get seven, rather than ten years non-parole in Boggo Road. Instead, the lawyer, who's a very fair sort of bloke, hands him twenty-four thousand five hundred quid, and tells him to stick to Bingo from now on. The manager walked out on cloud nine. Followed soon after by the lawyer, who - just for the lark - went down to the bank branch in question and opened for himself a deposit - fixed term of course - of twenty-four thousand five hundred quid. Not bad for a day's work, eh?'

Often when hitching you never get around to introductions. Sometimes it happens when you get in, and at other times just as you're getting out. When the E-Type dropped me at Ballina Post Office, the driver and I shook hands and he gave me his card. It said 'Solicitor'. The address was Southport.

Rolling back through the Big River Country, down past Wardell, Broadwater and Woodburn, that narcosis of the roads overtakes me again, and everything falls into a blur. Down sugar-cane lanes, beside the big-hearted bounty of waters, through the shadows of poinciana and poplar, past pole houses, punts, dairy factories and distant silver-roofed hilltop homes, the rivers run like a fuse from land to sea to sky. Their names seem to me incantations, a litany of paddle-wheeler romances: Richmond, Clarence, Bellinger, Kalang, Nambucca, Macleay, Hastings, Manning ...

Heading home. Gorgeous old Gondwananland, unrolling at godspeed, its dusk closing in like summer rain above its newest name, an Australia of fresh-cut fire-breaks, rusting back-yard cars, 'roos and rabbits, lace-iron pubs.
A ridge rises to mind.
A tree exclaims against the skyline.
Moments before the rain, rescued by a ride,
the hitch-hiker’s heart is a leaf
one hundred feet high past that ridge.

One madman Cockney truck driver, Dave, insists we have a beer in Macksville, at 'The Star', of course. In what he describes as the 'Mongrel Bar' we have a middy for the road. Above us, next to the sign which promises 'Credit to everyone over 90 who is accompanied by a parent', is a faded colour picture of the pub exterior. Its derelict-looking crew of blue-singleted, ruddy-nosed timbermen and slaughtermen - trenchermen all - is lined-up on the pub porch.

'That was taken in '64.' says the barmaid. They don't drink here anymore, none of those blokes. They're all barred, or dead.'

She looks familiar. It's Nora! She of the dulcet tongue and weak bladder, who had almost climbed in my window. She squints at me, short-term memory mercifully malfunctioning, and can't quite place the face. We both let it pass.

Re-playing the oxide of the road, we rumble down through those country towns, where on Mondays CWA women in sensible print frocks hold jam stalls and pumpkin-scone raffles in front of the local Rural Bank. Where the Aborigines hitch back to their settlements across the river. Where the way-signs are beads of time on The Journey's diamond highway. These names from the world of the Arakwal, Awabakal, Kumbainggiri, Ngamba and other tribes now exist only as black letters on a white ground, but buried in the synesthesia of their sounds are pictures of that first world:

Nambucca, the crooked river.
Clybucca, the crooked tallow-wood tree.
Yarrahappinni, the bear rolling down a hill.
Coolongolook, the place of bats ...

On the edge of town the bile-green neon of the 'Rep's Remorse Motel' gives way to obsidian night, where all the things I don't know about the earth and people and history, and all the story
unrolling from those names gleams back, recondite, from the black trees.

Long night, and Dave is full of raves. Claimed he'd once been in Thailand, escorting a party of English schoolgirls on a cultural tour.

'Siamese cats and Siamese twins. That's all these little darlin's knew about the place until they got there. So, first mornin' in Bangkok they come downstairs, go out the front of the hotel to the bus, and lo and behold, there's two dogs just had a screw. You know, stuck back-to-back, like. And one of the girls points to 'em and says "Oo, look. Siamese dogs!"

His stories were hilarious, endless, dreadful. The shoe was on the other foot: here was the driver keeping the hitcher awake. The raving roads indeed. I feigned sleep as the black pelt of the world closed around the old Bedford and the rapture of the distances overtook me with its one thousand images and ten-thousand words.
Back then - at twenty - I believed, with all the deadly earnestness which only that age can summon, that I was already running on empty. My life in Sydney was certifiably dead, and I probably wouldn't be far behind.

Already too old to succeed, and yet too young to fail, I borrowed twenty dollars and decided to flee my own autopsy, and those upon the academic, economic and romantic corpses strewn behind me, by taking to the roads, forever. To disappear. Or at least to hitch-hike around the coast of Australia, the circumference of the knowable world.

The concentric tourniquets which stifle Sydney - mortgage belt, industrial belt and fast-food chains - soon fell away. An old Fargo van piloted by a 'rabbito' named Ernie took me over the Blue Mountains and out past Bathurst to the Carcoar district, where I joined him on a three-day bunny safari. The western plains of the Great Divide. It's like driving through a Hans Heysen painting. Stringy-barks and, below the wind, undulating fields of young wheat rolling like ground-swell across the earth. Sulphur-crested cockatoos cartwheeling down the sky, screeching through the bush. Mobs of galahs, and not too many cars. Soon enough you realise that this hitching life is a long-distance loneliness punctuated by longer-distance anxiety: 'Will I ever get another ride?' To which a homespun, thumb-built philosophy assuages: 'Then again, the longer you wait, the sooner your ride comes.' Or so you hope.

And here it is: an interstate Mack, a cockie in a Zephyr, a bodgie in a '55 Customline, a philosophy lecturer in a Vanguard, who refers mockingly to his vehicle as "'Ergo," the vanguard of the intelligensia,' a Diamond T, a whining Bellett, a stolen Holden, the
last of the split rear-window VWs. It's like living in a motor museum.

Somewhere near Cowra we pass a semi-trailer which has overturned on a curve, spilling its cargo. The road-side looks like a kid cowboy's dream: it's strewn with R. M. Williams boots and licorice Choo-Choo Bars. I quickly grab a pair of the former and a pocket-full of the latter only to discover, thirty miles further down the road, that in the dark I've picked one size eight boot and one size ten. That these two boots average my size is not good enough. I double-back, rummage around for two size nines, and depart suitably shod just as the insurance agents arrive to torch the lot. I imagine that now, in my Williams boots, no one will spot me as a city boy.

Across the plains of the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area dawn and dusk suns flickered like strobe-lights through the poplars and eucalypts, muting the colours and suspending the familiar, as though we were travelling through a silent movie. At Hay I helped a truckie change eight of his 18 tyres. Then a quick raid on someone's orange orchard. Later, a ride in a bone-rattling International from Balranald to Mildura.

'I've been at the wheel for 22 hours,' says the driver, 'and since I was starting to talk to myself, I figured I oughter find someone to listen to me.'

The truckies possessed enormous stamina. Many lived like gypsies, criss-crossing the state and country for weeks on end, at odds with log books, cops, savage schedules and their own body clocks. Some were reticent, others great yarn spinners in a language which was a rainbow of profane inventions. One Mack driver kept talking about 'the bloody mermaids'll get ya.'

'In the Murrumbidgee?' I asked, wondering about highway narcosis and little white pills.

'My oath. Mermaids all over the M.I.A. Especially during the harvests. Weigh-bridge inspectors. You know, cunts with scales.'

New South Wales became Victoria, became South Australia. Berri, Renmark, Riverton, the beautiful Clare Valley, Port Pirie, all vanished into the infinite regress of the rear-view mirror. Beyond
Port Augusta the Nullarbor Plain and The Great Australian Bight now awaited my thumb-dance. I prepared by carefully provisioning with a bottle of Passiona and a packet of Iced Vo-Vo biscuits; by now there wasn't much left of the twenty bucks. The driver of a flash Ford Galaxy managed to detour me from death by dehydration and Vo-Vo O.D. when he informed me that he was an abalone diver out of Ceduna, and, did I need a job?

The next morning I found myself racing out to sea in an 18 foot launch, one of a team of three 'ab boats.' Our destination was the Islands of St Francis in the Van Nuyts Archipelago, about 40 miles off-shore from Ceduna. The head of the outfit was Rodney Fox, a man who had achieved considerable fame by surviving a horrendous shark-attack, in which a White Pointer had clamped his whole torso in its horrible maw. Rodney had struggled so fiercely that the shark hesitated for a moment before delivering the coup de grâce. He kicked free, but with the perfect imprint of the shark's complete set of upper and lower teeth puncturing his torso fore and aft. Several hundred stitches later - it looked like a zipper would have been quicker - and after a brief convalescence, Rodney got back on the horse, so to speak, and resumed his lucrative occupation as an abalone diver.

The little Bertram cruiser scudded over the south-westerly swell, past the yellowing wreck of an old freighter which was returning, rust-to-rust, into the seascape of a deserted cove. At the intrusive sound of our howling Mercurys, brown Fur-seals sunning themselves on the island rocks wriggled and plopped into the sea. My job was to stay on deck, tending the air-compressor, making sure the divers' air-lines weren't kinked, and shelling (or 'shucking') the bags of abalone which I had winched to the surface. Also, to watch for sharks. Folks, my title was 'shucker'. The pay, fifteen pounds a day; the draw-back, constant sea-sickness puling in my guts.

The team of five divers was camped at the back of the Ceduna Shell Roadhouse, where we lived in a flapping grey tent and slept on army-surplus stretchers. Tinned spag and meatballs for breakfast and, predictably, fish for dinner. After a week's fishing
the winds turned on-shore, the water became too choppy and turbid, visibility reduced ... just the excuse the boys were looking for. They hopped into their V8s and scooted the 500 miles back to Adelaide's flesh-pots, such as they are, until the synoptic chart would prophesy better things. I would probably move on before they returned.

During my modest career as a shucker, I had often noticed a glum-looking kid wandering into the Roadhouse for cups of tea. His name was Teddy, an Aucklander, and he was having no luck in hitching to Perth. Each day, for a working week, he had stood by the Ceduna tick-gate waggling his thumb from nine to five. A thousand miles of desert lay ahead, and he couldn't even get out of town.

'I gave-up a nine to five office job for this?' he lamented.

He had my sympathy, and also my anxiety. I wasn't looking forward to a similar fate, i.e. wait. But worse, he was at the head of the queue. Hitching's etiquette is like surfing's: you don't drop-in. The person who got there first has priority; and the next hitcher has to stand well down the road, past the first one. At Ceduna this means that the hitcher who's at the inspection gate - in this case Teddy - can actually ask the halted cars for a ride. If he can't score one, the next guy - like me - who is 50 yards down the road, thumbing at the by-now accelerating vehicles has got Buckley's chance. I prayed for Teddy's success.

To no avail. Come the morning of my intended departure, there was Teddy, trudging down toward the inspection gate. As I sat at the counter of the Roadhouse diner, staring a hole in my pre-road coffee, not looking forward at all to this one, I struck-up conversation with the reverend gentleman who was breakfasting beside me. Who announced he was heading to Perth.

'Now?' I said. 'I mean, today?'

'Yes.' he answered.

'Could I, um ... get a lift with you?'

It was with a mixture of jubilation and shame that I drove through that Ceduna tick-gate. I had just scored a ride all the way
across the Nullarbor, *without even raising my thumb!* But I couldn't look at Teddy.

The No Tree Plain was a surreal ribbon of unsealed images. Like the black wake of some invisible boat, the highway rose and fell, fell and rose, straight as death, across the undulating pulse of the spinifex ocean. Heat miasmas shredded the vanishing point and left it flapping between heaven and the horizon. One sign said 'Last Petrol', another warned 'Last Water'. After that the husks of blown-out tyres, broken beer bottles and dead kangaroos provided the only pointers. Beside crater-sized pot-holes and jaw-jarring corrugations, abandoned cars devolved from rust to dust. Ragged Aborigines walked from apparently nowhere to nowhere. A mission. A station. Hundreds of miles from anywhere, two wild-eyed hitch-hikers gesticulating like crazed windmills beside their midnight bonfire. The old telegraph station at Eucla, appeared then disappeared, engulfed in the shifting coastal dunes. The W.A. border, and the first sign of 'civilisation', a bullet-peppered tin square proclaiming 'First Swan Beer'. Finally, after 1200 miles in 36 hours, I said farewell to the terrifically decent 'Rev. Trev' Brown, missionary, late of Port Morseby. I teetered, sleepless and speechless, onto King George's Terrace, Perth. Wrecked, but there.

_Diary! O Dear Dorothy Diary! The muck you have to put up with, the alternating elations and depressions, the scratchings inside the vacuum flask which passes for a skull on this mad-mad-man-on-the-road ..._

_Perth is still Earth, but on another planet. Like a red-hot penny, the sun sinks into the sea - instead of rising out of it. Just like a west coast should._

_'Is that Africa out there? ... Oh, Rottnest Island. Thank you.'_

_Aborigines sleep under park trees, and ask me for money_

_White '68 model Australia cruises the red-brick sea of nausea. These Pommie-Wop blow-ins are meant to be 'my' people - so why do I feel like the spare prick at their wedding of insatiable demand and inexorable supply?_
Warm city in winter, slower-poke than Sydney. Its Indian Ocean cowboys carve the north-west into new zaibatus. Everyone speaks the same Australian English still - and in Europe I would've crashed through at least eight language barriers in the same distance ... But, now to find a job, get rich, run away to sea.

Accomodation: within five minutes of my arrival on St Georges Terrace, an old vagrant had saved me from following in his multiple-conviction footsteps. I was half-way over the wall of what I took to be a nice leafy park - which would do fine for my night's accomodation - when a metho-mellowed larynx growled, 'Skip it, matey. That's the State Gov'nor's joint. They'll nab ya for the vag and trespass - an' prob'ly fuckin' treason too.' I left the Vice-Regal vice to the Governor and continued on. Someone pointed-out an old red brick building, cluttered with spires and battlements. It had been a religious institution of some kind, and still bore the name 'The Cloisters.' Now it functioned as a flop-house for the impecunious and peripatetic, those fools who on good days claim to belong to the 'brotherhood of the road,' and on bad days to nothing at all, the 'otherhood of the road.' I checked in. For a dollar a night, a hot shower, a dormitory bed and dreams of wimples, dimples, pimples ...

On a Monday morning I hit the streets of Perth looking for a job in the north-west mines. Enough self-defeatists in pubs had assured and re-assured me that there were no, N-bloody-O mine jobs to be had in the Pilbara region. To go up there looking for work, they said, was crazy because all mine hiring was done in Perth. And no one was being hired in Perth.

'Been here six weeks, sport.' was the usual dirge. 'No chance of a labouring job up there. You might as well get one on a site in Perth. Not that they want anyone here either.'

There seemed to be competition at the bar to see who could tell the greatest tale of ruination. You could have given The Hanrahan ('We'll all be roo-ned.') Memorial Award to any one of 'em.

'I've been here six months, sport. No way you'll get a job.'
They looked like men who really didn’t want to sweat long days and to masturbate empty nights in the spartan north. Their comfort in complaint, supported by that ever-faithful prosthetic implant, the bar-stool, and surrounded by the bonhomie and barmaids of a city pub, suited them fine. Their body language told everyone so, except themselves.

'Sorry, the office is closed for today.' said the personnel officer at Hamersley Iron.

'But I've been waiting here two hours already.'

'Oh. It seems like you've been forgotten.' He looked a little embarrassed. 'What were you after?'

'A labouring job at Tom Price. Are there any going?'

'Not really. But ... let's look at your application form. There might just be something.'

He's actually feeling bad that I've had to waste two hours because of a stuff-up by his clerk. He makes it up in the only way that counts: with a start at Mount Tom Price!

The Job: up with socks and drill them rocks every morning of the seven-day week, mouth monstrously through the mess, bus out to this almost solid iron ore hump in the Hamersley Range which is being exported knuckle-by-knuckle to Nippon, drive around on an Air-Track crawler-drill, boring holes in boulders so they can be blown to smithereens, save every cent, sleep in an eight by twelve room, get-up and do it again - for 10 weeks - amen.

The town had 500 single men and six single women. Extraordinarily, one night one of the girls kissed me. Even more extraordinary, I can't recall why. It was a company town, of family bungalows and single mens' dormitories, one extorting supermarket, a pub, and no brawling. In the event of anyone delivering a knuckle-sandwich, both server and swallower were on the first plane south, no questions asked. An enormously fat catering manager, Kell, and his pet emu - sharing similar silhouettes - paraded around town. The West Australian Ballet Company visited, but the result was a sense of deprivation rather than of elevation. As Erwin announced next morning on the mine bus:
'Gentlemen, it was very sad. There was enough crotch up there to go around for all of us.'

The old drillers had worked all the big projects in Australia and New Guinea. They talked of the Snowy Mountains Hydro scheme in the 1950s, of the great tunnels through the mountains around Talbingo and Tumut; and, inevitably, of 'a bloke I know who knows a bloke who drilled through a seam of gold a foot wide that the engineers just sealed-over - under orders to keep the project running on time.'

Hamersley Mining had sunk $300 million into the Tom Price open-cut mine, and was going to do very well out of it, thank you. But for all the state-of-the-art crushers and conveyors, things still kept jamming. After six hours of shovelling crushed ore, which had flooded the train loading-bays when an ore-shute stuck open, Duggy the Drunk bellowed, 'Three hundred million bucks worth of alternating oscillators and oscillating bloody alternators, and it still takes a dozen blokes on pick n' shovel to make the bastard work!'

I became the off-sider on a big Ingersoll-Rand mobile drilling rig, which trundled over the mountain, day and night, sinking 60 foot deep holes with its tungsten bit. The powder crew followed in our wake, filling the drill pattern with Nitro explosive and blasting the hill-side to Mitsubishi. On night-shifts, while old Frank O'Reilly, the driller, eased the bit down into the earth with the skill of a surgeon - and sutured himself against the cold with furtive belts of Vodka - I would crawl right into the roaring innards of one of the twin diesel compressors. The Pilbara nights were freezing and the rig had only a one-man cab. (And anyway, conversation was out of the question because of the roar of the compressors and the halmohst tohtal himpehntrabhility of Frahnk's Hoirish haccent.) The only possible warmth to be had was in huddling next to the compressor's screaming flywheels. I crouched for hours, embalmed in a diesel amnion, hypnotised within these roaring rhythms and sub-rhythms in the belly of the beast, enmeshed in the machine music of the Atlas-Copco spheres, watching the spokes of the star-wheels turning, and wondering where, for me, real life lay?
Day-shift on the rapidly-disappearing mountain allowed a view of the red-eyed wilderness which surrounded us. The Hamersley Range of course harbours more than noisome, boom-town mines. Between its green-yellow spinnifex terrain, ghost gums and blue-black heavens, there are all the possibilities of caves and creeks, Aboriginal paintings, birds, beasts and visions. But, to me, the grime-faced hoon on the hill, useless without a four-wheel drive or a day off, it was the horse latitudes of a life; the spinifex was a Sargasso Sea, and beneath that huge marquee of blue, we were just prisoners of place.

After ten weeks of entrapment and frugality, with the outside world leaking-in only through anomalous media grabs (listening to Their Satanic Majesties Request and Vanilla Fudge; reading Simone de Beauvoir; hearing over breakfast that Robert Kennedy had been shot dead), I had saved one thousand 1968 Australian dollars, and had grown a beard. A bulldozer driver yelled, 'What are ya, mate? An armpit with eyes, or a cunt with teeth?'; and I jumped an ore train to the coast. Duggie the Drunk ('I don't need a fuckin' uni. degree to drive a truck.' he'd snarled at me), who'd saved nothing, and the fitter who hated me washing my work-boots in the communal Malleys, were glad to see me go. So was I.

Port Hedland was a culture cut-up, of hitching-rails outside supermarkets, bulk ore carriers moored off-shore from feral camels, and giant Thursday Islanders setting world records by day in laying railway-track and by night, in alcohol abuse. Broome was quieter, with its old pearling luggers careened on the tidal flats, like elephants drunk in the sun, and its exemplary miscegenation of Japanese-Malay-Chinese-Aboriginal-European genes.

Rides are few, but then again they're long. Up here, a hundred miles is not much more than 'next-door.' Derby. Fitzroy Crossing. Hall's Creek. The road curves east then north, squeezing between the Kimberley Plateau to the north and the Great Sandy Desert to the south. At times I spot wild camels and donkeys fleeing through the scrub. The sky turns turquoise at the edges. The whistling, whip-cracking Aboriginal stockmen, dressed like fantastic gauchos in red bandanas, Williams boots, chaps and Akubras, just let us sit
and wait, and wait, while their huge mob of cattle ambles on its way, out from Noonkanbah.

One morning I awake beside the road, just outside Kununurra, and wish myself 'Happy Birthday!' I've turned 21. Preferring not to over-emphasise homelessness and joblessness as harbingers of a dubious future, nor the discomfort of having been stuck in this spot for three days, I walk into town and celebrate my majority with a few beers and a tin of smoked oysters. Later, down the road comes Rod, with whom I'd travelled the last 200 miles, and whose Land-Cruiser I had jacked out of two bogs and three flats. He knew I was going to Katherine, some 600 miles away across the W.A - N.T. border; and I knew he was going there too. He pulled-up beside me.

'Just driving down the road a bit, Jack. I want to take a look at the Ord Dam. If you're still here when I get back, I'll give you a lift to Katherine tomorrow.'

Rod's forked-tongue clicks; his nose gets longer. He never comes back. By the time he's a sixth of the way to Katherine (and, who knows - maybe well and single-handedly bogged?) I've decided to remove myself from the vagaries of Kununurra's roadside and the mercies of such prevaricating ponces. The next morning I'm on a TAA Fokker out of Wyndham to Darwin.

As we climbed above the jigsaw coastline, where the bays and estuaries meet the Timor Sea, I stretched my neck to squint as far as I could, north through the diamond dawn, aching to see another country, Timor. I couldn't. The hostess served me breakfast over the Joseph Bonaparte Gulf, then another near Port Keats, and another at the Daly River. I landed heavily in Darwin, feeling as though I'd partly re-couped, in eggs, orange juice, toast and coffee, this unconscionable expenditure of $25 for the plane-ride.

Darwin, 'The Top-End', 'The Territory.' It all seemed steeped in sweat and alcohol; and it was still only 10 a.m. Due to the sullen, pre-noon deliquescence, plus the pangs of my own paranoia - brought-on by a cheap-skate little fare-evasion trick which I had pulled on the airport taxi - it seemed best that I did not linger in this rheumy outpost. I hit the road, positive that the radio cabs were reporting on my location and were now circling, about to pounce. Mercifully, I was soon whisked down the track to Rum
Jungle by two wild girls with long red finger-nails and a big, black, bat-winged Chewy Biscayne. Then, at Adelaide River I ran-out of momentum.

*Homeless, homeless, tracking down what phantoms of Hero Road?* Hemingway by now would have downed three macho martinis, torn the horns off a few of these waterbuffs and written the novel of it - all before lunch. By dusk it would have been a film-script. Peter Pinney would have tossed an Afghan camel driver for a free ride to Alice, and for the 'Ghan's turban, taboot. And won. Kerouac and Cassidy would've driven on the wrong side of the road all the way from Mataranka to Banka Banka, with those two Chewy girls singing doo-wop shoo-bop hymns in the back seat.

I've got a sky about to rain, a packet of Sao biscuits and no ride in the last hour. Hah! The Holy Road! The Quest and Journey! Beside a suicide's sky somewhere north of Katherine Meat Works, I spit my allegiance to this phantom family of paper-back tigers. Where is the colour fuse to God? I rave at the road.

*Pah! Petty dramarama.*

All things come to he who thinks they won't - only slower. A truck delivers me from this welter of self-disgust. I hop on the tray, pull my raincoat over my head and watch the Northern Territory roll backwards through the afternoon. The fine ochre bulldust turns to mud-waves spraying out behind us. Savage little pubs, all mosquito mesh and drunk-proof grills occur from time to time. Abandoned World War II airstrips crumble in the scrub. Truckies talk about 'a bloke I know who knows a bloke who served here in '45, and came back a few years ago with a D6 Caterpillar, 'dozed-off a few feet of over-burden, and took out 300 forty-four gallon drums of aviation fuel that the Yanks left buried.' It seems they're still flying on this mythical juice.

'Down the Track' is the location of any movement or object occurring south of Darwin. 'The Track', the Stuart Highway, bisects
the continent from Darwin to Tennant Creek and Alice Springs, and then on to Coober Pedy and Woomera, and all the way across the desert to Port Augusta. The last rail-head south of Darwin is at Mataranka. After that the monstrous road-trains take over, churning hundreds of metres of blinding bull-dust behind their scores of wheels. It's a road of vast distances, dingos, bull-bars built to bounce water buffalo, and endless grey-green winter vistas.

The unremitting flatness of the landscape and sky coincides in some Territorians with a hard and violent psyche, just below an apparently level surface. Like a madness below water-line, it bubbles-up, a regurgitation of the excessive booze, of the too-many times around the clock in the shuddering cage of a diesel prime-mover, and of the shoved-aside memories of all it took to make this land 'white.' My worst brushes with it are mild: the occasional 'fuck-you' finger from some passing cowboy, sneering comments about 'city bastards', pub remarks about 'the useless, bludging boongs'. Just enough to scare.

In others, the limitless horizon and sky appear to have evoked the opposite to this harshness of spirit. With a view unobstructed all the way to infinity, they seem to have left their souls open to scrutiny by both sky and self. The circumference of their knowable world is an enormous earthen insulator against the turmoil and intrusions of coastal culture. The uncomplicated vista, and living at the heart of something which stretches thousands of miles in all directions before it confronts the chaotic sea and regulated cities, have left them content in its colour and rhythms, secure in the anonymity of being simply who they say they are. These were more likely to be the people who gave me lifts. The hard men stopped for couples, and bargained for a fuck as the price of a ride to Darwin or the Alice.

As well as in landscape-led characterology, I pass the stalled hours deep in the tracks of Dust on my Shoes, Peter Pinney's terrific tale of his adventures in bumming from Europe to Burma during the early 1950s. Now there was a hero of the road, I tell myself.

*The soukhs of Damascus, death on the Chindwin, a simple code of the road:* have pen, will travel; have yarn, will rip.
None of this boring shit, eating the dust of Aussies in cozzies sucking Fozzies, or getting the finger from a jerk in a jeep, who's probably owned, lock, stock n' beer gut, by Lord Vestey or some two-bit Texan...

So far from the 'Big Smoke', so deep in the dry desert air, and all I find here is myself, again. I'm sure Pinney didn't bother his head with all this introspective twaddle. He didn't need to read a book - he wrote it!

An old-timer who had spent thirty years as a linesman on the Overland Telegraph took me all the way from Mataranka to Three Ways, 500 miles.

'I seen you there, hitch-hiking like I used to in the Depression, and I've been reading that we might be having another one, a Depression, so I'll give yer a lift.'

This was about his longest sentence during our two-day drive.

My depression passes, now that I have a good, long ride ahead. Come dark, old Jack pulls his old ute off the road, we build a fire, and he heats-up a can of - in the middle of several million square miles of Australian beef country - Paraguayan beef. The occasional kangaroo thumps away through the dark bush. Reticent Jack rolls out his swag and beds down. Only the glow of the tip of his 'roll-yer-own' indicates that he's still awake. After twenty minutes he belches.

'Struth.' he says, 'That stuff tasted more like the Paraguayan himself, eh? G'night Jack.'

'G'night Jack'.

Just north of Tennant Creek is a crossroads of the wind, the sand-whipped, one-pump and epithetic 'Three Ways.' A corrugated iron 'cafeteria.' A bent signpost perversely pivoting west to Alice, east to Darwin, south to Mt.Isa. The cusp of madness, badness and the gerrymander. A landscape of serenity in sunlight, psychosis under storm-cloud. An isolation to flense the nerve-ends. Too far from the sea. A place of gimlet-eyed men, too wise to their own violence to risk much speech with a stranger. Very expensive Mars Bars.
'If ya don't like the price, try the shop next door.' drawls the old hard-case behind the counter.

Only two other objects here exist above ground-level. One is a stone monument to 'Flynn of the Inland', founder of the Flying Doctor Service. His is one of those legendary names from my fifth class Social Studies book. Next I expect to see 'Clancy of the Overflow' canter into view, all bandy-legged and no bullshit, three months ride from 'Old Regret' and Adaminaby, but still knowing exactly 'where he are.'

Clancy doesn't appear, and the other object is no longer standing either. It was a 'roo warning sign, which has recently been laid very low, in fact, parallel to the ground. A gang of woolly-headed guys (a virtual lino-pattern of races and parents) is gathered around it and their old station-wagon, which, it seems, when travelling last night in an ebullient manner en route to Camooweal - where the boys, black, white and brindle, and collectively known as 'The Five Stetsons' country n' western rock n' roll band, are due to appear tonight - had flattened the 'roo sign at 80 m.p.h., and, in the lead guitarist's words, 'used the sump-cover as a grader blade.'

The rhythm section is currently under the car and performing abdominal surgery on the sump pan. The lead singer, stripped forever of his role as driver, is sobering-up in the bushes, from whence can be heard a painful yodelling of Patsy Cline, carrots and Castlemaine. It's all good dirty fun, although from below the car the drummer is grinding his teeth about 'The only bloody thing above ground for a hundred miles, and he hits it!'

'Welcome to Three Days.' says Bobby, the Aboriginal-Greek bassist.

'Three Days?' I repeat.

'Yeah, that's about the average wait for a ride here.'

'Shit.'

'Yeah. Look at this.' he says, pointing to the back of the flattened road-sign. It's covered with a desperate ping-pong party-line of graffiti war:

- J.K. from Frankston was here 26/6/67 - 29/6/67. Hates Queenslanders.
- They hate you too, Mexican shit-head. 3/10/67
- Stuck inside of Three Ways with the Memphis blues again.
- What’s that supposed to mean?

An hour later another hitcher arrives. He’s an old hand, heading for Sydney, and has stood on this corner before. After a warm Coke and a quick squiz around he decides that two hitchers is one too many, and heads off to Sydney the other way, via Alice, the 'Ghan train through Oodnadatta (and its graphic onomatopoeia of chattering teeth in the chill desert air), Adelaide and Melbourne. Thus, it is with near-jubilation that I leap into the back of a Land-Rover which halts for me after a mere three hours.

‘Where’re you going?’ I yell above the motor to the two jackaroos in the front-seat.

‘Just for a Sund’y drive. Down the road a bit.’

‘Yeah, where?’

‘Camooweal.’ answers the driver.

Some Sunday drive. Camooweal is almost 300 miles east down the Barkly Highway, and just over the Queensland border.

Grateful as I was to reach Camooweal, I had no desire to be seen there. The town had a fearful fighting reputation, born of stories of cattlemen, shearers and boundary riders hitting town to blow their cheques after months of isolation on over-the-horizon stations. The local motto was said to go: If it pours, drink it. If it runs, shoot it. And if it runs away, shear it. My hair was collar-length, and I had a beard, which in Camooweal rhymes with what it signifies, weird. Travellers told stories of outback towns like this where, for the local hoons, the funniest joke around went:

Local: ’Hey, Hairy! "Blue" was lookin' for you.'

Long-hair: "'Blue' who?"

Local: '"Blue Gillette". Let's get 'im fellers!'

I turned up my collar and avoided the stir-crazies by walking straight out of town, beyond the cattle-grids and shot-gun blasted 'Welcome to Camooweal' sign, way out into the mulga, where I hoped that one sane ride - please Jesus - would quickly find me before a shearer's dozen of fifteen half-stung roustabouts on a beer run might come gunning their unregistered FE Holden ute across
the scrub in search of hasselable species like roos, coons or city poofters. Saved by a - wouldn't you know it - unregistered Holden ute driven by a perfectly sober and affable shearer.

More highway hypnosis from the rear of more trucks and utes: Queensland slipping away backwards on a rhythm of wheels and posts, clouds and curves. Lifts from families and Aborigines. A midnight drop in rainy Mt Isa finds me sleeping under a bandstand in the park, which with the dawn, reveals at least half a dozen other derros and drifters uncrumpling themselves from beneath its bushes and benches, shifting like mists to avoid the dawn patrol of the bull cart, and getting on their way another day down Hero Road.

'Bloody wallopers!' wheezes one limping old boy with his bottle of brown-paper breakfast. 'Shouldn't be able to touch you if you can still get up and walk away. A vagrant's a bloke with no means of support, and if yer pins is still workin', yer've got support, right?'

'Right.' I answer, because I agree; and even if I didn't, I'm not about to debate the finer points of being ambulatory with this Diogenes with a gammy leg, who at seven a.m. is already half stung on a bottle of, yes folks. Invalid Port, and whose face bears the scars of one too many tangles with the wrath of grapes.

One of the dawn refugees is a Dutch kid who has just hitched overland from Europe, and has arrived in Australia via the Indonesian islands. Out of his pack he pulls two exquisitely carved teak statues which he'd swapped for three old shirts in the island of Bali. He says it's getting spoiled there already: there were a dozen other European travellers on the beach at a place called Kuta and a hotel being built nearby.

The coast! La Pacifica at last. And Highway One again. The sea tilts up to fill half the sky. Townsville is a tropic of colour, a banana-chair upholstered in bougainvillea, travellers palms and poinciana, and reeking of blossom perfume and sea-salt. The broad-brims of the inland stockmen give way to straw hats. Old pubs, fusty and white in their verandah bustles and lace iron, slumber in an elegant decrepitude, awaiting re-discovery by nostalgia, or demolition by Progress.
The psychosis stretches of North Queensland's Bruce Highway ('Hitch-hiker Murders Family' or 'Family Murders Hitch-hiker'), places of the legendary L-o-n-g Wait, fail to live-up to their parched reputations. South of Mackay, stuck for the night, I found shelter in a road-gang's camp. Most of the gang was in town for a Saturday night hoot at the pub, in preparation for tomorrow's rodeo. The old 'nipper' let me sleep on a stretcher, and in the morning gave me bacon and eggs and a slice of that cuisine navvy speciality, condensed milk pie. As I was leaving he asked:

'Tell us one thing, Jack. I can see you're wearin' cowboy boots. You a 'dark horse' headin' for the rodeo?'

The Highway picks up speed; you can already feel the gravity pulls of Brisbane and Sydney causing things to fall down the map. At night the windy-headed cane fields burst into flame as they are fired for the harvest. The world smells like a great vat of molasses. The tropics tumble at Rockhampton. This is supposed to be the temperate zone, but I grow increasingly impatient to end the story, to write-off the road, and so, scramble all the impressions of Queensland into a postcard movie of faster, flashier cars, fewer old truck rides, the goofy green humpings of the Glass-House Mountains, agreements or arguments with drivers over the things I've avoided, conscription's 'lottery of death' and Vietnam.

At Surfer's Paradise I sit on the beach, with the dust on my boots and the stains on my pack seeming to me the badges of the road. I bask a little, catch my first wave since Perth, feel like I've earned this beach by hitching 10,000 miles and three months to get to it. Around me the tourists who've walked from their hotels are basting and baking. One 40-ish couple approaches me.

'Excuse us, but we couldn't help noticing that you look like you've travelled a long way.' says the woman.

'Well, yes.' I laugh, 'I've just hitch-hiked around Australia.'

'Congratulations! ... I hope you don't mind me asking, but, are you Peter Pinney? We've read all his books ... or your books?'

I laughed as much as Pinney would have.

Feeling just about 'credible', but wondering if the journey had aged me that much - Pinney must be at least twenty years older
than I am - I hit the track, for one last sprint south. Past the Pacific's petticoat hems (the circumference of a known fantasy), over the border, and with Sydney in the sights.

*New South Wales again! To kids in Perth and Hedland this is an exotic place - they all run away to here. Almost back, Jack. Shelter from a tropical cyclone in a brick dunny near Mullumbimby. Screw the thumb to the track, one last time - no more sleeping now. All the rites and wrongs of passage - done. Home-road, and maybe at last I've done something. Now for a warm bed, a bath, maybe-baby a warm friend who wants to see me? Sydney, Sydney! I've done something!*
Crane, Marie, crew and all,

Dear mob collective,

The world is a couple, the world is a wave. As a single soul, stuck surfless in the middle of the iron sea, that - azya can imagine - makes me a pretty useless unit. God, I'm glad to be back on lubber land!

Don't ever bother to run away to sea. Run away from it. It's not a life fit for a human, certainly not this one. I hope you're all well. I am. In fact I'm a great deal better for being off that bloody scow. The story follows. I wanted to write it like a proper short story, but I'm too lazy, or illiterate or something, so it's a bit of a letter and a bit of a story. Imagine it was written by me, but that I was a better writer. Once upon a wharf ...

I'm clomping up the gangplank of the godawful (already!) Cap Blanco, a 5,000 tonne trans-Pacific rust-bucket. My mother, in dark glasses (to hide a tear, I'm sure), waves from the Darling Harbour wharf. A last wave back, and I disappear from view. Fortunately, she can't see my greeting from the Bosun, the big, blonde and pissed-off Karl Muller. I stick out my hand to shake, say 'Gidday,' and in return receive a view of Muller's back as he strides aft, throwing a bubonic, Teutonic 'Zis vay' over his shoulder.

I'd guess he's seen all us 'work-away' types before - 'students', beatniks, hippies, the usual raff & riff. He loathes 'em (us) all - with their (our) denim jackets and canvas duffels, and lately, all this poofey long hair. Why? Because we can get off, and he can't. And now he's got another one, me, on this long run to Vancouver.

'Your cabin.' he says when we reach the rear of the superstructure on the starbord side. It's actually the ship's hospital, a two-bunk cubby-hole. Muller expectorates something in English (you can tell he even hates the language - I expect him to call me
'Pig-dog Englander!'): 'Be ready for work after lunch.' I sit on the lower bunk and play with the idea of picking up my pack then and there and just splitting. ('Hoy, Mum! Changed my mind. How about a lift to the beach instead?') A disagreeable premonition of bad times-to-come is in my guts. Only the conviction that my life in shitty Sydney has hit a complete brick wall compels me to stay.

 'He's a fucker, ain't he?' says a voice from somewhere.

 I almost crack my head on the bunk above. A tanned hand and a mop of dark hair appears from over the edge.

 'Hi, I'm Vince. From Hawaii.'

 He's the second workaway, and has already been assigned to the engine-room. He fills me in on the story of the Cap Blanco, once known as the 'White Queen of the Pacific' and pride of the Bremen Steamship Company's line. Now, after five years under a rummy captain ('Captain Schnapp' to his crew), the ship is simply known as 'The Rust Queen'. (But she'll always be the Crap Blanco to me)

 'They fired the Captain in Sydney,' explains Vince, 'and gave the command to the First Mate. He's got until Vancouver to get the tub de-loused and cleaned-up, then maybe he gets the job permanently. He hated the Captain, and now he's out to prove how the ship should be run.'

 'So what's that blonde guy's problem?' I ask.

 'The Bosun? Heart troubles. Needs a brain by-pass too. The Third Engineer told me that he's got a fiancé in Honolulu, and since the ship just got re-routed direct to Vancouver, instead of via the Islands, he's worse than usual. Seems he's been at sea for ten years, and hates it, but the pay's so bad - something shitty like $40 per week - that he can't afford to leave. The only time he smiles is when he's in Hawaii.'

 The mess at lunch is a chaos of young German deck-hands in paint-splattered overalls downing large amounts of potato, blood-sausage and sauerkraut, drinking Holsten beer and singing raucously between mouthfuls. On the PA some radio station is playing Yellow Submarine, which the Wagnerian chorus-line adapts to its own fantasies:

 'Ve all live in a sherman sex-machine,  
a sherman sex-machine ...'
Over lunch Vince ('Wince,' to the shermans) tells me his story. He'd escaped from Detroit to go surfing in California, then to Hawaii. Then he worked his way to Australia, and now after three months, is heading back to study in Hawaii.

'Landing in Vancouver's sort of over-shooting the mark, isn't it?' I says.

'Hell, I was so pissed at them yesterday when they announced that, I almost got off the ship. But then, I figured it's cheaper to fly to the Islands from the West Coast than from Sydney, so I stayed. Beside, maybe we'll go to the Islands anyhow.'

'How come?'

'Oh, funny things can happen at sea. Ships drift, weird stuff like that.' answers Vince.

Lunch over, Vince descends to the inferno of the engine-room, and Muller leads me up to the bow.

'Take this hammer, this scraper and this wire-brush, and from this area clean all the rust - the whole area.'

He sweeps an arm to include the entire fo'c'sle head and its gear - capstans, winch, bollards, stanchions, gunn'als, scuppers, flag-post and rails. Every surface is blistered with rust. Weeping bubbles of topcoat and undercoat burst to release an orange ooze. Cancers of oxidised iron stain the once-white metalwork from handrail to deck. Me traveller's heart is a lead sinker tangled twenty fathoms deep on the anchor chain.

'You start work at six every morning.'

Muller's eyes roll as he speaks, as though, even in port, he is unable to rid himself of the spectre of the pitching horizon.

'Ah, every morning?' I ask.

'Ja. Every day. We have no weekends at sea.'

'And what time do I finish at night?'

'Like everyone else, at 18 hours. One hour for lunch.'

I convert, from a 24-hour clock, to hours per day, then per week - and come up with a 77-hour working week.

'Boy, that's a long week. No time off?'

'No.' says Muller. 'The crew likes overtime work. More money.'

I make the mistake of debating the point.

'Sure. They're getting paid for it. I'm not. The agent told me I'd been taken on to just work ordinary hours, no overtime?'
Muller tilts.
'So, you don't want to work? The gang-plank is still down. Why don't you use it, lazy damn gastarbeiter.'
'No.' mutters Jack. 'No. It's OK.'
'By Vancouver, then ...' the Bosun gestures again at the whole disaster area, 'it will all be clean.'

The Crap Blanco gets hauled out into the Harbour by a couple of grunting little tugs. The hawsers drop away and 'The Rust Queen' hits the Heads and the swell. The Tasman Sea, to me, is marinated bile. The climb, lurch and drop of a short sea for three days, with a north-easterly swell slamming onto the port bow, has soup bowls on the mess table knocking-out sauce bottles like ten-pins; and our hero wishing he'd never run away to sea.

'Raus, hippies. Raus!' crows Muller at our door at 5.30 each morning. A heart-starter of peppermint tea and croissants is served in the mess, and then heave-ho, it's off to work I goes. Across the freezing, heaving deck, straight to the taff-rail, where - heave-ho! - I blurt the lot to black leeward. (Once to windward had been sufficient to learn that particular lesson.)

The 'Reina de Rusta' (as Vince calls it) does the rounds of New Zealand ports, Auckland, Napier, Wellington and finally Lyttleton, just out of Christchurch. Hatch-covers roll back and cranes deposit slaughter houses-full of frozen lamb carcasses into the holds. At night the crew hits the town, and every morning there are a couple more Maori girls in the ship's unofficial complement. The cabins and mess overflow with their trilling laughter and impromptu sing-songs.

The morning of the ship's departure for Canada, the Second Mate walks through the halls of the crew quarters, ringing a bell and crying 'Alle Madchen raus! All girls ashore!'

Eighteen girls, some clutching guitars, others bottles of Scotch (which you could hardly call 'duty-free') and fluffy dolls, wobble down the gangway, tearful and promising-to-wait, to stand against the backdrop of Lyttleton's green hills and red roofs - and below a sign which proclaims 'The N.Z. Stevedoring and Whorfingering Company' - where they sniffle and giggle and wave until the ship
has cast-off, then pile six-up into taxis and head back towards whichever port was home.

Vince's job consists of swabbing the sebaceous sweats which leak, dribble and ooze endlessly from the pipes and valves of the engine-room, then retreating to his bolthole behind one of the big insulated vent pipes, from where he can snooze. Better job than mine, but all that heat and no horizon would drive me nuts. The ship inches across the map, into the tropics, into the shirt-off latitudes. I can stand dreamily at the bow like a rust-peppered figurehead and watch for the occasional whale breaching or even back-flipping in the sun, breathing away my sea-sickness for a while, and then, leaning way-way over the rail, I can gaze down into the windless, ultramarine plain twenty feet below, and see my own reflection at the apex of the prow's curve, with the white tumble-forward of the bow-wave never quite catching it.

Our forlorn figurehead perches up there like an arrow about to be launched, singing to the deep blue yonder every song I know, and ending up with:

'For all the good I do here, I might as well be shovelling shit on the Isle of Capri.'

Word eventually comes from the bridge that the Captain and watch officer have a very good view of me doing zilch.

Five years of rust scabs clog my nostrils, scratch my eyes and force me into contorted positions from which I can't see the horizon. The nausea persists. Old salts tell you that you don't really conquer sea-sickness until you've puked-up what they call 'the green bile of your own self-hatred.' I've got plenty of the latter, and even some of the green stuff, but I still haven't conquered nothing. The endless days on this yawning, rolling, pitching blue desert, and the nights in a cabin that shudders its rivets silly to every turn of the ship's screw have stripped from my sea all possibilities of romance. All I want is to run away from the sea, forever.

'Wince' cheers me up with the scuttlebutt on why the new Captain hated the last one so much. Old 'Captain Schnapps' was more or less drunk all the time - or so the story went - while his First Mate was very abstemious. One day on the last trip over, the First...
got drunk on his birthday - too drunk to do his watch. The Captain thought this ought to be entered in the log, and even though the Mate begged him not to - bad for the career - Schnapps went ahead and wrote it in: 'Today the First Officer was drunk.' The next day the Mate had his revenge. He simply wrote in the log: 'Today the Captain was not drunk.'

One sunny lunch-time Vince and I are sitting at our cabin door, cacophonously slaying the only sea-shanty we know, which is the Beach Boys' version of The Sloop John B.

'I wanna go home
Why dontcha let me go home (yeah, yeah)
This is the worst trip
I've ever been on.
Doo-doo-doop, Doo-doo-doop ...'

From nowhere, Muller appears in front of us.
'What are you doing?' he shouts, voice rising on the final syllable.
'Singing sea-shanties.' answers Vince.
'Shanties! What is this "shanties"?'
'Old, well ... new sailor songs ...' I attempt.
But Muller has already dipped his Plimsoll mark. His eyes roll like a horizon in a port-hole.
'Shut up you!' he barks. 'Are you trying to send me crazy with your noises?'

After he leaves, Vince hisses, 'That guy needs Hawaii even more than I do ... But poor Hawaii.'
'I reckon. Speaking of which, tomorrow we're 500 miles east of it, our closest point.'
'Yeah. All we need's a left-turn to Paradise. Let's hope.'
'For what?' I ask.
'Ah, nothin'.'

The next night was foggy. The deck watch had to strain to see and to stay awake. The engine watch didn't even bother. The Third Engineer was drunk by the time he came on, and, as usual, the oilers and fitters settled in for a quiet night of cards, schnapps and cat-naps in their mess.
I awoke at three a.m., disturbed by Vince entering the cabin, probably after a trip to the head. There were odd comings and goings all over the ship. Second Cook said next day that when he came on duty to bake the breakfast croissants, he noticed that both the fire-buckets of sand were missing from his galley, and decided it was time he had another row with the mess-boy. The carpenter in the cabin next to Muller's said he could hear the wretched Bosun pacing his cabin all night, like a bear in pit.

At six a.m. there was a hell of a commotion in the engine-room, and anyone who could headed down there fast for a sticky-beak. They said that the Second Engineer, who'd just come on duty, had suddenly got on the blower, shouting to the bridge. He cut the engine to 'idle' and old Crap heaved a sigh of relief as she slid to a dawdle. Officers appeared and disappeared up and down hatches, ran clanging across gangways and shouted un-gentlemanly things at non-officers. The object of their attentions was a pair of sand buckets standing beside a partially unbolted bearing-cover on the main screw shaft, out of which was issuing a horrible, crepitant whine and an unhealthy temperature.

The activity of a ship's engine bears an inverse ratio to the number of officers around it. The less the old donk's doing, the more officers there are. Wrenches appeared, the already-loosened bolts on the bearing-cover (theories were being aired already) were fully undone. The Chief Engineer peered in, confirming that sometime during the last shift the bearing had chewed itself to pieces.

'Looks like a mouthful of broken fillings.' he comments.

The Mate stamps off to the bridge to inform the Captain of the need to change course for repairs. To Hawaii.

When Vince had snuck down to the engine-room in the middle of the night he had a fair idea that the Third Engineer would be drunk-asleep, and he knew that the rest of shift would be up in the mess for their meal. Having already taken a sand-bucket from the galley, all he had to do was grab a wrench, loosen a bearing cover, pour in the sand, then replace the cover. He was loosening the bolts when he heard someone coming down the ladder. He down the wrench and fled.
Muller had arrived with *his* bucket of sand - to find one there already, plus a wrench, and the bolts loosened! It was as though he was in a *deja-vu* of which he'd already forgotten the first half. Someone was already doing - or had already done - the crime for him. Muller panicked. He dropped his bucket and ran for the ladder.

Everyone on board was under suspicion. Each of the 'guilty' ones, knowing that he was *innocent* of the actual damage, although not of the intention, was spooked by the possibility of being hung for something he hadn't *yet* done. Vince finally confided his version of events to me. He had been terrified, and hadn't dared risk exposure by looking to see who was the other intruder in the engine-room. Nor to return to the scene and finish-off the job. He presumed that after he had come back to the cabin, the person he'd disturbed had returned to complete the sabotage. Vince swore he hadn't done it, but he had a good guess who might have - Bosun Muller.

Muller, who could confide in no-one, probably figured that whoever got to the bearing had already done the job before he had arrived on the scene to disturb them in the finishing touches. Muller calculated that Vince was the most likely person to have done it. Maybe, he mused, workaways aren't all that useless after all.

The Captain's suspicions had also narrowed to the two 'with a motive,' as he put it: Vince and Muller. The problem was that there was no evidence that the crime had actually been committed; only that it was on the verge of being done. Then - according to the Chief Engineer - as though through sympathetic magic, the desired effect on the bearing had been achieved anyway. It had been a simple metal-fatigue collapse. Unsure of what to make of the fact that there was no sand in the bearing, the Captain and officers had kept this point a secret. The weight of near-guilt, they hoped, might flush-out the would-be malefactor.

When they were each called to the bridge for separate questioning, Vince and Muller passed in the passageway, and, each one assured of his own innocence - and consequently of the guilt of the other - had looked the other man in the eye. No expression had shown on either face, but flies on the wall swore they heard
expressions of gratitude sub-vocalised in both German and in English. Along with separate prayers that if anyone had to swing for it, Lord, please let it not be me.

The ship limped at five knots for the next four days, then finally crawled into Oahu. Next night on the dock in Honolulu, Vince (who had just signed off) and I passed Muller. The Bosun looked at us, self-consciously shifted his grip on a large overnight bag he was carrying - the sort of bag, I thought, that you'd carry if you were planning to, say, jump ship - and then, from an uncharacteristically level eye, gave Vince a conspiratorial wink.

'Sonofabitch! I'll swear he did it.' said Vince.

P.S. Dear mob,

You're wondering how I know all the facts. After Vince disappeared rather rapidly to Kauai and it was confirmed that the mad Muller had jumped ship (poor Hawaii!), we all had a lot of fun in the mess putting the pieces of the story together - including the bits which Muller told the carpenter just before he did a bunk - but we haven't told the brass.

The officers have decided that Muller and Vince were in it together! - but as there was no sand in the bearing, there's no charge. And as there's no Bosun and no Vince, there's no one to charge anyhow. Meanwhile, as far as we know both Muller and Vince still believe that the other guy did it!
It was 20 years ago today: San Francisco, late 'sixty eight. The psychedelic Mecca of Haight-Ashbury had already been turned to a harlot by an excess of good press and bad drugs. By the time I arrived, 'Love Street's' flash of epiphany had long passed. A restless flotsam of panhandlers now washed up and down its storied blocks: street people beached here since the high tide of 1967's 'Summer of Love' had rolled back to leave 'The Fall of Speed.'

Like a true psychedelic tourist I wandered the incense nimbus of the Haight's 'head-shops' and record stores. Street dealers cruised past me, Joplinesque girls and lank-haired dudes in the 'Hashbury' uniform of fringe-jackets and bell-bottoms, intoning their litany of coded narcosis: 'Acid, blotters, reds, Gold, keys, lids, Moroccan, Sandoz, Owsley, speed, opium ...'

'Man, some spare change to help with my rent, please?' says the big American Indian who has planted himself in my path, his plaits framing a face like a sepia memory of Geronimo. I dredge up a few quarters. Having unsuccessfully asked half a dozen street people if they know of somewhere I might sleep, I hit him with the same question.

'Nope. Sorry, dude.' he says, then, 'Where you from, anyhow?' 'Australia.' 'Far-out. Kangaroos an' all that stuff, hey? I never met an Australian before.' He thinks for a moment, checking me out. 'Alright, you can crash at my pad.' 'Great. Thanks a lot.' 'Just don't try to rip me off, OK?' 'No way - I'm not into that.' 'I got some valuable shit at my place.'

His name is Bob, and for a living he sells underground newspapers and ounce deals of grass. His second-floor apartment is in an old white clapboard house a few blocks off Haight Street; the lounge room is stacked with hundreds of copies of the latest Rolling
Stone. Its cover features the full-frontal 'Two Virgins' shot of John Lennon and Yoko Ono, bollock-naked and pubic-proud.

'These ones selling well?' I ask.

Bob looks offended by the suggestion.

'I ain't sold a single one. I'm buying-up every copy I can score. I'm gonna corner the market.'

'But they print them by the thousands.'

'Right, but this issue's gonna get banned, like real soon. Obscenity, you know, because of the tits n' ass n' stuff on the cover. They'll all disappear from the street, and then the price'll skyrocket. They'll be collector's items overnight. Then I'll start dealing 'em, at ten, fifteen bucks each. I've already got three hundred copies.'

We hit the streets for a Saturday night out. From eight til ten we hawk 'The Berkeley Barb' on the stripper strip in North Beach, until we've earned enough cash to make the pilgrimage to the Fillmore Ballroom. It's like the St. Peter's, the Kaaba and the Wailing Wall of rock, all rolled into one. Beneath yards of hair, saucer-eyed dervishes dance to the sonic boom of the bands. A glaucous light-show of doves, bubbles, lianas and latex moons heaves and recedes its plasma across the screen; the air is an unpoliced fog of the smuggled botanies of Acapulco, Marrakesh and Mazar-i-Sharif.

We swallow some purple pills ('Sure, it's acid. Real pure.' says the Jerry Garcia lookalike who sells it to us). We watch a band named 'It's a Beautiful Day' go hyperactive on bulk voltage, a frenetic fiddle and, I imagine, a heiress's ransom in cocaine. Time starts to bend. The skull-songs composing and re-composing inside my cortex seem half mine, half theirs. Dancing, I find myself interrogating myself: who's responsible for this ... this infinite regress down nerves ends and memory and pictures of the wind? And to what conclusion - and who is the concluder? Oh ... oh, so this must be what tripping's like!

In the lobby after the show, I catch the deep mirror eyes and smile of a dark, Semitic-looking woman. They remind me of my separation from something, of the broken arc between me and contact with such beauty. Is this distance just something in the eye
of the would-be holder? As we catch a taxi back to Bob's place, I try to abandon these lugubrious abstractions which weigh their chemical sadness upon the soul of the Saturday night pilgrim.

One of Bob's acquaintances, a wheedling, blond-haired boy named Charlie, has joined us at the Fillmore. Too spaced-out to talk, I retire from their company, to the spare room while they roll joints of Jamaican weed. There is no door to close out their conversation which soon turns, even while tripping on 'speed'-accelerated acid, to that all-American quest, the hunting of money.

'Soon, dude,' enthuses Bob, 'Soon the pigs are gonna ban this issue of the Stone. And I'm gonna clean-up a coupla grand, for sure.'

'Yeah, then maybe we could go into dealing together?'

'Yeah. Well, maybe ... Hey, these John n' Yoko covers are gonna be hot! I'll be loaded!'

Is this, I ask myself, the vision splendid: stuck in a spare room on a splaf-stained mattress while two speeders out-rave each other on how they're going to fleece the public sheep? After enduring an hour of their penny-ante cosmic capitalism, and watching the insides of my eye-lids screening Loony-Toon hallucinations, I realise that my would-be chemical apotheosis has devolved into amphetamine insomnia and irritation. The concupiscence of these two American Dreamers must be escaped. I decide to walk-off my agitation.

'Hey, man, Jack, you can't go out there at 3 a.m.' says Bob, protectively.

'Why not?'

'Speed-freaks, brother. They'll eat a young Aussie Paleface like you.'

'Yeah, vicious mothers, those guys.' adds Charlie, 'Steal your face.'

It takes one to know one. I resign myself to being stuck inside of Hashbury with the immobile blues again - and finally fall asleep.

Haight Street in the morning, all piss and incense perfume. With my shot at a lysergic epiphany well and truly past, but at least safe from the predations of methedrine madmen, I make it down to the street, hungry and still buzzing. I stand for a moment
beneath the street sign at the corner of Haight and Ashbury and
muse upon how its cross-road shingle had briefly acted as a global
May Pole, a sort of tribal Kaballa tree which, by way of image,
rumour, song and chemical had announced that there was a new
Zeitgeist of abundant spirit abroad on the Blue Planet. But now, the
Haight with its predatory spikers and feral bikers served as a
warning against the naivety of believing in any vision which said
that 'spirit' alone was enough. Flower-children, grown adults with
names like 'Tinkerbell,' 'Sunflower' and 'Cloud,' were trying to
panhandle their way out of the ruins, to the latest Elysium in Taos,
New Mexico, or somewhere, anywhere.

'Hullo.' she says, materialising from a doorway. I turn, and fall
into a pair of dreaming-pool eyes. Irises and pupils that merge into
one dark mirror. Just like the woman at the Fillmore last night. She
smiles.

'Hullo.' I manage.

Isis at twenty. Now known as Cindy. She's small, with a
mantilla of black hair framing a pale face. Isis with a child riding on
her hip, nipples nudging her sweater in the morning chill. She
places a hand on my arm. The shock of human contact surprises me.

'Where are you from?' Her voice chimes soft bells, which ring
of my wanting. Too late I try to muffle them. No chance.

'Oh my.' she laughs at my answer. 'Australia. And you've got an
accent..'

'No.' I laugh back. 'You have.'

We're on an island universe, cut-off from the street tides.
'I guess so.' she says, 'But I want to hear yours. Say something
in Australian, please.'

'What?'

'Let's see ... say "love".'

The expression vapourises on her lips, lingering, like the
quality itself, just out of reach.

'Um ... OK.'

I hesitate, dry-mouthed with self-consciousness, then say the
word three times. I feel silly. It's like acting out a line from a
Beatles song. Yet, each time the word comes more easily, but each
time I seem to fall further into the music of its meaning. Into the
triple magic: what is named, the act of naming, and, that it is heard.
I retrieve myself, but too late. She has felt my fall into the magnet of her promise. She gently removes her hand from my arm. The child on her hip stirs.

'You're tripping, aren't you?' says Cindy.
I remember that I probably still am.
'How can you tell?' I ask.
'I just got a contact high off you.'

My words dry-up. Feeling marooned on this tarnished reef, and out of reach, I despair of rescue from myself.

'Hey, it's alright,' she leans in, grinning, 'whatever it is.' Then adds, 'Look, friend, it's Sunday, and I got to go panhandle the tourists for some food money. I borrowed my friend's baby, see? I was going to ask you for some spare change, but not now ... So, Aussie, I gotta go, OK?'

I find my smile. 'Here, have some anyhow.'
I squeeze a dollar bill and two quarters into her warm hand.
'Love.' she says, blowing a kiss which I catch on my eye-lids. When I open them she has disappeared within the reflections of a doorway.

An hour later, after flap-jacks and coffee and coming down on Love Street among the early-bird muggers, the wormy old winos not worth robbing and the symbolically huge padlocks on the head-shops, I spot Indian Bob, storming down the block, Geronimo plaits flying.

'Fuckit!' he fumes. 'Fuck-it!'
'What's up?'
'I've been burned so bad.'
'Who by?' I ask. 'Charlie?'

'No. Not that asshole. By Rolling Stone. Guess what those sucks've done, hey? Released a new issue of their fuckin' magazine before the last one's even been banned! ... Jee-zus! What am I gonna do with three hundred out-of-date copies of Rolling-fucking-Stone? I'm ruined.'

From a safe distance a small gaggle of Middle-American tourists has witnessed the fulminations of this Red Indian, a little shocked by his language, but satisfied that they have seen, Doris, in
Haight-Ashbury, a real freak-out. Bob feels their Paleface gaze upon him. Hunter genes quicken to the prey, and without missing a beat, he wheels.

'Sir, some spare change to help with the rent? Please, a few quarters, madam ...'
THE LOG OF

THE WHITE WOGS
'Like a Sunday in T.J.
It's cheap, but it's not free.'
Steely Dan

Desecrated Sabbath in Tijuana, a scrum of dust and fuss, and everyone who's in one country scrambling to get over to the other. Mexican wetbacks in their polyester threads and desperation await nightfall, praying for the success of the $50 they've paid to some local runner who'll later lead them through the wire and searchlights and over the sagebrush hills to the promised land.

Voluble, soluble-in-Scotch Norteamericanos cram the sidewalks, looking for tuck n' roll upholstery jobs, yard-wide sombreros, fifths of duty-free bourbon, donkey dolls, and velvet paintings of cactus-siesta scenes or cinnabar-breasted señoritas. Navy wives down from San Deigo drag their sodden midshipman mates past shop-front touts who offer instant divorces; Mary Beth or Lindy Lou looks dolefully back at the temptation. And all the workaday people, the streetsweep, deskclerk, shopkeep, shoeshine, clean-laundry, bankteller-ordinary people do their daily bread beside the thrall of whoredom which seems to be the fate of border towns everywhere.

Outside the Tourist Bureau a lugubrious burro stands beside the B-grade bullfight posters. He's been decked with bells and ribbons, painted with white zebra-stripes and hitched to an expired parking-meter. The perennial Purgatory of donkeydom for the beast who once carried Christ into Jerusalem and, more recently - his stocks slipping badly in the age of mechanical horespower - had to appear in a night-club act with a capacious dame while eyes-agog gringos bet on the event. He raises his head and gives that broken-hearted bray which cracks all the way from the laughing-death soul of Mexico.

And there's Crane - according to plan - where and when he should be: bespectacled, wire-haired, chin-thrusting and terrible-tempered. According only to divine plan - if that - he has just
crushed the sandalled foot of a would-be pickpocket beneath his size 10 hobnailed boot. The *ratero* shrieks multilingual curses at him, culminating in:

'You motherfucker!'

With an insolence too obnoxious to detail, and a violence which for a moment silences even this zoo of a street, Charlie snarls at the pickpocket:

'If you don't want your mother fucked, keep her off the streets.'

Unfenced fields, the first I've seen in weeks - nothing like that north of the border. Luminous cornfields which give way to the beginnings of the desert, where a tumbled landscape of sun-split boulders, like the devil's marbles, warns of things to come. A plain of shimmering silica. The heat furnaces a Pepsi sign to faded flakes on a billboard which, like its product, is more mirage than substance. From a high ridge at dusk, Mexicali's street-light filaments wire a treasure-trove into the dark plain below.

*You shuffle from too-casual competence in one language (this life-long English) and awkwardly into another (beginner's Spanish). Everything is reversed, the shoe of confidence, superiority even, is on the other foot. Who controls the words controls the world - and it ain't you, babe, who knows every twentieth word, if that. In this unfamiliar condition, time too becomes a cut-up and cut-out of meanings, modified by the scrambled grammar of your cultural incompetence - of memories retained, things half-understood, the inclusions of dreams, the excisions of sleep and your absentee attention ... Bad shape, hombre.*

On the fringes of Mexicali we crawl into a house under construction, concoct a meal of cheese and lettuce wrapped in *tortillas*, then attempt to sleep, but to little avail. All night a low-flying plane buzzes the area, followed by the recurrent roar of jeeps and the sweep of flood-lights. Our house, we realise, is right beside the international border, whose barbed-wire fence Uncle Sam must patrol constantly, to hold his line against strangers in the night.
Crane here: Soaring south on the Pan American Highway on a junk truck. Me and the copiloto crammed into the cab beside Paco, the owner-flyer of this pyramid of pranged bicycles, karked spin-dryers and a dead pin-ball machine. Jack's in the back, balancing on top of it all. After three cups of chewable coffee and a Coke chaser, Paco's raving so enthusiastically about everything, his family, my family, the landscape - 'mira, los micro ondas,' the new micro-wave towers which passed the television signals of the 1968 Olympics (minus shots of the machine-gun massacre) from hill-to-hill, from Mex City to Amerika - and clucking sympathetically about how difficult it must be for me to manage, with so little Spanish - 'un idioma tan rico' - all in his one-hundred-words-a-minute Spanish. I agree.

... so, on the 2,500 kilometre count-down to Ciudad Mexico, Distrito Federal, we get lost in the track of time. Between the border and the capital, things don't necessarily happen (as the gringo caricatures of Mexico gibe) mañana, nor do they necessarily happen at all. You just submit to the miasma of the road, the path to far Quahoochibah, and recall what you thought were its dust-motes dancing ...

Somewhere south of Nogales and north of a thousand Ks of cactus, a paunchy Federale cop, rusticated to a funeral bier of a check-post beside a dry arroyo, finds a way to fill his day. He flags-down Paco's preposterous vehicle, pockets his tithe, and motions us from the truck.

'Papeles!'
'Sorry?'
'Papeles. Your papers!'
He checks our passports and Tourist Cards. All in order.
'You are hippies?'
'No.'
'Then you are hitch-hikers?'
'Yes.'
'Not permitted in Mexico.'
'But,' argues Crane,'el jefe de la policia in Tijuana told me it was permitted in Mexico.'
'Señor ...' the cop thumbs through his passport, 'Señor Char-les Rain-eh, si? ... Tijuana is in Baja California. This is Sonora, the real Mexico, el Mexico authentico - entienden? - and I tell to you, in Sonora touristas must pay the money and travel on the bus. Or, do you want to go back to la frontera now?'

Paco and his truck snort off into the distance. We sit on our packs, dry-gulched, and watch three buses pass without stopping. Sallow faces and sullen eyes stare out of the windows: deportados, busted wetbacks being shuffled back from the border, their $50 shot at paradise failed, to be dumped far enough inland that they won't turn-up again, at least not tonight, in the U.S. Border Patrol's dragnet.

An old Greyhound bus picks us up. It is full of peasants who travel in the time-honoured manner which lugs voluminous bundles bound in table-cloths and string, plus hobbled chickens and rope-bound suitcases. The children giggle at our beards. For 10 pesos we find a spot in the aisle between the bundles, and settle into the highway's hums and bumps. An hour later we pass Paco's truck. I lunge for a window, wave at him, he speeds-up in pursuit, and with air-horn braying, cuts-off the bus and shudders his truck to a halt. A few moments later Crane and I have resumed our former seats, and Paco picks up the conversation where he left off, in his beloved idioma tan rico.

Out of the 'ratlands,' as the southerners call the northern regions of Mexico. The blaze of stones; bones of old beer-and-Coke tiendas in the desert. Membranes of heat-haze stretch across adobe villages; the burro hours. The walled haciendas of grandees loom out of Audie Murphy and Gary Cooper-time. For the other people there are green concrete boxes on the edge of town, with windows barred against rateros and a crucifix above the door to hex the rest.

Ginger-bread basilicas to the Virgin, with twin bell-towers and time-pocked plaster, survey the village zócalo; where the Chiclets chicos and shoeshine kids do their best to keep the wolves of their own stomachs at least subsidised at the family door. Near the pool-hall a woman is roasting corn, the Mayan 'sunbeams of the gods,' on a little coal brazier.
Across the Tropic of Cancer. Mazatlan, the first city in the New World, and only the second in the world to be bombed from the air: during the 1914 Revolution, a leather-skinned bomb fell from the grasp of an airsick bombardier and exploded in a city street, killing 4 and wounding 15.

*Adios the Sea of Cortes, El Golfo de California.*

*Helmut, a German hitcher, en route from some point on the wheel to some other, joins us for a while. His desiccated skin and terrible mania for quantifying his travels - 84 countries, 300,000 kilometers, 6 years on the road - are a disturbing vision of the possible. I have seen the future, and it is Helmut, and I don't like it.*

*The T. J. Two-Step has over-taken us. A confetti of pink toilet paper marks the place in the sagebrush where gringos and their parasites have passed the night.*

*Alan Ginsberg once howled: 'I would rather go down the dark road to Mexico, heroin dripping in my veins ...' He should have said: 'More likely, I will go down the dark road to Mexico, dysentery ripping in my guts ...'*

*Women at a village well laugh at our facial hair. The local drunk rolls by, taunting: 'Why all joo heepees have beards?' 'I dunno, hombre. Same reason all you Mexicans have moustaches?' He fingers the cactus on his upper-lip and sloths off.*

*The 'No-Way-Josés' tear past us in their empty cars and trucks. They assume Jack and I are Norteamericanos because we're gringos; and, as everyone knows, all gringos are millionaires - or the kids thereof - so why give them a free ride? I explained to one driver near Guaymas that I hitch-hiked because I was poor; that in my country I was not from a rich family.*
'Bullshit.' he said, then pointed to the first Indian he saw: 'Look at him. Too poor to piss. In all his life he'll never have enough money to even get to Mexico City. You - at 20 - already have enough to get yourself across the Pacific Ocean, and back again. To us, you could never be called poor. And if you think you are, you're poor in the head - and he's a richer man than you.'

In the heat of the day, grounded, doing this arm dance beside the endless highway, with only a cactus-needle in the compass to show the way, a bloke berates himself for leaving hearth and home for this - stuck beside sun-dried cobras of human crap and the derision of the drivers. Tarantulas the size of kittens tip-toe across the highway. Just been once, and guts already bubbling again. Rosalita, where are you? The rosary of Romance dies in the dog hours. Pit of a place, this Hermosillo, Ciudad Obregon, Culiacan, so on ... and I'm such a moaner: most of the Mexicans we meet are so generous to us ... the farther we get from the 'States, the more Mexico becomes Mexico, and not just a Seppo annexe where the people are made to feel like hand-me-down Coca-Colons, stuck on the wrong side of the Rio Grande's Pearly Gates.

Trucks squeeze through towns which were old when Mexico was still Spain's. (And they threw out the Spaniards in 1821.) The adobe walls of carriage-width streets are ring-barked by the scrapes and scars of truck-trays. Jack's frowning into his diary (which we've nick-named 'The Log of the White Wogs'), avoiding me, I guess. I write Castillian words on the back of a writing-pad or my cigarette packet, anything. Drink 'Dos Equis' beer, tequila, and some battery-acid brew they call aguardiente - tooth water. Lucky if you've got any tooth enamel left after it. Anything. Roll another number - the magic anaesthetic. Fuckin' waiting.

Crane's no relief. Mention that all this (the shits, the waits) is bringing me down and he'll just get stoically superior, which is his chip-on-the-shoulder way of denying that he's
feeling the same thing himself. Hates to be like me. So, we throw stones at the zopilotes, the vultures feeding on rabbit wreckage, and raspberries at the big Tex-Mex limo that just gunned past with its bullshit bumper-sticker: 'When Guns Are Outlawed Only Outlaws Will Have Guns.'

'Muebles y Mudanzas,' 'Furniture and Removals.' A lumbering, pachydermous pantechnicon groans to a halt fifty metres past us. 'Yay! You beautiful bloody thing!' hoots Crane. In. Packs in the back with all the bedsteads, wardrobes and mattresses. Us up front with the cochero, Roberto and his two teenage off-siders, Hernan and Alejandro. And away. Introductions. 'Juan y Carlos. Somos Australianos.' 'Ah, si. Italianos.' 'No. Australi-ianos.' 'O.K. Israe-lianos.' 'No, no. Conosces "el kanguru"?' 'El kanguru? Ah, si, si. Austral-iia! Conosco ... pero, donde es?' For exactly such 'but-where-is-it?' occasions, Crane carries a tiny map of the world, which he now whips out, pointing firstly to Mexico and then to Australia. 'No Joonited States?' says Roberto. 'No.' 'No Europa?' 'No.' 'Que lejos!

We realise we are gringos of the farthest order, Englishmen or Americans from the most distant corner of almost another planet, whose fathers ride not in Cadillacs, but on kangaroos, or perhaps both.

'No es caliente ...!

How many Mexican drivers said that, as they shoved across the truck-stop table the little red incendiary grenade of the proprietor's wife's home-made chilli sauce, a cure-all for parasites, jaded palates and indifferent cuisine?

'It's not hot ... es sabroso, es picante!'

A generous dousing of the bisteck con papas with this 'not hot, flavoursome, piquant' sauce would follow, then a fire-gargling,
watery-eyed gringo crying to the waiter for something to slake the flames of Hell-Now.

'Chico! Una Coca-Cola grande, pronto, prontísimo, por favor.'

Which only made matters worse. Our Lady of the Remedies looked down from her altar and sniggered.

In Guadalajara, a fateful meal. Alejandro recommends a Mexican speciality, mole. What is served is a glutinous brown sludge containing lumps of some unidentifiable matter. Halfway through it, the rancid undertaste deters us, and we revert to the old bovine-reliable bisteck con papas fritas. Too late. Several hours after, as we sleep in the hold of the furniture truck, the mole strikes. Not just your amateur diarrhoea, but a roiling nausea which contracts in tingling bands from the gut to the scalp. The flushes, the cramps. I’m over the tail-gate trailing a streamer of toilet-paper, a desperado in this shut-and-bolted midnight city, looking, please God, for the impossible - a toilet. And quickly, Jesus, quickly. One block away from the truck, my frantic sphincter almost lets go in anticipation when I spot a vacant allotment. Hands tear at belt and zipper. All previous disapproval of people defecating in public places is swept aside in a tide of agonized release, seemingly through all orifices. Ten minutes later as I weave back to the truck, a purged but burning pipe of flesh, I meet a familiar figure.

'Quick. Where is it?' pleads Crane.

Throughout the night we repeat these pilgrimages, until our orifices can retch and leak nothing but bile; and still the spasms come. It is to be the first of many such nights.
The good Roberto Medina Revilla's furniture van has disgorged us in Mexico City, Capital of Frightening Statistics. We are at 2,300 metres - in itself, no cause for alarm - but, surrounded by 6.5 million people, who in turn are surrounded by another 60 million - almost half of whom are under age 17 - with a birth-rate of 3.5% per year, in a country which is only 11% arable land. This all adds-up to a statistical terror, a voodoo of abstractions, but the sensation is like being a termite in a tenement, which is being eaten rapidly towards collapse.

And yet, here at the centre of this demographic bulls-eye (which grows at the rate of 1000 people per day), citizens on the gracious, Parisian-like avenues such as Paseo de la Reforma, and in parks green with chlorophyl and dollars like Chapultepec, seem oblivious to the falling counters of this doomy abacus upon which I reckon the few days remaining before 'The Revolution' hits.

We hadn't been warned of the vast slum barrios of tarpaper and TV-aerial shacks which circle the capital like a hungry mob. It sinks in: we are in the middle of largest city on earth. As a kind of gastronomic 'Gods-eye' against the various spectres we head straight for a cafe and order enchiladas and orange juice and try to get a handle on all the sensations, of human thronging, of air like a suicide's exhaust pipe in a closed garage, of manic traffic, and of overwhelming aromas - fumes, perfumes, fried pork, desperation, delight.

What to do? I have the address of Marina, an English girl whom I met while getting my Mexican visa in Los Angeles. She teaches English and lives somewhere near the Russian Embassy. When we squeeze off the bus at her stop, with our beards, back-packs, peak-caps and road dust, passengers murmur things about 'communistas' and 'Cubanos.'

'It's easy,' Marina says, 'all done with syllables, the Partido Revolucionario Institucional. A lovely contradiction in concepts - the
Party of the Institutionalised Revolution. They've been in power since the end of Villa and Zapata's revolt in 1920 - and they make damn sure there won't be another one. No one hears the name anymore, but it's good for window-dressing. Kind of a "newspeak" to numb the pain. They even know a year before the elections who is going to be the next President.'

'So how do they keep on getting votes?'

'They've redistributed more than 200 million acres of land - and no other Latin American country can match that. On the bad side, they stomp anyone who has a less-institutionalised idea of "revolution" than they have. You heard about all the students and protesters who were shot before the Olympics in Tlatelolco Square?'

Marina lives in the suburb of Colonia Tacubaya with her friend Darlene, a boisterous blonde night-club singer from Baltimore. They prepare us a meal which is in fact a nostalgic joke: Corn Flakes, bacon and eggs, plum jam. Not a frijole, tortilla or piece of puerco to be seen. Our turbulent gizzards don't complain. The rest of their apartment is pure Gringa-in-Mexico - Indian rugs, books on Aztec art, prints of Palenque temple rubbings, Diego Rivera reproductions - and is under siege from Mexican suitors.

'Enrique the landlord lives upstairs; he wants to marry Marina.' explains Darlene.

'And failed again last night.' giggles Marina. 'He's a lovely man, but he takes a refusal so seriously.'

'Which then becomes a problem when we want to have someone to stay - a male 'someone.' He gets so jealous, even if they're only sleeping on the couch. He keeps on about the "la reputacion" of his family house.'

'So, guys,' concludes Marina, 'we can let you stay the days here, but not sleep the nights. Crazy, eh? Sorry.'

'Hotel Ermita' near the bus and railway terminals is perfect: hose-'em-out tiled rooms, clean sheets and spittoons. We raise a few old Latino doubts about the machismo of gringo lads when, in the interests of greatest economy, we request a double bed, literally a 'matrimonial bed.'

'Una cama matrimonia?' repeats the clerk.

'Um ... si.' I mumble in my deepest voice.
On reflection, I realise that the clerk, who's used to large groups of economising Mexican families and friends probably doesn't think twice about who, or how many, share the bed, as long as they pay. The discomfort is more likely from our little Aussie homosexual panics about men sleeping together in something called a *cama matrimonia*.

Ours is a toilet-determined exploration of Mexico City. The dysentery persists, and so each meal is eaten with an eye to the most direct route to *el baño*. The result is an enervated pair of tourists thumbing through the guide-book sights: here is where Tenochtitlan's necromancers ripped out living hearts in sanctums of congealed blood; there, in 1847, 'our Mexican martyrs at the Halls of Moctezuma beat the United States Marines - no matter what their battle hymn says'; and there is the Basilica of the Virgin of Guadeloupe, slowly sinking into the earth-fill which was once Lake Texcoco, but with supplicants still hobbling on their knees, 50 metres across the flagstones of the square, praying for a miracle.

A couple of university students, Antonio and Jacinta, take us to Tlatelolco, a colonial-era square built on the site of an Aztec market, and show us bullet marks in the walls where in September Army machine-gunners had opened fire on hundreds of people who were protesting the Olympic Games within the square.

'We still have friends missing. I don't know if they are in jail or dead in some bulldozer grave.' says Jacinta.

'Why didn't we read about this in the world press?' I ask.

'Because the Government silenced it up, and denied that it ever happened. And the world press knew that if they made a big story from it, that could mean the end of the Olympic Games - and of their stories. So, everyone pretended it didn't happen.'

At the swirling vortex of, shall we say, 'Avenida de la Infinidad' and 'Boulevard de los Buenos Sueños,' and six major streets of lesser nomenclature, there stands a magnificent traffic-policeman, Jesus Somebody, Nuestro Señor de los Traffic Jams. Around him a six-lane particle accelerator is flinging cars, trucks, buses and taxis in a violent carousel. Imprecations. Rents, tears and sprints. His white-gloved hands glow like plutonium, radiating pulses to the brains of
each of the one hundred and seventy-eight vehicles which are caught at any moment within this Bendix. They see God - and his name is Jesus - and receive from his finger, like Adam in a Michaelangelo, the Word: Stop or Go.

To maintain simultaneous transmissions to the divided attentions of his fissiparous flock, he must pantomime - pirouette, whisper, grimace, snarl, coax, - and, at that last critical second when macho metal is about to meld with death-wish, split open the heavens with the shrill of his whistle. Hell freezes. For an instant the noxious clouds clear. Repentent revvers of motor-cycles edge their machines back behind the white line. Taxis on life-and-death missions to the hairdresser lose their nerve and decelerate for an moment; horns fall silent. A sunshaft penetrates the plaza and illuminates Him, The Divine Fulcrum.

The devils of centripetal side-streets, who are flinging more vehicles by the second into this maelstrom, falter. The demons of the centrifuge, who conspire to fling outwards into the very same streets thousands of other Fiats, Seats, Fords, Datsuns and Chevrolets, baulk at this sight of God in His glory. For a moment the centre holds. Two gringo blokes on the sidewalk burst into applause. God winks back.

One night Darlene drives us to the Plaza de los Mariachis where the air is filled with sobbing trumpets and plaintive male harmonies, which seem to ache up, out of the saddest corners of the Mexican soul. Moons of molten brass glisten on trumpets as thrumming guitars milk the moment for every drop of spilt blood, lost love or spent seed that the tourist's imagination can muster. Tambourines tinkle and slow trumpets sway as the musicians, dressed like matadors in mourning, strum and croon beneath the lamp-posts. At her favourite club - not the one she sings in - Darlene orders the best table and tequila. Six mariachis wearing tight black suits with golden lace and silver studs surround us, led by a corpulent tenor with a voice like moonbeams on the tiles. For 20 minutes they soar us away on their cadenced wings and violins, through poems of love and denial, conquest and regret, until the air is almost weeping.
The tequila is obviously working.
'They're not allowed to export this brand to the States.' says Darlene, 'It's supposed to be narcotic. Drink enough, they say, and you'll start hallucinating.'
'Edmundo,' says Marina to the waiter, 'traiga la botella, por favor.'

He returns with an empty bottle, at the bottom of which is curled a brown worm.
'That's what you've been drinking, lads.' announces Marina.
'Jeez-us,' winces Crane, 'how's my dysentery going to be tomorrow?'
'It's supposed to be good for you.' says Darlene, 'In fact, if you're a muey macho hombre around here, you finish the bottle completely. Which includes the worm.'

She looks at us. 'Any takers?'
'I'll pass.' says Charlie.
'All yours.' I nod to Darlene.

'If the Mexes can be macho,' quips Darlene, '- and I'm not sure if there's any such word - I can be macha.'

With which she up-ends the bottle, plops the pickled worm into her palm, and swallows it.

We weave home beneath tequila moons, not much more erratically than anyone else on the road. I explain that we can't go back to the 'Ermita,' because we've departed with one of their double-bed sheets.

'Why a bedsheet?' asks Marina, 'You saving for a glory-box?'
'It's for a sail.'

'We're going to get a canoe in Yucatán, and sail it down to Panama.'

'Que locos!' says Darlene, who leans and whispers something to Marina. 'OK, come and stay at our place. We'll get you out in the morning without Enrique seeing.'

We smoke a nightcap, and the girls kindly accomodate us in their beds. Upstairs, Enrique dreams of what - weddings, revenge, family honour?
A JOURNEY

Morning finds 'Carlos' Raine and 'Juan' Ho (as they now style themselves) on the autopista to Acapulco - 350 kilometres from Mexico City and 2300 metres down the slopes of the Sierra Madre Occidental. Three wind-whipped hours later they jump down from the back of the beer truck on which they have been riding, and from where they have ducked the police at the frequent inspection posts, and have practised their pidgin Spanish with the four other hitchers up there. They land in Taxco, a town renowned for its silversmithing and embalmed architecture.

The pretty pueblo tumbles down a hillside. Every structure, even the newest, is a colonial anachronism, an Iberian nostalgia, built in a decree-frozen style of instant antiquity. The seamless past and present of appearances in a postcard of Spanish tiles, shutters, stucco, balustrades and lacelike ironwork. Mexico as Fodor and Frommer promised.

The cobbled streets display the work of junkcraft jewellers, potters and weavers: turquoise ear-rings, jade cuff-links, brass replicas of the Aztec calendar, 'Indian' wall-hangings in acrylic colours ... most of it beyond the needs and means of a hitch-hiker. A variety of new identities is thrown at them by Taxco's tireless touts:

'Hamaca!'
'Sombrero!'
'Taxi!'
'Heepee!'

Hot hills of cactus and stone cup the town in sunlight. The travellers climb the steep, slippery cobbles to the zócalo, where to the slightly dented strains of the local brass band, they eat shelled, soft-boiled eggs served in a tumbler, and have their shoes shined. The latter entails skills of logic and bargaining: the muchacho starts his bidding on 'Meester Carlos's' over-sized Army boots at twice the rate for a normal shoe. Doggedly, El Crano insists that his boots are only half as large again as ordinary shoes, not twice the size, and thus he will pay no more than a 50% surcharge. Meanwhile, 'Señor Juan' who's wearing suede desert-boots has to discourage all comers who wish to apply polish to them. It's not that these kids are stupid. On the contrary - they just hope that he is.
By dusk the tourist coaches have growled away, back to the coast or the capital, and Taxco returns to its citizens. The coloured lights strung through the zócalo’s trees illuminate the evening paseo as couples and families stroll. Drinkers at the cafe tables take the last pulse of day.

'I'm not paying $5 for a bed - even one as shitty as that, just because it's in Taxco-Tourisco. The 'Ermita' had better for a buck.'

'OK. It's the cop-shop then.'

'Can I help you?' asks the desk sergeant.

'Yes. We'd like to sleep here for the night.'

The cop's eyes widen.

'But you're American tourists!'

'No. We're Australian travellers.'

To him, the distinction is too subtle or semantic to wish to debate in our broken Spanish and his night-school English. However, he knows that viajeros - as opposed to turistas - by tradition, are permitted free overnight shelter in Mexican police stations.

'OK.' he says. 'This way. You the first tourists I ever lock up, like, how you say, voluntarios.'

He leads them down a once-white corridor of padlocked bolt-action rifles, past a rouges' gallery of 'Wanted' posters and sleeping-it-off drunks, and into the lock-up. Holey socks jut over snoring, sagging bunks. Several occupants grunt 'Gringos? Aqui? Por qué?' then return to their slumbers.

'Don't leave your boots under the bed.' advises our cop. 'All the thieves in here are not inside the bars.'

The night passes on waves of chainsaw snorings and the libidinous grunts from the adjacent cell, where some poor prostitute is working-off her fine with El Capitán.

'Muchísimas gracias por la hospitalidad.' says Crane to the desk sergeant as they depart in the morning.

'De nada, hombre. What's your destination?'

'Acapulco.'

'Better not ask the police there for a bed.'

'Why not?'

'You're hippies aren't you?'

'No. We're travellers - remember?'
The road spirals down to the coast through an enduring slash-and-burn landscape of burros and family farms; of small children waving iguanas or an armadillo at the passing traffic in hope of a sale. Plantations of the spikey blue *agave* tequila cactus. Cactus, acacia, kapok. Corn, beans and *platanas*. A lift from an American who's producing the musical 'Hair' in Acapulco, and who offers them a job. The ubiquitous white cowboy hats and *huarache* sandals of the peasantry. Another lift with a couple of playboys and their girlfriends. Finally, as dusk descends, two French-Canadian guys, who have driven five days to escape as many feet of snow in Quebec, take them all the way to Acapulco.

They baptise their arrival with a few Bacardis in a beach-front bar. Jean-Claude, the driver makes an inglorious debut in Acapulco cafe society when he tips the waiter five centavos. With perfect sangfroid the waiter returns it, informing him of its approximate worth - less than one half of one U.S. cent - and of precisely where in his anatomy Jean-Claude might most tightly retain it.
'Honey, my favourite part of L.A. is Acapulco!' belches some *baracho* blow-in from north of the border, one of the frequent apparitions which stumbles past our street-level window at the 'Hotel Trinidad.'

Tucked away in a backstreet 300 metres from the seafront fandango which is Acapulco, the 'Trinidad' is a warren of cages, painted entirely in the one shade of dark green, and, at $1 per night, the cheapest bed in town. It provides the base for our daily forays up and down the beach strip. We are wastrels with a 'No Denials' clause inserted in our contract with life, smoke-dried, sun-burnt, over-fed on junk food, and hopefully, forgiven our excesses by the sea. Each day we *mean* to see the famous cliff divers at La Quebrada, but each dusk finds us at the other end of the long beach and too uncoordinated to find the bus to La Quebrada.

'Mañana, pal, mañana.' It is we who are the parodies of Latino procrastinators.

The sea spins like dancer's skirt, wide and teal-blue in the dawn, aquamarine at noon. From it, all day the pelicans lumber to take-off, cruise at water-level like ponderous sea-planes, then, spotting a fish, plummet to a perpendicular crash-landing, to soon re-surface, gargling down their accordion gullets surprised but finished fish.

On the strand of beach known as 'Gringo Gulch,' hawkers of *hamacas*, Chiclets children, marijuana movers, *sombrero* sellers and platoons of trinketeers proposition the world for an extra peso. The beautiful bay folds its rocky arms around the frippery of parasailers towed by speedboats, margaritas served to New Yorkers at New York prices, couples from Kansas on private beaches entwined beneath the shade of palm-thatched *palapas*, and hotels, like 'Las Brisas,' where a suite for a week can consume the average Mexican's annual income.
We team up with Roger and Joe, refugees from wintery Wisconsin, who can't believe the sunshine. Together with Crane they have us evicted from the 'Trinidad' because of their intemperate dope-smoking.

'So now where do we live?' I complain.

'On the fucking beach like the other half of Aca-bloody-pulco.' says Crane in his sweetest temper.

We do move to the beach, between a large family from Guadalajara who can't afford hotel accomodation but are having a wonderful annual holiday anyhow, and a crew of Mexican drop-outs. A beach urchin named 'Elvis' befriends us - he claims to have seen Presley's film 'Fun in Acapulco' twelve times, and pities me for never having seen it at all. Beach theft is rife, although not without honour. Charlie falls asleep one night with his new sneakers pillowed safely beneath his head. In the morning they have been replaced by an aged pair of rubber thongs. One of the Mexican students beds down with his guitar strapped firmly across his chest. He awakes to find that he still owns the strap.

Mexican kids caught with pot have their heads shaved, making them highly visible targets during subsequent police raids on the beach. Suspected Mexican 'hippies' get the same treatment - which ruins the budding theatrical careers of several American members of the cast of 'Hair' when they are caught in a 'hair-raid' and shorn. (Not that it mattered. With $30,000 spent to mount the production, 'Hair' was shut-down after one performance. The Archbishop didn't approve of the nudity.)

One night we're sitting in front of a darkened beach-house with some Mexican kids, passing joints and making music, when suddenly the house lights go on and police with machine-guns appear on its porch. We can see them but they can't see us. A ripple of panic runs through the group, but, all savvy to their own constabulary, no one bolts. The joints are snuffed, and in ones and twos, shadows slip away down the darkened beach. Our sense of survival says it's time to quit the spangled lunacy of 'Grand Hotel La Playa' - as we have named our beach abode.
According to The Cranium: The emphysemic old bus makes it all the way to Pie de la Cuesta - 'Foot of the Hill' - a quiet and undeveloped beach about 10 kilometres north of Acapulco. Not a poncho-seller or instant orphan in sight. No one to throw you off some piece of Mexican coast owned by Conrad Hilton. Just snoozing, nodding palms. It's not much more than a village, a few thatched beach-front bars and a heaving shore-break. Jack gives a hoot, and leaves the bus at full-speed, strewing his clothes behind him as he heads for the surf.

I take it easier, stroll along a palm-fringed shore which curves away to the empty north. Behind it the jungle climbs to hot verdant hills stained by bursts of oleander, hibiscus and bougainvillea. A good place to stay a while and watch the days roll out to sea. Catch that old dawn sonata of roosters and burros.

Señor Ho passes hours body-surfing in the grinding shorebreak, suspended between annihilation and gravity-defiance, after which he tucks out the back of the collapsing wave, or being sucked over-the-falls and bounced horribly off the bottom, to emerge gravel-rashed and gleeful before swimming out to do it again.

A week passes easily, with our days full of waves and heat, reading, writing letters, buying mandarins from the old ladies, drinking rum at dusk with whoever's in the bars, cooking fish and camarones on the beach at night - and no sweat about some midnight sandman come to steal your soul from under your nose. Buses come at dusk from Acapulco for tourists to watch the westering sun - the big torn-out heart of day - fall sizzling into the sea, and to wonder if they saw the fabled green flash.

'I saw it. I saw it!' 

'Aw, bully, Doris - there weren't nothing to see.'

They leave in a hurry to catch some maracas-on-martinis floorshow while the sky cools slowly to iron-blue night.
A street-girl from town, an Indian named Maria-Helena comes to the beach one night to sleep. We talk about the sea and music and where we come from. She says she likes gringos, but has never been with one. I reciprocate that I like Mexican women, but also have never been with one. All that changes. For a while she rocks above me, Aztec moons alive in those dark Malinche eyes, then disappears in the fluttering nerves of night.

'It's time to go, Charlie. Narcs.'

'Jeezus! You're so paranoid. Where are they this time?'

Two suspicious types from Mexico City have turned up at the beach in their brand new Hawaiian shirts, check shorts - and department-issue black leather shoes. They're ordering Pepsis at a bar full of Bacardi and 'coco loco' drinkers, and asking if we know where they can score some pot. After one has asked Crane to show him his passport ('I just wan' see your picture, man.'), Crane too succumbs to the 'noids. We send them on a wild-goose chase back to the proprietor of the 'Hotel Trinidad,' and catch the next bus to the highway.

'Hey.'

'What?'

'Guess what?'

'What?'

'We never did see those La Quebrada cliff divers.'

'Mañana, pal, mañana'
At Puerto Marques, near Acapulco we had eaten tacos from a beach-stand. They were worse than usual, but we persisted and finished them. Half an hour later as we retraced our steps, we walked behind, rather than in front of the stand. There, in its scrap-heap, among the onion skins and corn cobs lay the neatly filleted corpse of a dog. All the muscle and flesh had been excised, leaving the skin, bones and head still connected to each other. Revolted, we abused the vendor, who protested that the corpse had been there when he arrived, and declared in a fit of plosives that his fare 'es bisteck y un poco de puerco, pero no es perro!'

The dog taco made no dramatic difference to the state of our bowels, which was steadily worsening anyhow. By the time we reached Veracruz on the Caribbean coast we were both running temperatures, and our 'adventure' was now a listless trudge through the toilets - such as they were - of Mexico's truck-stops and cheap cafes. We had so far refused to consult a doctor, hoping that we would eventually - as Crane put it - 'just crap it out of the system'. Mexaform tablets gave only temporary relief before they wore off the next day.

'Well, what could you expect,' I moaned, 'in a country that's got a diarrhoea medicine named in honour of it?'

One's perception of the world is dulled or brightened by the state of one's guts, is it not? Our perception of Veracruz did little justice to its flamboyant history of Cortes and his beautiful Indian translator-mistress Malinche, of Henry Morgan and all that Spanish Main-man romancero stuff, or to any of its more current charms. We saw only a chalky green sea, chopped by a nagging wind which never drew breath, and a port full of the standard venal and venereal baubles which are a sailor's lot. Beyond its bars and duty-free stalls, just another hard-working, fish n' frijoles coastal town.

The 'Hotel Grand' welcomed us with a take-it-or-leave-it sullenness. Too tired to look further, we took it, and plodded up the stairs beneath the weight of our packs. Check for the proximity of
the bathroom; look out the window onto a world of trucks and trade, and happy people with solid bowels. I wonder how it feels? We fall onto our dying beds and sleep.

Charlie is worse than I am. For a day he sweats and tosses, then announces:

'God. I feel like I'm gonna die. I'm crapping amoebas.'
'You sick enough to spend money on yet?'
'Yeah. Go score some proper medicine will you.'

I find a drogueria and spend 50 precious pesos on the pharmacist's recommendations of quinine and some nameless dark-brown mixture, probably laudanum.

We take triple doses and stay in bed for the next two days. There is little to do. We have exhausted our reading supplies, and Mexican newspapers seem to be full of photographs of dead criminals, none of whom we recognize, though I search hopefully for the filleted cadaver of the dog taco vendor. All that remains is to confront the aching body and the mind trapped within it, reproaching whatever part of the ego has led you out here to risk everything, in order to gain what? Having stepped beyond the bounds of most propriety, renounced the security of friends and the hygiene of home, having eaten dogs, and taken intoxicants as strong as molten lava, what magic has been sighted, what uncommon wisdoms gained? A 12 peso room in the 'Hotel Grand,' overlooking the monoxide mournings of a Veracruz truck-stop.

After two days Crane begins to improve and is able to get out of bed. He totters to the street and buys from an old campesina a lettuce, and from a grocery tienda two bread-rolls, and the least Mexican form of protein he can find, a can of Norwegian sardines. Down by the harbour we eat them, celebrating that we are still alive by sharing the feast with the cawing gulls.

We hung around Veracruz, waiting for our bodies to catch up. There was an English ship in port, the City of Canberra, which we boarded by talking our way past the armed dockyard guards.

'Yeah, sure we're from the city of Canberra.' we said, without too much of a lie.
On board, the crew of amiable Goans took us aft to the galley where the cook prepared a large bag of sandwiches - made of white, sliced bread, with New Zealand butter, marmalade, cheddar cheese and even Vegemite! This was joined by red apples, and another bag of freshly-cooked potato chips - which were not called 'french fries' or *papas fritas*. With bellies and pockets full we debarked past a scowling officer from Liverpool.

On the pier, from out of a nowhere of pallets and crates, a dark-haired gringo of about our own age emerges. There's a film of the road upon him, a kind of patina of nowhereness, dust and too long among the rats and rovings of this coast. Al's his name.

'You guys want to buy some mesc?'

He pulls a leather pouch from his Levis and holds-out a handful of dry brown cactus buttons.

'Organic mescaline. Peyote. From Sonora.'

Our stomachs are in no shape for this stuff, which often comes-on with vomiting.

We sit on the pier and listen to his story.

Been down this way half a year, but not to the day; no good to go back Stateside, too much heat after me; Mexico visa dead too. But no sweat, I can cross at Juarez, Nogales, Brownsville, whenever I want - just leave your nerves at the border when ya do a run. No fear. No pain neither in this shape; just sleep on the trawlers, ball the whores. Whites and white rum. Knife fights. See? Someday, maybe deportado, pero hoy dia, no preguntas, sin problemas; just panhandle n' deal whatever to whoever. Somedays I don't wonder what happens next, says Drugger Al.
We set course for the Yucatán Peninsula, and start hitching around the rim of the Bay of Campeche. Another American-on-the-lam (the mañana republics are full of them) named Bud, gives us a ride in his rusty Olds. He's from Texas, and although his poisons are *cerveza*, 'Cuervo' and *pulque*, he's like an older version of Drugger Al: the same can't-go-back shadow on his eye, the chameleon papers, a cast-away from the co-ordinates of fixed identity and abode. Another ageing cowboy caught in the American matinee myth of 'the outlaw.' He never tells us what he's into, but it seems to involve running illegals and girls across into El Paso, and 'bars' for the Gulf oil-rig workers.

'Australia, you say? Any Jews or Negroes down there?'
We decide to have some fun.
'Yeah, lots of Jews, so many you can't tell them from anybody else.'
A surly silence from the driver-seat.
'How about Negroes then?'
'No. Not many of them at all.'
'Can't be too bad. Don't like the races myself.'
'Oh, we've got the races. Lots of Aborigines, you know - blacks. Real good people.'
'Uh-huh.'
Another place he can't go.
Soon he wishes to be rid of us, and disappears into an adumbral bar in Alvarado, and we're on the road again.

A long and free bus-ride follows, thanks to the jocular proprietor of the line, Señor Hernan Gavela Morales, who happens to be on board. He drops us in Minatitlan, from where we travel into night with an accountant called Carlos. ('Carlos meet Carlos'.) Somewhere inside Tabasco state, on the jungle-and-marsh jaw of the Isthmus of Mexico, he halts at a highway restaurant.

It's a structure of bamboo and beer-crates, held together by the crush of the jungle around it, and the magnetic force of the single
fluorescent tube which attracts every moth and mosquito for 100 metres. Carlos is the maximum Mexican, moon-faced, gold-toothed, Cantinflas-moustached and is insistent upon us eating 'la especialidad de la casa' - the identity of which is to remain a surprise until we've consumed it.

The *chica* brings a stack of steaming, fresh tortillas wrapped in a cloth, *maize y frijoles*, the ubiquitous *salsa picante* and three plates of meat chunks in gravy. The meat is fatty and salty, and unlike any we've tasted previously. Crane's stomach is still too truculent to risk further assaults, and he quits after a few mouthfuls. In order not to offend Carlos's generosity, I persist.

'What is it?' I ask again.

'I tell you when you finish.' he chuckles.

After washing it all down with a 'Dos Equis' beer, Carlos motions me out to the back door. There is a metallic rattle above my head, and out of the darkness a monkey on a chain dives, snatches my cap and scampers for the rafters.

'Hey, a monkey!'

'That's right.' says Carlos. 'That's what you ate!'

'Oh fucking Jeezus El Pifco!' I moan. 'First dog, now monkey. What's next, donkey?'

'No, no.' hastens Carlos, 'It's a Central Mexico speciality. Es *muey sabroso*, no?'

'Correct. No.'

'Hey monkey-guts!' chortles Crane. 'This one should be as good as mole-colon! *Es picante*, no?'

I retrieve my cap and some control over my retching oesophagus. In a funk of post-prandial remorse I apologise to the monkey for the fate which I have just hastened - by one meal, I fear - upon him, and join the others, who are still roaring with laughter in the car.
Carlos drops us in the midnight streets of Villahermosa (he informs us that the name means 'beautiful place'), where we go sniffing down side-streets looking for a cheap hotel, waking sleet-eyed, dog-tired, *novela*-numbed night-clerks on their second job, hassling them for a 15 peso room. All they want is 20, or for us to go away so they can get back to sleep.

But here we are, as tired as them, and tenacious in our belief that experience can't be bought; but if you have to pay, well, the less the better, and the weirder the experience will probably be. The desk-clerks aren't impressed. The prices are fixed, and they're not about to risk their jobs to become a 'We-talked-him-down-five-pesos' anecdote in the boastings of gringo punks in search of vicarious poverty.

So, back up the shuttered streets to the main drag. Dew-blind cars, dying green neons. The dusts of a warm Gulf wind lick the lascivious tongue of fate across this intersection of the only six lives in sight. Four local looners are babbling below the fluorescent flack of a street-lamp halo.

'Hola, meesters.' they crow.
'Buenos noches.' we reply. 'Buscamos un hotel barato, conosces?' 'You wan' cheep hotel, eh?' answers the largest of them, a leering rake with greasy hair and a torn, once-white body-shirt. He saunters over, hands behind his back, and peers at us through concentric black waves which emanate from chemical pupils. Contact. But no high.

'He's drunk, or wired, or something.' whispers Crane.
'So are his mates.'

The other three shuffle over. Unmeant greetings and introductions are swapped. Miguel, Octavio, Hernan and Jose. We casually make it clear that we're not Norteamericanos. No matter. In poverty's resentment, finer points like passports don't count, just the colour of skins and the sniff of revenge. Out here, even Mexicans from the capital are called 'gringos'.
And then, at low midnight in Villahermosa the actors drop into their real roles. The big guy, Miguel, is suddenly swinging a machete. It snakes out from behind his back, with fluorescent moons dancing along the blade. He scythes its point at the ground. Flish-flash. Little sparks of frustration ignite the dull light. Flash-flick. The group moves in around us, lurching at our belongings. Miguel grabs Charlie's glasses; someone tries to pull my pack off. I tug it firmly back on as we both look for escape-routes. Crane grabs back his glasses. We start moving - not too fast yet - down the street.

Thud! A rock strikes my pack. Adrenalin rushes haywire to the nerve-ends; we both grab rocks, then start running. All the doorways in the street are shuttered, with the folded arms of metal cross-bars locked across them. This, I realise, will be a stupid way to go down, hacked by some gringo-hating Mexican in a boondock town, with only the wind for a witness.

'Look-out!' I yell, 'He's just behind you!'

Too late. Thhwaak! Miguel slams his machete full-force into Crane's upper left arm.

'Christ!' Crane howls, spinning to throw his rock with his good hand. He grabs at his left arm to see if it is still attached to the rest of him ... sees himself stumble to a halt, blood flowering through a voiceless scream, awakening to images of emergency surgery performed in some lost, gangrenous hospital ... he gropes for the bloody bicep, but finds instead the arm still pumping, in action - as are his legs, heart and lungs.

'Thank Christ!' he calls. 'The stupid fucker's hit me with the blunt side of the blade!'

And then there's an open door.

'Quick, it's a hotel!'

We spin in, slam shut the door and throw the bolts, top and bottom. A quarter of an inch of plate-glass in a wooden frame now divides our world from the insane one of Miguel and his pock-faced friends. It feels as wide as an ocean, with us on the far shore. They bray at the glass.

'Yanqui maricones! Pelos largos!'
'Yah, Mexicanos go home! Yeah, piss off, ya cunts.' we answer, foolishly.

They charge the door. The hinges begin to give. What was only a moment ago a moat as wide as a sea is suddenly reduced to a piddling brook. A few more lunges and it will be crossed. Our puny world of traveller's cheques, letters home and counting the number of passport stamps is far too close to being snuffed. We check the foyer and with dismay find that the stairway from it is barred by a metal gate. The only way out is via the elevator. As I stab at the call button, the night-clerk rises bleary-eyed from the pages of the novela into which he's been snoring.

The old lift creaks on its cables, waddling slowly down from the fifth floor. Back at the front door, Miguel and his friends lurch in uncoordinated attacks upon its weakening locks. The lift is at the second floor. They charge again. If this wasn't potentially fatal, it would be funny. First floor. Locks and hinges about to burst, glass to shatter. Trapped between a too-late Otis and the splintering ocean.

But what's this? Enter the night-clerk, who has finally awoken to the critical nature of things. Luis Sanchez Villarobles works here five nights a week, ten 'til three, 25 pesos a night, and, hermano, if anything in the foyer gets torn, broken - or smashed - on his shift, it comes out of his pocket.

So, Señor Villarobles takes control. He steps to the door. And opens it.

The locos erupt into the foyer, all arms, machete and blood-curdling shoe-scrapes across the tiles. The lift hits the ground floor. Crane claws at its aged brass gates and we stumble in, just as the first madman reaches the cage. We shove him back into the foyer, slam shut the gates, and hit the 'Up' button. Nothing happens. And here comes Miguel, huge black irises blooming flowers of madness across the acres of his open pores. He swings the machete two-handed like a halberd. Pa-ra-ang! The thwarted metal sprays sparks off the cage bars as the elevator at last begins to rise.

'Quick. Press the fourth floor.' pants Crane, 'The fifth's the roof. Don't wanna get trapped on it if they follow us up.'
We collapse against the walls of the elevator as it drags itself aloft - too scared to panic, too shook to not. At the fourth floor we peer out, fearing that our assailants somehow may have burst through the stairwell gate, and will at any moment come swarming onto this landing, panting and florid, but still with the strength of one hundred bottles of tequila coursing through their nasty, bastard arteries.

'No one here.' I whisper, 'See what's out that window. Might be a fire-escape or something.'

Crane pokes his head out, and gives a hoot of relief and disbelief.

'Hoo-fuckin'-ray! It's the cavalry!'

'Whatta you mean? Give me a look.'

Below is the vision impossible, the sight you thought you'd never see, and certainly never welcome: the Mexican constabulary en masse, dozens - no, scores - of uniforms pounding up on foot, screeching to a halt, leaping out of squad cars, riot trucks and patrol wagons, sirens wailing, lights flashing, revovers waving, billy clubs twitching, pouring like iron filings through the magnet of the front-door. Everyone's at the party: Federales, militia, state cops, plainclothesmen, and bringing up the rear, even an Army jeep with a swivel-mounted machine-gun.

We've disabled the lift by jamming our backpacks in the door. While keeping a wary eye on the stairwell, we watch this extraordinary sight below.

'Great. They've got the prick with machete.'

Far below, Miguel is slung headfirst and with an appropriate lack of mercy into the back of a patrol wagon. Scores of authority figures file out of the building and clatter back into their vehicles. In a crescendo of macho revvings, honkings and sirens, this bristling posse of testosterone blasts back down the main street to the Police Commandancia. But, we look at each other in dismay.

'They only got one of them. The other three fuckers are still in the building.'

We check out the corridor, and finding a vacant room, slip in and bolt the door behind us.
'Well now, look at that: two beds and an en suite dunny, and a telephone. Best room we've ever had in Mexico.'

'We'll take it.'

I call the night clerk to inform him that we've just booked in. He wants me to come down and register. I abuse him as best I can in my retarded Spanish, and demand that the book be brought up to us.

'Guess what, Cheapo?'

'What?' says Charlie.

'We just scored ourselves a 40 peso room. The best and the dearest.'

'Next time, Scrooge, that someone offers us a 20 bloody peso room, let's take it.'

A few minutes later the redoubtable Luis Sanchez Villarobles and a detective, Señor Portillo arrive. They reassure us that all the felons have fled the hotel.

'That this should happen to guests to our country is a shameful thing.' says Portillo. 'Your attacker will be severely dealt with.'

Yeah, we're thinking: clap the sonovabitch in jail for years, cut off his mustache, break his machete fingers. Anything. As long he stays nailed until we split town.

'Tomorrow, you must report to the Commandancia and file a charge against him, then appear as witnesses. You cannot leave Villahermosa until this is done. I'll expect you at nine a.m., hokay?'

We enjoy our private bathroom, but find that even after a shower we're still lying awake, ticking like butterflies on speed - not to mention the monkey in my guts, the woofing down of which seems so long ago now.

Tap! Tap!
Gulp!

('Shit ... Whozat?')

('Dunno.')</n
'Quien es?' booms Crane, in his best *basso profondo* tones.

'Es un amigo de Miguel.'

With switch-blades in our clammy hands, we conduct a conversation through the locked door, then advance to the safety chain. It is Mad Dog Numero Dos, Octavio, a small and now
pathetically repentant figure, with downcast eyes, and on a mission of - unbelievably! - mercy.

'You must forgive Miguel. He is a good man, a peaceful person ... What he did tonight was not him.

'Aw bullshit,' says Crane fingering his bruised arm.'Cause sure as hell it was me that he he hit.'

'No. You don't understand. He is a good man who supports his old mother and will marry his fiancée at Easter; but tonight he was turned into an animal.'

'Fuckin' - a, you bet he was. How much tequila had he drunk to get that loco?' I ask.

'But none! Tequila does nothing. We Mexicans just talk a lot when we drink it, maybe dance or weep some, but nothing more.'

'So why did he, and you, attack us?'

'Ah, it was el diablo ... ' and here he drops his voice way down.

'La droga, marijuana.'

'The bastard was stoned!' shrieks Crane. 'Marijuana you say?'

'Shh! Yes, yes. Not him at all, not me, but the devil inside. So please don't press charges tomorrow. We aren't drogaddictos, marijuaneros.'

'Pity.' says Crane, 'You might be a bit more bloody mellow if you were.'

We make no promises to Octavio, since the police require us to press charges, and we have as much desire to run afoul of them as to go home and meet Miguel's little old mother.

Before falling into an uneasy sleep for what little remains of the night, we formulate the First Hypothesis of Inverse Derangements: Gringos and Mexicans exhibit opposite responses to the same intoxicant - and the same response to opposite intoxicants. It's all done with expectations. Our evidence is that any number of south-of-the-border gringos can be seen going absolutely crazy-as-cactus around a bottle of 'Cuervo', 'Ole' or a few too many margaritas, because that's how people north of the border have all their lives told them an inebriated Mexican acts. The same gringos, or at least their off-spring, can be seen to smoke half an ounce of Acapulco Gold, and simply ozone out. Meanwhile, Mexicans have grown up on the inverse of this mythology. To them, tequila, as Octavio noted, frequently leads to a lot of palaver and maybe a tear
or a wobbly gavotte; but weed will send you wild, frenzied, terminally fucked-up, like a jackal with hydatids. And sure enough, as our night showed, the prophecies, as ever, are self-fulfilled.

Morning finds us down at the Commandancia, an edifice of crumbling cornices and bile-green paint. Doleful campesinos sit on the steps, waiting to bail-out friends or family with the slim wad of pesos kept safely tucked inside the sweat-band of a hat. We ask for Detective Señor Portillo, and are told that he finished duty at eight a.m. and will not be back until midnight. In our faltering Spanish we began to explain to the duty officer the events of the previous night.

'Ah, si, si. Entiendo. Entiendo todos.'
Understands it all, doesn't need to hear another word.
'Go three blocks down the main street, and tell everything to them in the office at No. 38.'

A little bemused, we trudge through the already hot morning. A brassy sun squints down on the shingle of No. 38 - El Officina de Turismo! The woman at the desk looks aghast at us. Either our story or our appearances, or both, are too much for her air-conditioned sensibilities. She backs away, then returns with a male interpreter. We drag him back down to the Commandancia, where he repeats our full story to the desk officer, this time in comprehensible Castillian. The two spend some minutes in staccato dialogue, accompanied by an amount of manual Spanish before the interpreter emerges, beaming.

'My friends, everything is OK. How you say - 'honky-dory'? You are free to enjoy our beautiful town. The officer says that you have not really done anything wrong, and will not be charged.'

'Que?'
'Whaat?'
'Señores,' says the interpreter. 'You don't wish to cause any trouble, I hope?'

'Oh, no, no.' mumbles Crane. 'I just wanted to know how's the guy with the machete doing - the one who tried to, you know, just to kill me?'

'The officer says that it was only fair that he should not be charged either. He has been released.'
Stunned silence followed. We walked away from that Commandancia with its sad steps and cross-wired reality, and without saying a word turned towards the hotel.

'You thinking what I am, Cisco?' asked Crane as we ascended again in that lumbering, life-saving Otis.

'That it's only 100 kilometres to the Chiapas border?'

'Si. Claro! ... Vaminos, eh, Pancho?'

As pronto as bats out of hell, we left Villahermosa, beautiful town which, for some, it may well be.
'Witness the man who raved at the wall as he wrote his "Questions to Heaven".'

Li Ho (T'ang Dynasty)

'We went looking for an echo, a place to hear our sound, a place to be in harmony, a place we almost found.'

Old Rock n' Roll Legend

So, again, ol' diary, ol' dimwit, o wall with ears but without hearing, what are we doing out here on the raving roads to Mexico and worse?

Why do some people seek a mirage of the miraculous awaiting them at the next bend in the highway while others hope only for postcards and clean sheets?

And what is this Quahoochibah place?

Chimera? Grail? Quahoochibah, the Cure, sits at the conclusion to all lines of vision; is the place where all the secrets are solved - and all the maps back are lost. It is the place of houris, nectar, perfect verse and perfect surf, none of which is taken for granted. For somewhere visited by everyone at least once in a lifetime, it is notoriously hard to relocate - organized religions have failed at reading the map for centuries.

Or is it just a chimera of my own naming? A no-such possibility which dangles a slaggish finger by the roadside, leading one, in the hope of some minor aggrandisement, across a baubled landscape of awful excesses, and binding one to the tides of intoxicants and their receding mirage of deliverance?
If it is anywhere, it is surely at hand. Yet, all I see around me are quiet Indians, sombre, handsome, dancing; but sharing no secrets of their Mayan magic - whatever it may have been, whatever they may have retained - with we travellers cheque gypsies, all hair and questions, but with no job, real language, land or family.

One day I'll walk up to a ticket booth, somewhere between Alhambra and Oman, sometime between Lent and Ramadan, and the clerk will simply sell me a ticket to Quahoochibah. Meantime, we're looking for a tienda with decent orange juice and a good juke-box.

This drive to dissolve the self out there on the knife-edge of the night and to sneak a vision of the workings of the universe will just have to wait. The self exhausts the Self. Its shadow is too close. We have become the terminal strangers.

The Chiapas plains scream past the window of the truck, until the driver throws us out for sleeping on the job. We're meant to be talking him awake, but after the night of the machete, labouring in Spanish is too hard to sustain.

While Jack's got the fits, the shits and the blind staggerers about every other thing between heaven and the horrors (we can't swap a civil word when he gets in one of those dumps), I steer us south towards the ruins of Palenque. It had flourished around the end of the seventh century A.D. and had been sacred as the westernmost city of the Maya, the place where the sun died.

Its old honeycombed stones rise on a wooded ridge above the omnivorous jungle. Silent, grey with age, steep-stepped, the Temple of Inscriptions sits like a spell upon the verdant tide which it holds just at bay. The Palace of Palenque and its tower stand to the right of the beautiful Temple pyramid: a gone world of glyphs and Sun God, feathers, jade and jaguar pelts. We are struck by the usual anthropotourist speculations on how such structures were
ever wrought from the earth and human hands and brains; how many incidental lives were expended in their making; and what necromancing, blood-clotted rituals were performed on its platforms and altars?

I climb to the top of the Temple of Inscriptions pyramid, which houses the tomb of Pacal who ruled this city-state from A.D. 615 to 683. The late afternoon jungle is still, and none of the usual Airstream trailer American pilgrims is in sight. For a moment - of what length I can't tell - the jungle below me recedes like a wave from a reef. The plain is filled with the houses, thoroughfares and ball-courts of a city. At the foot of the pyramid, hundreds of white-garbed Mayans are gathered. I look at my own clothes, and see that they too are shining robes. There is din and tumult from both the crowd below and the temple house behind me. Then, just as suddenly, I am facing again the green, silent plain over which this platform has looked for the last one thousand uninhabited years.

Every tree seems to bear light. Water is falling somewhere near. The earth glows like a dream which draws you on to touch and be touched by it. An unbearable sensuousness emanates from the land, as though one could almost feel its thrumming heart. I recall the carving on the the lid of Pacal's sarcophagus: it depicts the sacred ceiba tree whose roots are said to be in hell, its trunk in life and its branches in heaven. I stand absolutely alone, stranded in this Mayan light, enmeshed in the force of the earth, and yet, in aching isolation from any human touch which may, as a fuse, connect me to it or back to the world I've left. I weep.
THE YUCATAN DREAM-BOAT

We were way out on the mandible of Mexico, the Yucatán Peninsula, as it chomped into the map-blue maw of the Gulf. Sick of hitch-hiking, Crane and I had this Caribbean dream-boat scheme. We would buy a little tub, rig it with a mast and sail, and drift south, all the way down the Mosquito Coast, from Yucatán, past the Hondurases, to Nicaragua, Costa Rica and finally to Panama. We head for Progreso, as good a port as any for an ocean-going Cisco and Pancho team to start from.

En route to the coast, we strike market day in Mérida, the beautiful Yucatán capital, whose elegant Spanish architecture has survived the dubious ministrations of Progress. The town's whole 300,000 inhabitants seem to be on the street, wending their way through cornucopian stalls of clothing, meat, grains, fruit and hats. I buy a pair of tyre-soled huarache sandals, crunch upon chillied fried fish, and refuse a dozen enticements to purchase sunglasses, terylene shirts and other gringo indispensibles. No one sells navigation charts of the Yucatán coast.

In the park a group of musicians and jugglers is packing in the market-day crowds with rollicking fiddles, a jocular accordion and plates spinning on top of broomsticks. A slightly mestizo drunk clown rolls his eyes to heaven, wiggles his Zapata moustache, and with an open bottle of beer balanced on his forehead, performs a stately little gavotte. The audience giggles then gasps, swaying to the same angle as the bottle, as though to assist its defiance of gravity through empathetic magic. I climb half-way up an iron lamp-post to watch the performance; a cop comes by and doesn't tell me to get down. Charlie finds himself invited to dance with 'La Reina de la Fiesta', a pretty Indian girl in a brilliantly embroidered white huipile blouse and skirt. They both blush, then dance passably well.

Tearing ourselves away from these land-lubbing pleasures, we board an old gas chamber-on-wheels for the 40 kilometre bus journey north to the Gulf, to Progreso. In this off-season siesta its
seafront consists of shuttered holiday homes, a few empty cafes, a fishing fleet, three grey gunboats of the Mexican navy, and a sandblasted beach. We survey the beach for a suitably unoccupied villa, and take-up residence upon its porch.

'You say you wanna buy a boat an' sail it out there, on that o-shun?' says Rabanov, the old American who lives in the house next to 'ours', as he leans out his window.

'Sure. Why not?' I answer.

He aims the delta of wrinkles around his eyes at me.

'I'll tell ya "why not?" You monkeys oughta be doin' what Old Rab was at your age - I wuz out workin' for my first million.'

He takes a large mouthful of squid, and continues: 'It was good enough for old Rab, and it's good enough for you.'

'But, Rab,' I answer, 'Maybe I don't want a first million?' Refugee from Russia, via the rag-trades of Vienna and Brooklyn, he picks up a wooden cudgel and whacks the window-sill.

'Don't give me that hippie shit. Every young man should want to make a million!'

'But,' I persist quixotically, 'don't you think people also should also be free to make as little as they want?'

'Crap! Don't ask me to think like you guys. You ought to go home an' study accounting or somethin' useful.'

We tramp up and down the beach talking to the fishermen at work on their careened boats, looking for one for sale. Finally we locate the apostolically-titled Pablo Paulo, a five-metre clinker-built skiff. A lovely little thing, with green timbers and a simple two pole Mayan rig - something like a lateen rig - and a single canvas sail. We offer 600 pesos to Octavio, her owner. He says he'll think it over.

'We can just head out to sea in her.' says Crane, waving expansively at the whole Gulf of Mexico. 'Ignore all this visas and border bullshit, and three months later be in Panama. Whaddya say, Cisco?'

'Sounds great, Pancho.'

'What do you mean, just "sounds great"? Don't you want to do it?'
'Sure I do.' I answer. 'But, I've got this feeling that it's not going to happen.'

'Hey, Cisco. You turning chicken?'

'No. It's just an intuition.'

'Aw, crap.'

Hanging around the only juke-box in town, we meet two sisters from Mérida. They ask if we're Cubans.

'Why Cubans?' I answer.

'Because with your hair and beards and caps you look like Fidel and Che. And everyone knows you're trying to buy a boat.'

Crane takes off his cap, and points to the badge.

'But it says "Tomé Coca-Cola - Drink Coca-Cola".'

'Sure it does.' says Julietta, the elder girl. 'But around here, beards and caps and boats all add-up to one thing - Cubanos.'

'Why Cubanos?'

'Don't you read history?'

'Obviously not enough.'

Carla, her sister, explains that it was from Progreso in 1955 that Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and a handful of men sailed north in an old schooner to Cuba, to launch their revolution.

'Well,' glows Crane, fingering his revolutionary's chin-fuzz, 'it beats being mistaken for a Yank.'

Octavio agrees to sell us his boat. On the way to change our dollars into pesos we are arrested. A taciturn policeman marches us into an office with a floor of impeccably polished tiles. The Captain of the Port, a stern man with a Zapata moustache interrogates us across a huge and equally polished mahogany desk.

'Now, Señores, please tell me why you have been trying to buy a boat? Are you going to Cuba? Are these passports genuine? Where do you get your money from? May I see your guns? Why do you intend to start a revolution - or is it a counter-revolution - in Cuba?'

'But ...' we blurt - for a pair of self-styled travellers, that most painful admission - 'We're just tourists!'

Our merciless verbicide of the Spanish language convinces him that we aren't Miami Cubans trying to do a Castro on Castro; and
that, yes, we are just a pair of loco gringos who need to be saved from themselves and the Davey Joneses of the Mosquito Coast. And, that he can solve this whole matter quite neatly with old 'Rule Cincuenta' - which states that foreigners are prohibited from buying houses or boats within 50 kilometres of the Mexican coast.

We trudge back down the beach, to make our apologies to Octavio, who ingeniously offers to truck the boat 51 kilometres inland so that we can still buy it. We decline the offer. Further along the beach, Rabanov is still sitting at his window, cudgel in hand - 'against thieves: you guys, all these Mexicans, who knows?'

'Hey, Rab!' calls Crane. 'We took your advice about the boat. We've decided to go home and become accountants instead.'

'You cheeky monkeys! Give up. Ya hear me? Go back and get a job. Stop all this travelling-around crap ... You'll be sorry.'

'How long have you lived here, Rab?' asks Crane.

'Lived here? Listen, monkey, I wouldn't live in this shit-hole if you paid me. Too many thieves here. I just visit here for winter. My home's in that New York place. Too many thieves there too.'

'Are you retired?' I ask.

'Yeah. Damnit.'

'Why "damnit"?'

'Because ...' and here the runnels on his face rearrange into a new delta of disappointment, 'I never did make that first million. I hadta quit at nine hundred thousand.'

Progreso had only one more carpet to pull from under us. Heading out of town, we wandered into the Police Commandancia to fill our water canteens. A depressing place, with no water in the tap, shit in the shower and a stolen bicycle jammed into the one toilet bowl. Some poor wretch in a combination of police and prisoner uniforms, who - as both cop and criminal - seemed to be his own jailer, offered to show us the cells. Naively, we accepted. Once inside he demanded dollars before he would let us out. We laughed in his face; unsure of the joke, or his mistake, he laughed too. We shoved him aside, and kept on laughing all the way out of Progreso. Or Regreso.

'Told you I didn't think it'd happen.' I mumble.
'Eh, Cisco.' says Charlie, goofing.
'Si, Pancho?'
'Don't be so down. We're just like Fidel.'
'How so?' I ask.
'He left Progreso too.'
'But walking ...?'
AT THE CENTRE NOTHING

Ah Mexico! Your zócalos and locos, the elegance of your pomaded caballeros, it all dumps on us. Our voices are pointless on these ranting roads of trucks and cops and fatalities of child off-siders changing tyres beneath trucks jacked-up on rocks. Innocence is always ending. This is the lostness we've come to find, the anonymity which, of course, we resent.

We flee, stomachs still on fire through the jungle-licked Yucateco night on the splintered tray of an old Chevy camion. The jovial driver apologises for the windy ride, but he already has his family of five in the front seat. Between rides, Mexico lures us out to glimpse but never grasp the hearts of these cruciform towns. In the Plazas of Lost Mariachis and the Quadrangles of Angels where threadbare peasants still supplicate to history for a better deal, one may worship virgins, putas or statues. One may even expect a miracle. But for us, Our Ladies of Guadeloupe, The Highway and The Remedies just wink down and intervene not a whit - at the centre of the salty cross for us there is nothing.

The pobrecitos hobble on their knees towards a cathedral, hoping that this magic of mortification will absolve them of the sin of poverty or the guilt of illness. The basilica, afloat on flood-light and frankincense remains aloof, the rock of its faith unmelted by lamentations. Claudio and Rosalita bribe the angels with their tithes, and the sacristy absorbs it all.

Farther along the cat-black night we fall out of our ride to drink and dance at a truck-stop with Indians, who have now swapped their daytime dirtcropper rags for crystal white blouses. Local beer and a booming radio make them masters of their night. They laugh a bit at our beards and fair hair, and ask how we live without working. I explain that we've saved for this journey, and
are now in sort of a siesta between home and whatever happens next. To them, tales of unreal life.
By now I'm looking forward to leaving Mexico - soon - but we're still so many ruins from any border. The largest and most obligatory of these is the Mayan-Toltec city of Chichén Itzá, which we reach well after some midnight. Lacking any other shelter, we decide that for a hoot we will climb the main pyramid and sleep inside its temple-house.

We don our darkest clothes, strap on our packs and slide under the barbed-wire fence. After belly-crawling to the base of 'El Castillo,' the magnificent castle pyramid dedicated to Quetzalcóatl, the Toltec god of the wind, we look up to the 365 steep, broken steps and crumbling masonry which form the surface of this, its unrestored side. It lies in the moon shadow, and is the side to climb in order to avoid being sighted by the guards. Five clawing, panting minutes later and 75 feet higher, we reach the the top of the steeply-angled slope and slip into the temple-house. We are greeted by gibbering screeches.

'Christ! What was that?' sez Crane.
'I don't know. Quick, strike a match.'
'Bats.'
'God. I thought it was the ghost of the High bloody Priest himself.'

A dark plain stretches from the horizon to the falling moon. Beneath it Quetzalcóatl, the Feathered Serpent, has slept undisturbed for the millenium since the Mayans and the later Toltecs disappeared. Too loaded with thrill to turn in, we sit on the top step of the temple and try to imagine the 50 square kilometres of the city which once had covered the plain.

Below and to our right, a lower, flatter structure rises in the moonlight: the Temple of the Warriors. Tonight it belongs to the moon and intruders. We slide back down from El Castillo and cross the clearing to its shattered columns and platforms. The moon is by now a low yellow pendulum slowly settling between the rows of the Temple's columns. As we stand on its longitudinal axis and watch, the moon drops into the lap of a throne which has been carved in
the shape of the reclining figure of Chacmool, messenger of the gods. The night mists move in and cover our re-ascent of the main pyramid. A cat screams in the distance.

Everything you were
dropped away: customs and
tattered syllables, the dazzling
masks of light.
And yet a permanence of stone and
language
upheld the city raised like a chalice
in all those hands: live, dead and
stilled.

Pablo Neruda,
The Heights of Machu Picchu

With the morning we awake to the sounds of distinctly Gringoid syllables bellowing in the clearing below.

'Hey, Eleanor! Hurry-up. Darn it, Eleanor! Hurry!'

A lanky, middle-aged American is striding across the green at an ulcerating pace, firing a Nikon at everything which doesn't move, and continually casting over his shoulder for the hapless 'Eleanor'. Several moments later she appears, hobbling, with a walking-stick.

'Gordon, slow down. Please, Gordy!'

But Flash Gordon has already done three sides of the Castillo, and is bounding towards the Temple of the Sun.

'We don't have time to slow down, Eleanor.'

Half an hour later, we meet another American tourist. She's about our age, and with long black hair and jeans, looks to be more our kind of traveller.

'Hi.' she says. 'Great ruins!'

'You bet.' answers Charlie, who's just bursting to tell someone about our midnight adventure. 'See this one, El Castillo? We slept in the temple on top of it last night.'

Her face drops, until she looks like the daughter of Gordon and Eleanor.

'What are you?' she winces. 'Beatniks or something?'
We give up on humans and follow a sign which points through the scrub: 'A1 Cenote', that is, 'To the Well'. Or, we speculate, is it to the lair of yet another of our strange 'Als' in Mexico - this time, the Mayan underworld boss, 'Big Al' Cenote?

The 'well' is actually a large limestone sinkhole of about 20 metres diameter, into which people were thrown, not as sacrifices, but as emissaries to the the rain god Chac. It is now a murky pool of green-brown water, home to egrets and motmot birds, as well as blind fish. Stories of sacrificed virgins and tons of treasure have persisted over the years, but by now the loot is long-gone, having been dredged in 1904 by the local U.S. Consul, then shipped off to Harvard and other 'appreciative' points north. The most recent scholarly versions say that people were thrown into the cenote in the early morning, to be rescued at noon. If they had survived they were expected to have received a prophecy from Chac about the rainfall for the year to come. I wondered if, when they reported no prophecy, or an unfavourable one, they were thrown back until coming up with the news that fits?

As we muse upon the history of this pothole, there is a crashing in the bush behind us. It's Flash Gordon.

'Howdy boys.' Click.

'Hi there. How do you like it here?' Click. Click.

'I don't know, I haven't got time to look.' Click. Click. We've only got an hour scheduled for here. I'll see it all on the wall back home in Toledo.' Click.
Puerto Juarez in the state of Quintana Roo is Mexico's penultimate Caribbean settlement, a pimple on the chin of the Yucatán. The only thing beyond it is the expectorated fleck of Isla Mujeres, the Island of Girls.

We lurk on the beach below a tower of old Pepsi crates, still half a night away from the ferry which, in the morning, will take us across to the island. A patrolling soldier at this, Mexico's closest point to Cuba, pays us some attention, but is soon enough distracted by the presence of his sweetheart who waits in the shadows of the coconut palms.

Out of the blackness lurches a Volkswagen camper-van with New York number-plates. Its owners, Paul and Karen, invite us in for a cup of tea and a smoke of some Himalayan hillside. After a few minutes of passing the little brass hash-pipe inside this enclosed space, the Kombi is like a fuming samovar. I close my eyes and rearrange a galaxy of brain-cells as Paul slips on an old Dylan track. With God on Our Side thrums through the speakers in an unbearable richness of rhythm and texture; for the first time in my life I slip into a full synesthesia. This is not just a matter of putting pictures to the lyrics

'... the cavalaries charged and the Indians died,
for the country was young, with God on its side.'

It's more that the images are bursting from inside the very sounds. The hammering hooves are in the strings, the growl and whine of the guns in the timbre of his voice. I can see this music, see the pintos and cayuses galloping, falling, hear the harm somewhere in the guitar, the thunder on the tongue. 'I listened and I heard music in a word, and words when you played your guitar, and a child flew by me riding on a star ...'

We awake, our faces in the sand, the sun already risen, the little jewel of Isla Mujeres twinkling eight kilometers away across the milky-blue water, and the ferry approaching. On the island there's a ten peso flop-house, 'El Meson del Pescador'. No sleeping
on the beach is allowed here - too many signet rings and painted toe-nail *touristas* who might think it lowers the tone. We meet two girls from Los Angeles, Kerry and Ann, who have met a fishing-boat captain who's offered to take them on a trawling run to a Cuban island; but, not sure of the honour of his intentions, the girls are looking for company.

'Would you guys like to come?'

'Would we ever!'

'OK, we meet the captain again this afternoon to make the arrangements. He said we'd sail tonight.' says Kerry.

'What do we do when the Cubans ask why we've arrived illegally on their island?' I ask, not unreasonably.

'We'll worry about that then; not now.' answers Crane, equally reasonably.

Charlie and I hire bicycles and take a day-long ride down the rough seven kilometer track which runs the length of this low island. After bucking like bronco-riders through the scrub and coconut groves we finally arrive at the southern-most point, where the ruin of a small Mayan shrine overlooks a choppy sea. A bitter-blue southerly swell splits upon the rocks below the temple, sending each wave crashing up both sides of the island. I calculate that the temple has seen a billion waves since it was abandoned at least seven centuries ago. It probably has another billion to go before its glyptic remnants completely dissolve into the greater wave of earth-return.

Thirsty and sun-burnt, we sit on the point and people the waves with phantom surfers, who tear across the shallow reefs, executing impossible manoeuvres on the translucent faces. Ripping through tunnels of collapsing water, one of them emerges triumphant, pulls-out over the back of a wave and straight into the jaws of a huge grey shark. Huh? Take Two! The surfer is gone, but the shark still cruises beyond the break. That was no imagined noah. We decide not to go snorkelling.

On the return journey we forsake the break-bone road for a smooth sprint down the island's airstrip. A local kid on his dad's
over-sized bike joins us, and we race each other down the tarmac - until a Cessna has to abort its landing because of our gyrations.

'Cuidado,' yells the kid. 'Policia!' Roaring out towards us from the control tower comes a Police jeep, full of the sound and furiousness of Quintana Roo's finest, and signifying *muy malo* fates if these wallopers ever lay their truncheons upon us. We scramble for the scrub, ducking between the boulders where not even the four-wheel drive can pursue. A quick peddle back to town follows. We dump the bicycles and change clothes, just in time to see the jeep patrolling the street, cops squinting suspiciously at every vaguely gringo male. A dentist from Denver and a Cantinflas from Cuernavaca, baled up by the be-jeeped jerks, protest their innocence.

'I'm glad you guys are coming. Teodoro the skipper might be a bit of a Latin lover.' says Ann. 'Anyhow, the boat's called the *Doña Pascuala*, and it'll leave from the town wharf at 10 p.m. - *al punto* - he said.'

'Here's the plan,' explains Kerry. *Doña Pascuala* will take us out to Isla de Piños - Teodoro says it used to be a terrible prison island in Batista's day ... let's hope it's not one anymore. It's about 400 kilometers from here. He'll drop us there, go fishing, and pick us up a week later.'

'Does he want money?' I ask. 
'No. But he probably wants some *gringa*.' answers Kerry, tugging her blouse a little lower over her hips. 
'Did he mind the idea of two extra passengers?'
'Well, he seemed a bit disappointed or something, but he kept saying *sin problemas*, so I guess it's cool.'
'Let's hope the Cubanos feel the same way.' says Crane.

Ten p.m., down by the pier. An old lady is gutting the last of her catch. The *Doña Pascuala* is nowhere to be seen. 
'It left at nine.' says the vieja.
'An early Mexican!' says Ann. 'I don't believe it.'
'Are you sure he said ten?' I ask.
'Positive. "*A las diez de la noche. Viente y dos horas."* he said.'

The four of us stare at the empty dock where our ticket to Socialism should have stood. Glum silence.
'OK guys,' says Kerry. 'You've fucked-up our trip to Cuba ... but then again, you've probably saved us from a fate worse than a night with, um - let's see - Henry Kissinger. I think you owe us a cerveza or three.'

Sometimes it goes like that. The wild yarn of your life turns out to be all mild times and 'ones that got away.' You can actually tell long before it doesn't happen that it's not going to. I knew it with the sailing-boat that we tried to buy in Progreso, and I knew it with this one too, that the deal wouldn't come through. It's as though Fate is saving you from your own silliness. But you push on anyhow, just to see what adventure you turn-up in not having the adventure you meant to.

And it's all probably a good thing too: a local fisherman told us that sailing a skiff down these coasts would have been near impossible because of the constant on-shore winds. And who knows what Tio Fidel would have done with four visa-free gringos turning-up from nowhere at his backdoor? Especially with two of 'em wearing caps and beards.
Back on the streets of Mérida, we met a lanky, blue-eyed Bostonian named Alan. He was about 28, and trailing an entourage of four younger freaks, who hung upon his every fruitarian pronouncement. One morning, after we'd been evicted from our hotel, 'La Casa de Huespedes,' for El Cranium's usual dope-smoking, Alan invited us to visit the house which they had rented in nearby Ticul village.

The offer was more than welcome, considering my advanced displeasure at having to sleep the previous night sitting up in a rowdy, brightly-lit all-night cafe. Even there, several suspect gentlemen of Mérida ('Hey, my fren', wan momen' plis. Joo from Stateside? I been Eight-Hashbury too. Can you score me some garass?') were getting on my nerves; as were our own wastrel days and pissed-away nights. My conscience was prodded by the sight of an Indian kid about age twelve, studying his school-books by the only electricity he has, the street-lamp in the park. It was time to get out of town again. Time to find a place to rest a while, where we might wash, read, write, shut up, not move.

Alan and company draped themselves around their lush little garden. Cocooned in hammocks and surrounded by glissando moonlight on the mango leaves, they lay still while Alan read by candlelight from The Prophet in his, well, fruity voice: '... pain is the breaking of the shell of your understanding ...' and so on. Despite his nostrums and posturing, here indeed was a little peace. Adobe and terracotta, ample books, mañana rhythms and no dog-nosed hotel dueños to deal with. We settled in for a few days of retreat from the wonders and weirdness of the road.

Alan's obsession is with his 'alimentary canal' and the cleanliness thereof. We soon nick-name him 'Al Canal'. He joins the glorious pantheon of Mexico's Greatest Als: 'Drugger Al' of Veracruz, 'Al Cenote' of Chichén Itzá and 'Al Stillbroke' of anywhere we happen to be. And of course, that ubiquitous Latino shithead, 'Al Bano' - 'to the bathroom.' Oblivious to such slings from us (whom,
nevertheless, he is beginning to suspect as antipodean ignoramuses), Al Canal lives a life of guava and fasts, astronomy and enemas, and theorises the eugenics of sibling mating.

Between quotes from Gibran, we receive readings from the guru of fruit diets, Arnold Ehret, then the Bible, the Tim Leary version of the Tibetan Book of the Dead, various astrologers and Palestinian literature on the international Zionist conspiracy. Al's pals, Tommy, Julia, Paul and Nancy are less sceptical than we are, and other than with an occasional grain of salt, they take him as a general font of Aquarian wisdom. Nancy is pregnant to Tommy. Alan's ideal human, he tells us, will be conceived between purified, fruitarian siblings. He is disappointed that that Nancy hadn't brought her brother instead of her boyfriend.

Alan is in such good health that when El Crano and I ride bicycles to Ticul, he trots the four kilometres beside us and arrives less puffed than we are. He purchases a swag of papayas, bananas, oranges and limes, then turns around and trots back.

We head for the local cafe. After beef enchiladas and a joint, plus a couple of rums we stick our heads almost inside the juke-box - loudness is next to godliness - for those endless mantric cadences in the coda of 'Hey Jude'. A tapestry of chants fills our skulls and thrills our rock-starved synapses. The domino-playing Mayan men look on, unimpressed by the noisy banalities of the gringo cosmos.

'Look at yourself!' says Alan, pointing to Crane's dysentery-wracked frame. 'I'm healthy slim. You're sick thin.'

'Sure I'm crook, Al,' answers Crane, 'and I'm sure my taco toxins are killing me right now ... but I've still got my sense of humour. Watch this.'

He sucks-in his stomach and cheeks until he looks like a parody of a P.O.W., then says, 'They don't call me "Changi" for nothing.'

'That's not very funny.' intones Al.

'Think of it this way, Al.' persists Crane. 'If I didn't eat bread and corn and all that mucusy crap, I wouldn't have any glue to even hold the fruit in. Maybe the mucus does me good.'

'Wrong.'
'Alright then, how about: "If you don't eat, you don't shit. If you don't shit, you die."?'
'I'm fasting and I'm not dead.' croons Alan.

Our defensive, Aussie-hick humour is a Band-Aid between Crane and myself - it kind of papers-over the splits caused by his anger and my introversions and irritability. And, it's one of our few refuges against the madness that we've made of Mexico ... the pressures of being constant outsiders, rootless and usually rotten-sick.

Al's patience is being stretched by our presence, but, to his credit he is too kind to tell us to piss-off. Were we more sensitive to our own impositions, we might politely decamp. But, we've been aliens so long, and it's a relief to be around the others, and to share the same language, jokes and music. Sanctuary. But we should shut-up when Al sits there by the well in his Indian nappy and chants, 'Aa-uuuu-mmmmm, Aaaa-uuuummmm-mmmmmmm'.

After a day's shopping in Mérida we return with a waiter from Chicago in tow, a rioter named Jim. He's on a pilgrimage of American tourist resorts in Mexico, writing on every toilet door
'If you voted for Nixon you can't crap here.
Your asshole's in Washington.'

He had climbed the Chichén Itzá pyramid the night after we had, and the guards had shot at him - proof of just how noisy he can be. He assures us however, when warned to maintain some quiet around Alan's house, that he can be 'as quiet as a motherfucker'. Needless to say, Jim and Al Canal find nothing in common, except that instant antipathy which occurs between fellow countrymen in voluntary exile from the same things. They hate their country in the other. In order to avoid gross insult between the two, Crane and I take Jim back into Ticul for, predictably, a hamburger and a Coke. As we leave, Alan who's still fasting, drones something about '... that toxin of your soul, the dinner-bell'.
Jim hits the tequila. Someone tells him that there's a bordello in town - somewhere - and he's away, banging on random doors.

'Where there's whores, there's hornies, hey? *Donde son las putas?*

We shut him up and head back to Al's. The Grand Canal is sitting in the darkened garden, star-spotting through his telescope.

'Hey,' hisses Jim. 'If it's stars he wants, it's stars I got.'

He plunges toward the back of the house, where his suitcase is stashed. Al ignores the ruckus, and draws his bead on a jewel on the buckle of Orion's Belt. The stars are burning god-knows-what fructuous significances into his multiplying mind as he sits transfixed in the silence of the Mayan night. Suddenly, that holy night is ripped with a fierce javelin of light. *Zzzeeeeshh! Bang!* Then another, and another.

A maniacal cackle erupts from the front porch as someone switches on the light. There is Jim, doubled in laughter and still holding a bottle with an unlit sky-rocket protruding from it.

'Hey meester. You wan' your seester?' he howls at Alan.

Al removes his eye from the rim of the universe and relegates his cool to the compost heap.

'You dumb, fucking waiter. Get out of my house. And take those two Aussie mind-fucks with you!'

Sanctuary snuffed.
'Yip, yip! Hey, my fren' wan momen' plis! Goodbye. Adios!' Jacko's hooning like a loon from the back of this pick-up which is taking us to the border.

Mexico recedes. The spikey horizon of agave cactus fields and tussle-headed palms draws away. Chetumal's curved red tiles drop from view, and all that remains of Mexasform Land are a few passport shuffles. With our beards and weird schemes which never come off, and our dreadful diet of dogs and drugs and rock n' roll, I realise belatedly that the ordinary, family Mexicans among whom we might have spent time, would hardly have welcomed such a pair of unstable gringo locos into their parlours.

Maybe next time, Moctezuma ...
Adios, los Yucatecos.
Hoo-roo, Quintana Roo.
Hasta leugo, los Indios.
See yas, mestizas.
Sorry about the Spaniards.
Sorry about ourselves.
Muchisimas gracias anyhow, Mexico.

We walk across the causeway bridge on the Rio Hondo, which forms the border with British Honduras. Mexico is already a fading blue 'Salida' stamp in our passports as The Road renews itself with the buzz of a new border. We tuck our hair up underneath our caps. Another shot at the promised land, happy trails.

A tall black man in a navy-blue tropical uniform and Bombay bloomers says, 'How long would you like to stay, sir?'

'He spoke English!' hisses a grinning Jack.

'Of course, sir. Now, how long?'
Not that I'm an Anglophile, but not long after my first Mars Bar and a decent cup of Lipton's tea, just outside of Corazon Town, I'll swear that those tortilla-eating Mex amoebas in my guts started to curl up and die.
British Honduras is an anomaly, a tiny island of English language and African blood, a British Crown Colony tacked onto the eastern shore of Spanish Central America. It's a land of cane and coconuts, of cattle ranches and logged-out mahogany forests on the coastal plains; and of rivers and dense jungles where its western ranges rise to meet Guatemala.

The population is predominantly Negro, some of whose forebears were escaped slaves from Jamaica, while most are descended from sugar and coconut plantation workers brought from various parts of the West Indies. A smattering of East Indian Moslem traders, Chinese, inland Mayan Indians, a few attenuated Carib genes, and several communities of sombre Amish make up the rest of the population. Predatory Christian missionaries of every stripe (and star - such as evangelical radio crackers from institutions like the Church of the Holy Bleeding Short-wave Heart of Jesus, Alabama) all prowl the land, colonizing for their version of God. Here to do good for all, but doing best for themselves.

A black missionary named Reverend Anthony takes us home for a spread of Cadbury's Cocoa, tinned ham on white bread and English biscuits. Tea at three, and a language as familiar as an old coat. He doesn't even try to convert us. Just says 'God bless' instead of 'Adios'. Later, Dudley, a local engineer and His wife Janice take us further south to the capital, Belize.

'Whenever we get independence,' Dudley explains, 'the country'll be called the same name as the city. No more B.H. We'll be living in Belize, Belize.'

'Almos' like New York, New York.' Janice adds caustically.

After running over a rattlesnake (three times, for safety, then souveniring the rattle, for good luck), and passing sign-posts to places like 'New River', 'Orange Walk Town' and 'Midwinters Lagoon', Dudley drops us in the centre of Belize, a one-time pirate port from the days of the Spanish Main. The capital is a brawl of clapboard, canals and catfish. The harbour dominates the town,
with everything crowding around the foreshores of its muddy, shallow bay. There's a small iron bridge, a large dockside market, a few hotels and a cluster of blank-faced warehouses. Rum bars with wood-rot in their white balustrades loiter upon street corners, very Sidney Greenstreet. The town retains some of the buccaneer flavour of its probable name-sake, the English pirate Wallace, the patois decay of whose surname - through 'Wallis' and 'Vellis' - it is speculated, may have resulted in 'Belize'.

The populace is mostly black, the money mostly white, flowing from investment or aid supplied by the British, Americans and Canadians. A contingent of British commandos - called the 'Green 'ornets' by its nuggety, likely-looking lads - lurks about in order to keep the disgruntled Guatemalans at bay. The Guat's claim B.H. as theirs and that they were gyped of it last century by perfidious Albion in a 'railway-for-territory' sleight-of-hand. The the wily Poms got their colony, but we never got our railway, claim the Guatemalans; so, thanks, we'll have the colony back. Every time domestic issues get too pressing in Guatemala City, the 'B. H.' question suddenly is resuscitated as a distraction, a contingent of listless conscripts is sent off to the border to rattle but never draw the machete.

The few European faces in town belong to merchant seamen, American game-fishermen and deer hunters, sweating missionaries, and a few ex-pat gringo creative types. We meet one tripper from San Francisco who, with his girlfriend, has found his way offshore to Half Moon Cay, part of the second largest coral reef in the world, and is building there what he describes as 'a geodesic dome made out of palm branches - sort of a Bucky Fuller-gone-bush thing.' A few hardy tourists poke around this friendly, guidebook-free zone, mostly ending up in the shade of a beer against the midday heat. Bearded, dark-garbed Amish immigrants, having driven the horse and buggy into town for supplies from their hinterland communal farms, give a wide berth to all these agents of Sodomy and Gomorrahdom.

We locate free lodgings on the floor of the Salvation Army flop-house. The genuine down-and-outs and the supervisor aren't too
comfortable at having what they consider to be a pair of whitey tourists in their midst. But the Captain is an Englishman who appreciates our poverty and distance from home, and lets us stay. As mad dogs who've been out in the Mexico sun a bit too long we are grateful for his unconditional generosity.

Exploring the town, we instinctively gravitate towards the wasted side. We wander into a zone known officially as Yarborough, but to the locals as 'Soul Land.' It's no more than a muddy street facing the mangrove wastes, but in the middle of it is the Eden Rock Bar, a big old packing crate of a place, jacked up on poles and very l-o-u-d sounds. Interior decorations are simple: a bar and barman, a few glassy-eyed imbibers and a row of rum bottles which rattle every time a shilling drops into the brand-new Rock-Ola jukebox. Aretha Franklin, Wilson Pickett and most of Motown are alive and wailing in this Cadillac of nickleodeons.

Flanked by two similar establishments of rum, ganja and black R & B, the Eden Rock prevails upon the neighbourhood by simply having a louder sound system than the opposition. Whenever its supply of shillings lapses, dicordant waves of competing music crash in from each side of the building, causing some Eden Rock patron to saunter over to the box and re-establish aural supremacy.

'Hey white, what you doing in here, mon? This is a black brothers' bar.' says the big spade who has confronted Charlie at the jukebox.

Crane offers him a hit on the brown-paper joint he's just lit.

'Just playing the music, brother. Just here for the music. You like "Hey Jude"?'

'Sure.' answers the big man, as he exhales smoke over Crane's face. 'I like anything by Pickett.'

Crane punches the buttons and Paul McCartney's white tonsils come crooning out of the speakers.

'Hey, fuck, that ain't Pickett!' says the black man, 'What's this shit?'

'Beatles, bro'. They wrote it.' answers Crane, retreating to our table.
The big man goes back to the bar, orders a white rum and a finger of ganja from Winston the barman, rolls a number, and listens to the music, which - as the only white song on the juke-box - has never been played before. Half way through the joint, he passes it to us. Nothing more is said, and from then on we are tolerated in the Eden Rock as the only whites who care, or dare, to drink there.

What they don't mention in any atlas, gazetteer or encyclopedia is that Belize, British Honduras is one the most extraordinary places on earth in which to relieve yourself. (Calangute, Goa, India is another, but also another story.) Yes sir/ma'am, Belize, Belize is a place to take your ease. It goes so...

You find yourself walking down a dusty but clean-enough street, beside one of the muddy canals which grid the town. A pearly sky and two-storey houses of wood or concrete oversee your progress. There's a little sweat upon your brow, partly because of the high humidity, and partly because of the lingering effects of the Mexican greeblies which still patrol your colon. You would rid yourself of them.

Ahead is a wooden structure, about the size of a garden shed, perched on the edge of the canal and partly overhanging it. A sign says Gentlemen, and so you enter. The shadowy interior contains little but a broad platform running parallel to the canal. It has four large circular holes cut in it, and is raised about two feet above the ground. A local gentleman sits at the farthest hole, apparently slumbering, with his pants around his ankles and his head resting against the side wall.

This is no time for honkey privacy. You simply ascend the throne and commence your mission.

Two thoughts hit you as one: where is it going and what's that noise? A terrible sound is coming from below. You peer down through the hole to find yourself looking
straight at the canal water. Your first question has been answered. But what’s wrong with the water? It is no longer the calm, albeit turbid surface of a few moments ago. Now it is a black and thrashing melee of ... catfish!

You leave in more of a hurry than you had arrived. The old chap on the other end of the bench stirs, then chuckles: 'Don't them guidebooks warn you tourist people never to catch the catfish?'
'So, this is it, eh?'
'What is?' asks Crane.
'This.'
'... is what?'
'What we've come to find.'
'Guess so.' he answered. 'What do you reckon?'
'It's not quite right.'
"'Right'?' he snarled. 'What do you mean "not quite right"? It's what is. Forget the fucking adjectives.'
'No. What I mean is, it's not our place, here. We don't belong - we're just white wogs. The Belizeans hardly even belong here themselves. The Guats want to pinch back from the blacks what the Poms swiped from the Spanish, who nicked it from the Indians. Even all this "soul bro' from Soul Land" shit is just a pinch from Chicago - and most of them have never even been north of Corozal ... It's like all cultures are just waves of squatters, with everbody claiming naming-rights to what they've just pinched from the last mob.'
'Nice theory. So?' he said.
'So, I can't find a place to squat, or anything that feels close enough to real that I'd want to lay claim to it. And I'm sick of being the constant stranger, the white wog.'
'Then fuck off. Go home.'
'And where's that?'
'Home's anywhere you don't have to get your visa renewed.'

Crane poked his glasses up to the top of his head - as though he had eyes up there. Outside, beyond old Yarborough, was the bluest sea, a mangrove shore, and a Belizean thunder-box wobbling on stilts above the mud-flats.

'Fucking give up, won't you!' he groaned. 'We're here, aren't we, Jack? A million miles from deadshit-dumb Australia, loads of good ganja, living on fuck-all dollars a
day ... and you just keep on making me feel like it's not enough. What do you want? And what if this is "it"?

'It', the unreachable, inescapable destination. And us already there. Me in these self-pesterings, and Crane - after two joints and three rums - in his Zen derro pose. I fumbled on.

'Yeah, I suppose all we've got's the journey. Arrival's an illusion.'

He slammed the table and hissed at me.

'Fuckit, Jack! I'm going to hit you if you don't shut up. Stop thinking about this shit. Stop taking the world so personally. We're all going to disappear like so many Mayans. You're just another one of those things.'

'What things?'

He leaned back and cackled, pointing to the harbour.

'You're just another catfish, Jack. Don't ask questions. Just float around, and whatever it is ...' He shoved the rum bottle towards me, '... swallow it.'

So, why does Jacko keep his damn diary?

For art, fame, power, lovers, wealth? Well, his little exercise book's got a long way to go before he gets near any of that stuff - but I'd suspect that like any 'artist,' some of that's in the back of his mind. Art always was a long-term investment.

Then again, what would I know? The only way I put two symbols together is in my head, and then if I'm loaded enough and pointed in the right direction, out it comes ... and then it's gone. Sometimes I envy that he's 'creative,' and can almost capture in words some of the flashes of the road. But trying to keep them is like trying to carry a handful of holy water ...

Plus, that kind of communication - writing - is so out of balance: it takes him hundreds of times longer to write it than for anyone to read it. And how many hours of writing get sacrificed to the memory of a little living? How much
possible new living is sacrificed to writing-up so many old memories? I'd rather just get down with some rum and a number and have a good rave.

Later, weaving home through the puddles, staring at the moon's reflection.
'Maybe I'll do a Li Po.' I said.
'Lee who?'
'Famous old Chinese poet. He got drunk and fell out of a boat, trying to catch the moon in the lake. Drowned.'
'No chance,' says Crane. 'not deep enough.'
'What - me or the puddle?'
'Yeah.'
'Hullo, mon.' she says in a patois purr as she slips out of a doorway. When it's midnight by the Caribbean and you're twenty-one and on the run to and from yourself, and full of rum and ganja too, this sort of thing sounds like the bells of the Angelus.

'Hi.' I answer, as she falls into step with us, 'Where are you going?'

'Down the way, to home.'

Which happens to be in the same direction as the Sallies flop-house which Crane and I call home.

Crane nudges me.

'She's a hooker, Jack.'

'Bet she's not.' I hiss.

Too late his warning. I'm going down for the third time in those bright, black eyes. Her face floats like an icon within the frame of her Afro halo. She might be, I decide, the Black Virgin of Belize. The Madonna of Midnights.

In fact, her name is Amanda. She is about 18, wears a mini-skirt which would put the Pope in Purgatory, and has a lovely lilt to her voice - even though we keep running out of things to say. She talks about West Indian bands I've never heard. I talk about cities she's never heard of.

Crane peels off at the Sallies.

'OK, Errol Flynn,' he says. 'Watch your arse, pal - not hers.'

We walk on through the dusty streets and crumbling conversation. When she slips her arm through mine, it's like a citizen's cardiac arrest. I realise how much I've been wondering - hell, no, worrying - if I'd ever find myself next to a girl again: heaps. And here she is, my sweet angel of redemption, promising volumes of carnal knowledge and the resurrection of my manhood. We arrive at a dismal house elevated on palm posts.

'Can I have fahve dollahs, please Jack.' she says at the gate.
'Huh?'
'Give me fahve dollah first.'
Clunk! The icon falls apart. The Madonna goes hag. Crane was right.
'What for?' I feign.
'Just foh the room.' she feigns.
'Where is it?'
She points to a boxy appendage tacked onto the rear of the house. Taking my five, she pokes it, most un-Madonna-like into her little cleavage, then knocks on the door. An irritated grunt emits from within.
'Someone already in deah. Com, undah the house.'
We stoop beneath the low joists. Amanda pulls a mattress from somewhere and flops back onto it.
'Give me more fahve dollahs please, Jack.'
'Hey? I just did.'
'That was foh the room. This is foh me.'
'But we didn't even get the room.' I retort.
'That not my fault.' she whines.

The sweet dream of Amanda's saving grace has curdled. But lust and pride persist when other deadly virtues have fled. I refuse to part with another 'fahve.'
'Oh, alright.' she huffs, and wriggles out of her skirt and top like a snake shedding its skin.

Here, in this passionless pit, at my first sight of a naked black woman, I make a great and inane discovery: there's no contrasting dark 'map of Tasmania' - just black on black.
'Come on.' she urges, as I ponder this wonder of nature.
She reaches up, not to embrace me, but to tug the bandana from my throat. Arching her back, she spreads the bandana below her.
'Come on now, boy.' she giggles, 'I ain't got all night.'

As I prepare to consummate this farce, there comes from somewhere behind me a single, chilling sound. A metallic click. Springing to my feet, I spin around and there - omygod! - are six of
the biggest, blackest brothers you ever saw, standing like a picket-line between my white arse and freedom.

'Oh Christ!' I'm thinking. 'Was that a switchblade?'

Survival has instantly replaced sex on my list of things to do tonight. What, I quickly wonder, is the customary native punishment for gringo iconoclasts who would bespoil the local Madonna? And what of my own arse? I thank Allah that this is good ol' macho-hetero Central America, and not certain parts of the Middle East. I quickly zip up my jeans.

As I step up to this sullen human wall the heart in my mouth expects to be slit like an apple. But wait! The giant who bars my way looks familiar. It's our ganja man from the 'Eden Rock'!

'Hey Winston!' I yelp. 'How you doing, man?'

'Aw, fockit!' snarls someone down the line. 'You know this guy, Win?'

Winston's acting like he wishes he wasn't here as much as I am. 'He's cool.' mutters Winston. 'He's from the bar. He ain't no American.'

'Yeah, but he's still a fockin' whitey.' growls the voice.

I'm not waiting on permission to live. I barge straight through the line, on fire with fear, humiliation and relief, and head for the street. Outside, breathing air instead of adrenaline, I pause for a moment. And realise - damnit! - that my bandana's still back there, closer than I'm ever going to get to Amanda little devil's triangle.

'Now wait-a-moment,' I muse: 'to lose five bucks and the blessings of the Black Virgin, not to mention a lot of face, plus almost your wallet and your good health, taboot, is one - indeed many - things. But ... to lose your favourite bandana!

I stride back through the muttering dark ruck, back into that adumbral loins' den, jerk my neck-rag from under Amanda's little what-a-waste-of-sin derrière, and then, with the brothers still gaping after me, turn-tail for the street.

'Well, how was it, Errol?' asks Crane, who's still awake.

'Ha! Back in like Flynn.' I laugh.

In the dark he can't see me shaking like leaf.
'I reckon that everything you know could be written on the back of a postcard.' said Crane.

'It usually is.' I answered. 'Speaking of which, I ought to send some soon. It must nearly be Christmas.'

We were wandering down by a weed-choked wharf where the timbers rot imperceptibly, but always with the threat of dumping you into Belize's shit-fish harbour, and wondering what to do next: go to Jamaica, Guatemala, Panama, find work here?

'I wonder if they celebrate Christmas here?' I said, thinking aloud.

'Sure.' answered Crane, 'There's heaps of God-floggers down this way. When is it, anyhow?'

'Next week, I think.'

Neither of us knew what day of the week it was - but each of us thought himself as flash as a rat with a gold tooth, anyway. The usual flotsam of self-romance drifted across our dream-screens as we sauntered, mad dog-like beneath the midday sun, down towards where true rabidness lay. The only thing moving in the noonday heat was some poor black kid planing the transom of an big old launch. His face was beaded with sweat; wood shavings flecked his curly black hair.

'Mister Bo.' he wailed. 'It's too hot now. Can I do this later?'

A hammock slung under an awning amidships coughed and elbowed suggestions of occupancy.

'Bo-oy,' said a W.C. Fields twang, 'I want that name changed yesterday. None of this three-hour lunch shit. No wonder you-all got an underdeveloped country.'

The boy returned fitfully to his task of erasing the words *M.V. Anne Helena, Miami* from the stern. We took a closer look at the vessel, an ageing, timber-hulled World War II patrol launch of about 20 metres length. It was a long, hard time since she'd been cashiered out of some hand-me-down Third World navy. She now skulked beside this backwater, looking as suspicious - and here
we'll have to mix genders, continents and realities - as Sidney Greenstreet did in 'Casablanca.'

The Panama hat of her deck-housing had been remodelled once too often, and what was intended as disguise now served by its misshapenness to draw attention to the boat. As though Monsieur Greenstreet had borrowed - or stolen - someone else's hat, and a Sombrero at that. And then there was her remittance man suit, whose customary linen whiteness was now begrimed by too many brushes with quick paint jobs, the law, or both.

Having completed the erasure of the original name, the boy had now began pencilling-in the words M.V. Tropicana, Belize. M. Greenstreet, it seems, was adopting an alias.

The hammock bulged again with angular life.

'Finished there yet, boy?' it croaked.

A stubbled, beaky, hood-lidded head appeared above the edge of the hammock, surveyed the demon life around it and, spotting us on the wharf,izzed:

'Howdy boys. What're y'all doing?'
'Looking for work.' answered Crane. 'Got any?'
'I might have, son.' said 'Mr. Bo,' 'Might just have.'
'What kind of work do you do?' I asked.
'Oh, a bit of this and a bit of that. Charter mainly.'

He raised himself from the hammock and invited us aboard. The deck smelled of beer and fish-heads.

'The name's Beauregard - just call me Bo. And this ... ,' he said, pointing to a tall white man who lay in the next hammock and who sported a grey crew-cut and a red bandana, 'is my partner Billy Dale, from Galveston.'

Billy Dale seemed to wince at the word 'partner,' but said nothing - even though his lips were moving. A sibilant hiss emerged from his bandana.

'He can't talk too good.' explained Bo. 'Lost his trachea. Cigarette cancer. Show 'em, Billy.'

Billy lifted the neckerchief to show a dime-sized hole at the base of his throat. We too were lost for words.
'If you want to earn a few bucks, we're taking a load of bricks and gravel down the coast tomorrow.' said Bo. 'Interested?'
'Sure.' we answered in stereo. 'How much a day?'
Billy held up three fingers.
'Three bucks. U.S. or B.H.?' I asked.
'Hew-hess.' he hissed.
'OK.'
'See you at here at dawn then.' said Bo.

That night, at the Half-Moon Bar we caught-up with the scuttlebutt on 'B.O. and Billy', as the locals called the pair. Rumour had it that after hasty departures from Miami and then Grand Cayman, Bo had turned-up in Belize a few months ago, claiming to have 'forgotten' the Anne Helena's papers. Without which, as he had been heard in his cups to complain, 'These here Limey niggers won't let me register my goddam boat'.

Delores, the Salvadorean bar girl, with whom Billy liked to drink when he was in town, told us his story. He was a different kind of refugee. Pensioned off from a sixty-cigarettes-a-day executive post after his tracheotomy, like a true Marlboro Man he had retired to the jungle with a mail-order catalogue and a scheme. He intended to build a small hotel on a jungle peninsula at Concordia, 100 kilometres down the coast, and was chartering Bo's boat and an old cargo lighter to haul the building materials down there. We also discovered that no one wants to work for either of them. As Delores put it.

'They throw money aroun' like they got no arms.'

Next morning we load the wormy, flat-bottomed cargo lighter with bags of cement, blocks, gravel and sand. Three hours, four tons and a bare 20 centimeters of freeboard later, as we look at her creaking, weeping timbers, Crane says:

'Glad we're towing that. It's not safe to travel in.'

Bo overhears the comment and announces:

'Well, boys, y'all actually are travelling in it. Someone's gotta man the tiller.'

Billy loads a mail-order generator, a mosquito electrocutor ('the bug-fucker' as Bo calls it) and a kitchen blender - 'For the Bwana
Coladas' quips Crane - and we're ready. Bo revs the A.K.A. Tropicana's big GMC diesel, and our odd flotilla pulls away from the wharf. The lighter wallows in the launch's wake. Crane and I, perched on a throne of gravel and blocks, choke in its fumes.

The U.S.A.I.D. warehouses, the white colonial colonnades of Government House and the general tin-and-clapboard scrummage of Belize harbour slip behind us. Catfish boil the water in a carrion frenzy whenever we sling a banana skin overboard. Gulls caw. The sun is already a shimmering gong. It's going to be a hot, long day. As the launch plods down the harbour we pass a rocky promontory on which a young girl sits. Crane waves.

'Why you working today, man?' she calls.

'Why not?' he yells back.

'It's pagan. You know what ...' But her voice has trailed off beneath the diesel roar and the gulls' caw.

We turn south, down the coast, and cruise beside low mangrove shores which open to the mouths of unknown rivers; we pass villages built on inlets, and in the distance, can see orderly coconut plantations. Beyond the mangroves, a raddled jungle covers the coastal plains and rises to the heat-hazed Maya Mountains.

There is neither shade nor drinking-water on the lighter. Occasionally Bo throws us a warm Coke or a banana while he and Billy down beers and venison sandwiches. Thus the day goes, with the cerulean sea evaporating to a white haze, Crane and I dozing and bailing, and the marlin leaping. Our stomachs grumble for decent food, and somehow the conversation turns to Great Christmas Dinners We Have Known.

Stories of grandmothers, uncles, aunts, dogs, kids and cousins; the laundry boiler loaded with a hog-sized ham; springing 'Santa' at one a.m. and discovering that his voice sounded just like Grandpa's; plum puddings peppered with genuine 'trays' and 'zacks' - silver threepenny and sixpenny-bits; all the anomalies of a traditional English Christmas dinner celebrated in 100 degree Sydney heat, and followed by a 'southerly buster'.

'Wonder where we'll be for it this year?' I muse.
'Probably still bailing this barge.' says Crane. 'It's gotta be soon.'

'Yeah, it's next week.'

Hours later, in what is by now a moonless, starless night, we arrive at the little point of Concordia, Billy's village. What appears on the map as a dot turns out to be just that: a lamp-post on a pitch-black, mangrove coast. The lamp is the only sign of life, standing as it does on the end of a small jetty which juts from darkness into darkness. It is fortunate that the Concordia light-bulb is burning tonight, because not only does Bo's boat lack registration papers, but also charts and lights of any kind.

Bo stands at the bow, a reptilian figurehead waving a flashlight while shouting orders to Billy who's at the helm. We are in a channel. Right, to starboard, is the village light, to port the dim outline of a mangrove island. From his shouts to Billy, it seems that Bo intends to approach the jetty in a wide right-handed arc.

So wide is Bo's arc, or Billy's mark, that ... krrruunch! ... we run aground on the mangrove island on our left. Crack! The lighter slams into the stern of the launch. From my perch on the gunwale I am almost pitched into the water. The launch stalls. A vacuum of sound descends, to be broken within seconds by a volley of grossly inventive blasphemies issuing from Bo in the blackness. Billy wheezes a sub-vocal echo.

Somewhere in the sightless void we hear the Tropicana's starter whine, once, twice, then the big Jimmy diesel kicks over. Bo revs it. But something's wrong. The sound of the motor isn't coming from where it should be, five metres ahead of us. Instead it's from 50 metres astern.

'Hey!' I yell, 'We've snapped the tow-rope. We're adrift!'

Instant visions arise of ourselves on this floating hotel-to-be, carried by a belligerent coastal current out into the Caribbean, to be deposited months later as a very burnt offering to the smugglers of Curacao or the San Blas Indians of Panama ... Flash as rats with gold teeth, indeed.
'Fuck! Grab that boom pole.' yells Crane. 'If you can touch bottom, pole her towards the mangroves.'

I stab for the bottom, which - mercifully - is still there. As we slide into the black-on-black mangrove thicket, Crane pulls the remnants of the Tropicana's painter from the water and ties it to a tree root.

'They'll have heaps of trouble finding us in this.' I groan.

'Like hell they will. Look at that - over by the light.'

Across the channel is an unbelievable sight: the Tropicana just docking at the jetty, and Bo leaping ashore to secure her. Billy cuts the engine.

'Arseholes!' howls Crane. 'They've dumped us! Fuckin' marooned!'

We launch a salvo of profanities at the pair, who wave back. Billy mouths something, of course to no audible effect.

The arrival of the launch and the blasphemous commotions across the water have stirred the early-to-bed fishing village. Lanterns flicker on in the huts, which is of little comfort to us. Ours is going to be a rock-hard bed. The first of the mangrove mosquitos turn its blood-lust upon us. Which is when we hear Bo, who has been talking to a villager, send his good-ol'-boy accent sashaying across the water:

'Hey, bo-oys, guess what day it is?'

I open my mouth to shriek back blue murder. And instead am stopped dead by the sight of a group of villagers gathering below the jetty light. Some are carrying candles.

Across that channel as dark as a soul's black night, comes the most improbable sound. Like the tinkling of a snow-white rainbow, the village church choir is carolling:

'Silent night,
Holy night,
All is calm ...'
CONCORDIA

Crane again here: Morning. Bo takes us in tow to the jetty. After spending a night among the mosquitos and midges, while wearing nothing but shorts and T-shirts, and sleeping on a bed of gravel, we have little to say that isn't already written in welts upon our skin.

'Sorry I couldn't come back for you last night, boys,' he begins, 'but it's a bit shallow across there and ...'

'Cork it, Bo. Just don't say anything, eh?' I snarl.

We tie-up and Bo points us across the sandy village to one of the wood and tin houses which balances precariously on poles. It's where Billy lodges, in the home of a cheerful, plump lady named Mrs. Eiley. Pictures of the local saints, Jesus, Martin Luther King, John and Bobby Kennedy, Queen Elizabeth and Mohammed Ali line her sideboard. She serves us a Christmas breakfast of porridge, taro, fried fish and coconut milk, and jokes about our 'roaming around'.

'What you be looking for, Mister Jack? Maybe a nice girl?' she says.

Jack agrees a little too modestly.

'I think I can find you a good one here in Concordia.' she says. 'We'll settle you down here with a pretty girl and then a few little ones.'

The first part of the offer appeals. Mrs. Eiley catches the glint in his eye.

'Then again,' she adds, 'maybe you haven't stayed in all those other places ... because of too many nice girls?'

She quakes the house with her laughter. Jacko does a high-dive into his tea cup.

After breakfast we take a look at the village, a tidy run of chickens, a few pigs, small children naked below their faded, missionary shirts, and several young blades with trainee Afro hairdos. The houses perch on poles, against flood tides, and are agglomerates of weatherboard, driftwood boat-planks, semi-precious corrugated iron roofing and

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crimson bougainvillea. Palm trees shade the open spaces and occasionally bomb passers-by with their produce.

Concordia survives mostly on the income generated by the sale of fish, shrimp and crayfish to the local freezing-works, from where the catch is shipped to Belize, then exported to the U.S. The old subsistence rituals of drying fish and coconuts have waned, but in light of the export fishermen's depletion of the off-shore reefs and cay banks of even under-sized crays, they may soon be revived.

Billy whispers and hisses a tour of the site of his hotel-to-be, which is currently three holes in the ground, a large mound of sand, and a collection of Sears-Roebuck gizmos to keep the locals in fascination and out of work: a two-stroke pump, a chain-saw and a cement-mixer. And now a Honda generator, a cocktail blender and a bug-fucker.

Christmas Day being Christmas Day, we do nothing - just lay about, swim and walk, write a few letters, and try to explain to the village kids how, where we come from, today's just 'the day before the races at Tangmalangmaloo.' Next morning the Concordia locals are more than a little surprised to see us, whom they presume to be the advance guard of Billy's tourist trade, hop down into his cargo lighter and begin unloading her. All day we toss blocks, hump bags, shovel gravel and trundle it all by the barrow-load to the hotel site. The white-hot sun and sauna humidity don't take a siesta either.

At dusk, completely stuffed from the unaccustomed exertion, Jack and I take a walk along the peninsula beach. Behind us, a hyperglycaemic sunset bursts strawberry and passionfruit syrups across the Maya Mountains. Little remains to be done but to finish off the last of Mrs. Eiley's steamed pudding, string-up our hammocks and roll ourselves in sheets against the vindictive mosquitos. The palms fronds are serrated black daggers drawn against the sky. As I tumble sleepwards in the hammock, that bridge of
floating dreams, I feel myself to be gazing down upon a floor of stars, wishing I could decipher the pattern of all my tomorrows.

Flamingo dawn; a flamenco rattle of wind in the palms.
'Hey Ceesco, look. Red sky at morning. Spaceman's warning?'
'Maybe, Poncho.' answers Jack, looking around. 'And here come Los Gringos Grandiosos - Southern Man and Marlboro Man.'

Billy and Bo are shuffling across the beach towards us, looking as shifty as rats out of trash.
'OK boys. Sox n' cocks time.' says Bo in his best Larsen E. Whipsnade twang. 'Up or down, but up an' at it.'
'Hang on, Bo.' I say, 'We're not working for you. We work for Billy.'
Billy nods in agreement.
'And we'll start work after we've had breakfast.'
At the mention of breakfast, Billy whistles at us through the hole in his neck.
'Sorry Billy,' I explain, 'Sometimes I just can't get what you're trying to say.'
Billy pulls Bo close and wheezes in his ear. Bo translates the message with some pleasure:
'Speaking of food, y'all both owe Mrs. Eiley two bucks American for the meals yesterday. It'll be the same price every day.'
'What?' I squawk. 'You're paying us three dollars a day, then charging us two bucks to earn it?'
'Looks like that.' answers Bo. Billy nods in agreement, twitching his fingers as though he needs a cigarette.
'You fuckers!' snaps Jack as he springs out of the hammock, his neck tendons taut. 'You bring us down here to work for a bloody buck a day, but you don't tell us until we get here. Even the 'niggers' say no to you at those rates, don't they? Well, sport, we're white niggers then. And we just said no too. And, keep the buck - you'll need it, you desperate bloody dickheads.'
One of the Concordia boys ferried us in his outboard-powered dug-out across a fetid delta called Blue Creek. Threading the long craft through the mangrove mazes, he landed us near the ghost of a lumber town. The mahogany loggers had stripped the area then left behind the usual detritus of ruined Blitz trucks, beyond-repair Caterpillars, hundreds of Coke crates and a juke-box bar. A few locals lounged listlessly, drinking beer long before the sun had reached the yard-arm.

We stripped off our shirts against the humidity and sweat, strapped tight our packs and struck out for the main road, five kilometres away. Sweat poured down the gutters of our spines, soaking our packs and waist bands. The exertion felt good. We were burning with our pissed-offness with ourselves, so why not burn physically too? Bo and Billy were just a pair of two-bit fuck-wits, and we - the know-alls of stuff-all - had been scooped completely by their 'good ol' boys' act.

Monkey screams in the jungle. No other sound but our footfalls. One circling eagle. The musk of rot, the perfume of growth.

We hit the highway and hitched north towards Belize. In the back of a Land-Rover we ducked the lashing branches and vines of the road-devouring rainforest. Orchids and lizards and butterflies disappeared into the wild chiaroscuro. Later, the broad plains of cattle ranches gave way to endless orange orchards of the U.S. Citrus Company. Anomalous Anglophonic settlements appeared: Stann Creek Town, Middlesex, Roaring Creek, Hattieville and the site of the future, catfish-free capital, Belmopan.

Moslem merchants, stranded below their signs in Arabic calligraphy and too far from the Sind or Chittagong, either greeted us as fellow aliens or spurned us for it. Black children in the streets flashed power salutes and peace signs, while their elder brothers stood wondering where we fitted into the white empire against
which their Black Power prophets Marcus, Malcolm, Huey and Stokely railed.

By night-fall we were in the capital and laughing again. I imagined B.O. and the Marlboro Man waving greenbacks at the local lads, who wouldn't have a bar of it, especially since they'd seen us telling the pair to stick it and twist. Meanwhile, a minor but amicable riot was in progress at the foot of the Government House flagpole, with the 'full independence' people verus the 'permanent protectorate' believers. Each group would run-up its flag on the floodlit pole after tearing down the rival pennant. As the Belizean independence flag squeaked to the truck scuffles broke out with the supporters of the Union Jack. The local constabulary waded-in and broke up the melee in a fair-cricket sort of way. The 'Green Hornets,' here to protect the British Hondurans from the Guatemalans, were not yet needed to protect the British Hondurans from the Belizeans.

What for to do? We've had enough of Catfish City, enough nights of rum, ganja and the Sallies. We meet Wally and Trevor, a pair of English lads who've run out of money while waiting for a job on a ship out of here. Now they're waiting to be repatriated. We try for a ride to Jamaica on a British West Indies cargo boat, the Kirkstar. The old man takes one look at us and says: 'I don't like hijackers or hippies. You (he points at Crane) look like a hijacker. And you (he points at me) look like both.'

I now feel about as useful as a piss-ant on Pimm's.

Over a glass of canned orange juice - in a country drowning in fresh oranges - the decision comes easily. Crane has received a letter saying that there's money waiting for him in Mexico City. Which means hitching all the way back there, and through Villahermosa! None of this feels like my path in life. Enough of these black acids and over-amped jivers! There's a plane to Managua, day after tomorrow ...
'Hey, Charlie?'
'Yeah?'
'Remember you reckoned that what I knew could fill a postcard?'
'Yeah, Jack. Still do.'
'Well, I reckon the same about you.'
'So?'
'Send us one, eh?'
'Rama! Rama!' yells the bus hustler as we dip and sway through the backblocks of eastern Nicaragua.

'Hare! Hare!' drolly adds James the Englishman.

'Si. Yes, hurry, hurry!' continues the tout, as villagers join this rough Dodge slouching towards the river-port of El Rama.

'Hmm. These dark lasses are rather attractive, aren't they?' muses James. Bespectacled, smooth-chinned and terribly earnest, he looks like a young ornithologist on holiday, or an overgrown English schoolboy. A slimmed-down Billy Bunter. The comment comes as a surprise.

'I used to go with one back in London.' he continues, 'A Nigerian lass. Mother and Father disapproved dreadfully. Anyhow, it's been a while now.'

'What has?'

'Oh, you know ... all that sort of thing.'

Arriving at Rama we learn that at some indeterminate hour the down-river boat for the Caribbean port of Bluefields will arrive. The locals of this Misquito Coast are descendents of Jamaican plantations slaves who were brought over by the British, and still speak an 19th Century English peppered with Spanish additions and African rhythms. We are informed of the boat's probable progress: 'She op de river, comin' down presently, con suerte.'

'Presently' stretches towards midnight. Below the marimba noise and neon sweats of a bar, we pass the time with a few beers, a plate of beans and an interjecting juke-box until the boat eventually arrives. We file on board and slip away down the Escondido River. A smouldering moon repeats itself in the windless water while reflections fold the low spits and cliffs of the jungle shore into an infinitely extending Rorschach pattern. I sleep on a bench, someone's feet in my face, mine in James's, and awake to a peach dawn of coconut palms and distant volcanoes. The Escondido
empties into a wide inlet, with the jumbled cubes of Bluefields bunched upon its western shore.

Negroes, Misquito Indians, mestizos, a few creoles and Chinese fill the market and the mud-troubled streets. It's a monsoon-licked, jungle-lapped shanty of a town with good cheer on every corner. Grandfathers whose grandfathers were slaves sit on porch chairs. Like almost every school, post office and town hall in Nicaragua, the public clock on Bluefields' mildew-stained Municipal Market announces the building's geneology: 'Administration Somoza, 1952'. In eloquent testimony to the administration's ongoing benevolence, the clock remains stuck at ten minutes to two.

'The Sandinistas would fix the clock too, if they came to power.' whispers the woman who sells me a guava.

'That's Communist crap!' says an old planter who is also purchasing her fruit. 'They killed Somoza's father just when he was going to have it repaired.'

'And when was that?' she challenges. The planter moves away, as she answers her own question: 'Nineteen fifty-four!'

'Sir, the boat to Colombia is over by The Bluff.' a fisherman tells us. 'Soon be leavin'.

James and I jump into a little speed-boat which plies the route between Bluefields on the western shore of the inlet and the fishing village of El Bluff which nestles several kilometers away on the Atlantic side.

'Hell, I hope we don't miss it.' I say.

'Indeed. Rather good luck to arrive just in time to catch it. I read in the guidebook of chaps having to wait weeks here.'

'Not us, hey! ... Excuse me, Captain,' I ask, turning to the young man at the helm, 'What do you know about the boat to Colombia?'

He wrinkles his face, then recomposes it to deadpan.

'Oh, not much hurry I think.' he answers. 'Especially if it be Pirate, Mister Marvin's boat.'

'Isn't she leaving soon?' asks James.

'Oh yes. If "soon" be "soon enough".'

'What? Perhaps tomorrow, not today?"
He avoids James's question, informing us instead that the *Pirate* goes first to Nicaragua's Corn Island, then to Isla San Andreas, a Colombian island in the Caribbean.

Captain Marvin Wright, a genetic minestrone of frizzy orange hair, negroid features, freckled skin and green eyes sees us approaching along the wharf at El Bluff. He shakes his head:

'Not today, gentlemen, but tomorrow we be sailing. Surely tomorrow the Lord will let my engineer man fix the clutch. Then we be off.'

His vessel, the *Pirate* is about 25 metres long, wooden hulled, with a diesel engine amidships, a boxy superstructure, a small crane on the foredeck and a rumble-seat head hanging over the stern. As James and I each stake out a bunk, a small blue woman in a white blouse glides along the gangway, and then, like a waking dream, disappears.

I enquire of the Captain who assures me that this blue apparition is human, indeed she is *Una gringa*. A United States *señorita*, who is also a passenger. I contrive to meet her. Which means that I say 'hullo' when I see her on deck. Of course, she is not really blue, but of Arabic descent. Pamela the traveller, from Boston. She's in that gap between adulthood and obligation in which enchantment is permitted to bloom briefly, and which is known as age twenty-two. Pamela is also heading for San Andreas.

'Us too!' I enthuse. 'Tomorrow, the Captain reckons.'

'Maybe.' she answers warily. 'It's been "tomorrow" for four yesterdays - so far.'

'Well, there are three of us now.'

'Not quite.' she adds. 'Marvin has at least another five Nicaraguans that I know of. No one knows how many more he wants to take.'

James, Pamela and I sit above the wheel-house watching the day pass into dusk. Strange, spindly black birds, more like pterodactyls than cormorants compete for fish against the lumbering pelicans. A pyramid of clouds banks above the mouth of the Escondido. The in-coming tide and the wind-grained river meet,
twisting the sky's reflections into whorls, as though the water was lava.

By next day there are twelve passengers on the Pirate. In the manner of a would-be grandee, one man hands out raw plantains, a fibrous cousin of the banana, which is fit to be eaten only after cooking. He frequently selects and half-eats a sample of his wares, throwing overboard the other half, as though to demonstrate his wealth. To me, it is evidence of the inedibility of the stuff. His plan, he reveals to all, is to make a killing on the San Andreas fruit market, the island being without adequate supplies of plantain. Predictably, we dub him 'the Banana Republican.' We are presently informed by Marvin, on one of his ascents from the engine-room, that we will leave 'tomorrow - plus one more day.' The Banana Republican looks worriedly at his cargo, then at the hot midday sun glaring upon it on the foredeck.

Mañana and mañana in El Bluff creep at a very petty pace. We spend each 'tomorrow' on the beach, reading and body-surfing the choppy Caribbean waves. James is all eyes for the dusky mestizo girls who come to the shore to wash their cooking pots. I find myself thinking of the almost equally dusky Pamela who disappears far down the coast to swim, as naked and blue, I imagine, as Krishna in a bubble bath.

Among our fellow travellers is Frederico, a suave creole from Managua, who is referred to as 'the Spanish Man' because of his supposedly 'pure' Iberian blood. He is taking a load of oranges to San Andreas, and is thoroughly loathed by the Banana Republican for having filled the hold with his oranges before the Republican's plantains arrived, thus causing the latter to be dumped on the exposed deck. Frederico has hollowed out for himself a space among the coiled ropes at the bow, and spends his hours engrossed in Mexican novelas, studiously ignoring the Republican.

Another man, a Venezuelan who has introduced himself as 'Chief Engineer, but I have no papers,' spends most of his time supine, staring at the deckhead above his bunk and melodiously crooning in Spanish 'South of the Border'. His inactivity is explained
when a vigorous part-Indian called Teodoro emerges from the engine-room and introduces himself as the real engineer.

'El otro,' Teodoro waves dismissively towards the be-bunked Venezuelan, 'es uno pasajero solamente. Nada mas.'

Nothing more than a passenger, just like us. Teodoro then dives overboard, surfaces for a bar of soap and a scrub, and retires to his bunk to read the Bible right through the following day, Sunday.

We have now been waiting five days. The foredeck of the Pirate, which the Banana Republican had so confidently covered in huge hands of plantains, has changed from a jungle of greens, to a mountain of gold, to a mound of brown and is approaching blackness as rapidly as his spirits are. He no longer struts the deck handing out golden largesse, but instead paces the pier, consulting his watch, and seeing the fortune which he was to have made on San Andreas ooze away. All for the sake of a one-day ride on a boat with an ill-aligned drive-shaft, and a religious engineer who refuses to work on the Sabbath, and a Captain who drinks and disappears.

The cook, Octavio, serves us rich sweet coffee and half-inch thick tortillas fried in lard. The days merge into a Mosquito Coast haze. Swim. Read. Sleep on deck below the starry ocean of the Central American sky. Go fishing with Sanderson, the Pirate's first mate. Peer into the engine-room where oiled black bodies wrestle with the recalcitrant drive-shaft and Marvin alternately basphemes and repents ('Madre de Dios! This clutch - Godfcockit! Lor' forgive me for blasphemin'. Damnfockit!) Hear tales of the Somoza dictators, Senior and Junior, fishing-out their own waters, expropriating campesino lands for the U.S fruit companies, and worse, and worse.

One afternoon, upon our return to the wharf where the Pirate is berthed we find a large crowd gathered, watching divers plunging into the murky waters. Women on the pier are keening, men sit silent. Someone has drowned. Marvin tells us that two of the lobster divers, had been horsing-around on the wharf when one langostino pushed the other, a boy called Jaime, into the bay. He failed to surface.

As we watch the men repeatedly diving, a youth clambers up the wharf ladder, his face distorted in anguish.
'That's him.' says Marvin. 'The one who pushed Jaime. His best friend.'

Reaching the top of the ladder, the youth bursts past the gathered on-lookers and runs to one of the trawlers. A moment later there is a howl from the cabin and the youth stumbles back out on deck wielding a long-bladed fishing-knife. Crying something in Spanish, he raises the knife and stabs at his chest. The blade fails to penetrate the sternum. He stabs again at it again, then into his ribs before three other langostinos, wrestle the knife from him.

As the distraught man is hurried away to the doctor, the divers in the water struggle to the surface with the drowned boy's body. It is hauled up the ladder and carried by four men, one on each limb, to a flat-bed trailer behind a tractor. Once it is laid-out everyone else climbs on board and the tractor bounces away into the village. The body - the first human corpse I have seen - seems unconcerened by all the lugging and shoving and bouncing which it is undergoing.

Later, during the early evening, James and I are sitting on the step of a teinda, drinking orange sodas, when the cousin of the late Jaime comes by and asks us to help carry the coffin which he has just made. We stagger under its weight from his house to the place of mourning, the Jaime's house. As we enter the shack, the local inebriate who has installed himself as master of ceremonies spies James's garb, which consists of shorts plus a crew-necked black sweater worn over a white T-shirt. Noting James's air of absolute earnestnesses, while mistaking the white band at his neck for a dog-collar, the drunk erupts:

'Fathah, Fathah! Do us please the honour of readin' the Bible for the dead mon?'

'Oh.' says James, frightfully flustered. 'Oh, thank you terribly much for the honour. But no, you see I'm not a priest.'

No matter.

'Thank you, Fathah. Thank you.' says the drunk. 'We don't have the padre here anymore.'

'Oh, that's a pity. But, really, I don't even go to Mass ... '

'Thank you, muchas. I get the Bible for you, Fathah. Just you wait here.'
I retire to the street in order to maintain a straight face. Five minutes later a confused James emerges.

'OK, Father Jim. Was it sacrilege or just impersonation? I ask.

James takes off his glasses and wipes them.

'Neither.' he says, looking extremely confused. 'Thank God they couldn't find the Bible. Now let's pop off out of here before they do.'

Marvin finally sends to Managua for an engineer who understands the principles of the hydraulic clutch. He's a cheery mestizo named Victor, and within three hours of his descent into the bowels, the Pirate is ticking-over sweetly, from clutch to screw. Marvin hands him his fee, a wad of one Cordoba notes as thick as the Managua phone book, a bottle of whisky and a Bible. Panic ripples through the 18 passengers who have taken up residence on the boat. After a week of 'tomorrows,' no-one is ready to leave today. When Marvin suddenly casts off and guns the old boat out into the choppy swell, two passengers are left behind on a provisioning trip to Bluefields, and a third one in El Bluff's only bar.

James brings the news: 'The ship's dog is the first person to be sea-sick.' Then it's his turn. During the next eight hours of the rough crossing to Corn Island everyone else follows. The Pirate humps her way, like the camel of the sea, at four knots across the bilious swell. I rotisserie myself on a hot bunk above the engine. Febrile daydreams of roaming through South America with a sackfull of gold dubloons and an Arabian princess give way to nauseous self-recriminations at having wasted my days and dollars in these backwaters where no self-respecting local lass will even look twice at a long-haired, ill-grammared gringo vagrant like me. I purge it all with trips to the stern.

Sixty-five kilometres later, Corn Island shelters us in her placid lee. A spotted leopard ray, one metre in wingspan, glides across the sandy ocean floor below the Pirate. The water is so crystal that, even though two and a half fathoms deep, it seems I could lean down and tickle the ray's back with my finger. A pier, a small coconut-oil factory, four cottages and a wall of palms line the turquoise bay. The palms bow like a guard of honour. This is paradise enough. That there is not a postcard to prove it, proves it.
James has taken to conversing ('about tropical plant and birds, that sort of thing') with Edna, one of the passengers, who lives on the island. She dwells in a large matriarchal household of other women and their squall of gleeful black children, from which their men seem frequently absent, on lobster boats, in Bluefields or working as far afield as Honduras. Edna smiles in an intriguing, slightly cross-eyed way, has a calypso laugh, and invites us to dinner.

'Ol' Pirate won't be leavin' until tomorrow, you know.' she says.
'Why?' I answer.
'Cap'n Marvin got himself a wife here.' she giggles. 'I'm sure he gonna read her the Bible tonight, all night long.'

Dinner is vast: guava jam, cabbage salad, boiled pineapple, pork crackling, iced barley drink, rice, oyster patties, homemade bread, pastries and sweet coffee. Edna, Daisy, Maisie and their children laugh at our knife and fork manners, preferring to use their fingers or to stab Yanqui-style, right-handed, with a fork. We soon follow suit. After dinner I take a digestive stroll along the beach. When I return James appears and we head back to the Pirate.

In the middle of the night we are awoken by the Captain stumbling drunkenly through the boat.
'My shepher' is the Lor', nothing indeed shall I wan'. ' announces Marvin, then: 'San'ners'n, I wan' my flashlight.'
Locating the mate by the unmistakable, hookah-like burbling of his snores, Marvin prods the mate awake.
'Sandersh'n, where's my flashlight?'
Sanderson throws it at him and returns to sleep. Marvin descends to the engine-room and attempts to start the boat.

'Hey!' yells Teodoro the engineer, hanging his head down from the wheel-house where he sleeps. 'Hey, why yo' com' out here drunk an' mockin' an' fockin' about when yo' ought to be at home mockin' an' fockin' about there?'
'It's my boat, and my engine.' yells the Captain, pounding on a bulkhead. 'An' when I want it started, you start it!'
Upon threat of dismissal Teodoro descends to the engine. He kicks it over as Marvin casts off. Passengers wail.
'Mister Marvin, we can't go now, my wife's on shore.'
'Captain, Captain, we ain't loaded the coconut-oil yet! That's my cargo still in the factory!'

All protests are ignored. The Pirate wobbles 100 metres out into the bay. Marvellous Marvin cuts the engine, flings the anchor overboard and stumbles back across the deck, by turns cursing and apologising to the sleeping forms over whom he trips. He crashes into and out of the head, finally pissing a noisy cataract at the rail, half his stream hitting the water, the other half drowning his sandshoes. Suitably relieved, he announces:
'I moved my boat because the tide dropping. Musn't run agroun', a good Cap'n mussn'. Goodbless and Godnight everybody. Sleep well, buenos sueños.'

With which he flops into the boat's dinghy and splashes an erratic course shorewards, stranding us all on the Pirate until whenever he may choose to return.

We awake to a Saturday still only slightly at sea. James calculates that it has taken us two weeks to cover the 65 kilometres from Bluefields to Corn Island.
'It's just like the guidebook warned.' he groans. 'Anyhow, I've had plenty of time to catch up on writing to the parents.'
'Telling them all about life among the colourful natives?' I joke.
'Lord, no, Jack. I can't tell them the half of it. They'd disapprove terribly.'
'Of what?'
'Oh, things.'

One of the passengers informs us that there will be a wedding on Corn Island today.
'No!' wails the Banana Republican. 'That means the copra factory won't work today. No work, no load, no go. Hijo de puta! Them lazy buggers!'

Pamela announces that with Saturday as a wedding day, Sunday as the idle Sabbath (as demanded by the island's fiercely competing Baptist, Moravian, Anglican and Catholic missionaries - and that the only article of Christian faith upon which they can
agree) and Monday to take on a load of coconut oil, we have at least another three days here.

The Banana Republican is undone. His ambition lies putrid and pureed across the foredeck. Octavio the cook, who has exhausted our appetites for plantain baked, boiled, mashed and fried, orders him to throw the pulp overboard because of the flies it draws. The Republican reluctantly obeys, watching the darting silver barracuda shred his dreams across the sandy bottom. He then lugubriously confides to me that yesterday, when he went ashore to the store, he saw his wife's ring on the finger of a 'fancy man from Bluefields'. Crashed and cuckolded all in the one voyage. What could one say?

All day Saturday and Sunday the clouds bloom colour and rain, then clear to an opalescent vagueness, then re-group and sluice showers onto the deck so that we may stand and soap ourselves beneath the torrent, before the sky clears again. The circle of the sun sets on Pamela who sketches on top of the wheel-house. Our figurehead is a Spaniard named Fred, reading a book in profile.

Come Monday morning, the little coconut-oil factory fires-up again. A glaucous halo rises from its timbers as machines chug, chains rattle and shrunken skulls of copra overflow from drums. Coagulated grey oils bubble on a coconut-husk fire and six rat-catcher snakes slide, as sebaceously as everything else, through the piles of split coconuts in search of four-legged rattiness. Bored youths chop with long machetes at a never diminishing pile of husks, separating the flesh from each shell and throwing it into a 44-gallon drum, after which it is heated and crushed for oil. Here in paradise, this bedevilled shack with its furnace and filthy chimney seems the prototype of all dark Satanic mills.

Late Monday night, with oil drums loaded, plantains now completely jettisoned (the Banana Republican continuing his jeremiad), chickens caged, boxes lashed, the 'Spanish Man' still perched in the bow, the blue Pamela curled in a canoe reading Daniel Defoe by flashlight, and an uncharacteristically preoccupied James slumped on his bunk, the good ship Pirate again sets sail. As is his way, Marvin announces the departure only minutes before we up-anchor, again stranding two passengers on shore. Night dusts
the smooth mirror of sea, upon which we seem suspended between phosphorescent moons.

Morning is flecked with flying-fish on an idle blue. Old ladies snooze. A baby mews for milk. The pig tied to the anchor complains half-heartedly. The horizon is a white hedge of cloud, hemming the rising peaks of Isla San Andreas. Twenty hours out of Corn Island - and eighteen days after arriving in Bluefields - we're finally on Colombian soil.

On the wharf James asks the Immigration officer if there is a doctor on the island. After our passports are stamped I ask if he is ill? He lowers his voice:

'I hate to admit it, old chap, but I think I've got, um, a social disease.'

'Where? I mean who? We've been stuck on the boat for two and a half weeks?'

'One of the lasses on board. I thought she was rather sweet.'

'Who was?' My heart dips below its Plimsoll line. '... not Pamela?'

'Lord, no.' answers James. 'Didn't I tell you that I rather liked coloured lasses.'

'Well, she's blue.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'Nothing. Just something in the eye of the would-be holder. So, who was it?'

'Ahem ... do you remember Edna?'

'Jesus, Jimbo! So that's what you were up to back there. I thought it was all ornithology and botany with you two.'

'More like basic zoology, once I got started. It had been quite a while.'

I walked over to farewell Pamela who stood by the dock gate, waiting for a taxi. There was no point in mumbling about how iridiscent her dark hair and eyes seemed in the morning light, or how that goddess blueness still tinged the air about her. Some things are best left absurd. Instead, I stole a kiss, which she retrieved with parted lips. I still remember that kiss. It's been quite a while now.
BACKLOG
March, 1969

After hitching back to Mexico City and collecting his money, Crane headed down the Pan American Highway to Panama. In the southern Mexican town of Hualtla, Oaxaca, up in the Sierra Madre del Sur, to which he had diverted in pursuit of hongitos, the sacred mushrooms, he sat on the side of a mountain with a Northern Californian kid called Pedro, who had come on the same mission, as well as to be as far as possible from California on the day when a conspiracy of seers had predicted that the San Andreas fault would dump the whole of the left coast into La Pacifica. Crane and Pedro consumed the mushrooms of which the Aztecs had said

The mushroom called
godly mushroom
grows in flat country in
grassy country it has a
small round head a
long thin stem it is
bitter burning gullet burning it
besots deranges stupifies it
cures fever and gout only two
three are to be eaten they
sadden disquiet molest one
force one to flee frighten one
make one hide who
eats many sees many
things
dreadful or laughable
runs away hangs himself
jumps off a cliff
yells is terrified
thus they eat it
with honey,
and then learning that California had not dropped into the ocean, had
gone their separate ways, Crane south, Pedro north
October, 1970

In a fisherman's hut on Calangute Beach, Goa, India, Jack sat talking about places with a group of travellers. One of them, a Californian, picked his accent:

'Are you Australian?'

'Yes.'

'Hey, I met another Australian once, in Central America. Do you know a dude called Charlie Raine?' said the Californian.

Jack pulled out of his pack a battered postcard from Panama and handed it to Pedro.
Tally Ho Jack,

A quick addendum as I sit here in the glorious sun, having just given your MS a complete read-through. Hysterical accuracy: Crane and I actually met in a flophouse in Guatemala City (both pursuing the cheapest cribs - not girls - in town), did the mushrooms on a mountainside outside of Tegucigalpa, Honduras a couple of weeks later. The California-falling-into-the-ocean bit is a joke I told him about: KSAN in San Francisco had a contest to get all the hippies to come to California, jump up and down at the same time and watch the rest of the country fall into the ocean. We parted at the Pan American Highway after the mushroom trip, because I had split on my student loan and left my dad holding the bag.

One of our more notable adventures was when we got picked-up one evening by some engineering students in San Salvador and taken to a wedding party. A beautiful young señorita was marrying your standard Latin wealthy older man, and after a few of whatever we drank, Crane took it upon himself to 'rescue' her from this obnoxious fate. His first dance with her was taken by all as a charming part of the celebration. By the fourth or fifth, the smiles had turned to snarls, and there we were, surrounded by as slit-eyed a pack as I've ever seen. Crane managed to return the the distressed damsel to her master with all the elan of Lord Waverton Wollstonecraft, but bruised Latino machismo isn't necessarily assuaged without a dose of blood, and we barely managed to slink out of the party during the distraction of a toast. If I remember correctly, neither of us got much sleep that night.

Easy, brah, don't let your meat loaf.
Pedro