

CHRONICLES OF A GREYHOUND GYPSY:

NOTES ON 21ST CENTURY AMERICA

by

STUART HENDRICK

(Under the Direction of Nate Kohn)

ABSTRACT

This project examines 21st century America by exploring and interacting with people in all regions of the country in order to reveal the widely varying attitudes and cultures of a nation. Inspired by Hunter S. Thompson and his style of Gonzo journalism, I rode 14,026 miles on Greyhound buses in 67 days through 39 states. Through the processes of autoethnography, I put myself in situations that force me to examine my own thoughts and opinions. I experience first hand a complicated country that is rapidly changing as technology booms and war rages. I share my thoughts, feelings and perceptions without any conscious self-censorship. The arenas I find myself in include politics, race, the class system, poverty, war and capitalism.

INDEX WORDS: Autoethnography, Civic Journalism, New Journalism

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STUART HENDRICK

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STUART HENDRICK

Major Professor: Nate Kohn

Committee: Valerie Boyd
Pat Thomas

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2007

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INTRODUCTION

There are many subcultures in the United States. These cultures evolve as widely disparate aspects of society change and new technologies emerge to replace the old. The young are the ones with the energy and the enthusiasm to spark change, and the young are not young for very long.

The world is changing at a dizzying pace, and now is an ideal time to look around, think, and perhaps help others see and feel what America is really like. Much is good, but much isn't. This project is an attempt to contribute to the understanding of America, its people, and the times in which we are living by giving readers a first hand, eyewitness report of the present. The goal is to make people think and perhaps even change their ways by providing readers with my own observations and thoughts using autoethnography as my method.

Autoethnographies are “autobiographies that self-consciously explore the interplay of the introspective, personally engaged self with cultural descriptions mediated through language, history, and ethnographic explanation.”¹

This project focuses on my experiences traveling 14,026 miles through 39 states in 67 days on dozens of Greyhound buses. This participation is what “authorizes itself not through the citation of scholarly texts, but through its ability to evoke and invoke shared emotional experience and understanding between performer and audience.”²

The objective of this work is to detail my experiences and observations in a free-flowing manner that paints a vivid picture of what is going on around the country in order to look at who we are as a people.

Like the New Journalists – who used autoethnography as a means of reporting – this work uses every “literary device, from the traditional dialogisms of the essay to stream-of-consciousness...to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally.”³

Every generation attempts to keep up with the next. There is no question that technology has drastically changed in the last two decades, and the way we live and think has also changed, in large part as a result of that technological revolution. The world turns in cycles, and I feel a new peak is coming – for that is the way it always has been. The only way to get the time image of *now* down in print is to travel, observe and interact. I set out to dig deep within myself and write down my thoughts and feelings – much like reading letters of historical figures of the past – so others would have the chance to experience my travels, see what I saw and feel what I felt.

We have always been a culture of widely varying stories, and stories are the vehicles that make us think and remember. Tradition is rooted in stories. Although tradition has many benefits, it also has its downfalls. It prevents people from evolving, in many cases. People always have to be aware that life is constantly moving and changing. Nobody is ever at a state of being; we are always in a condition of becoming. Over the course of this journey, my perspectives change and I am able to see things from different angles. I learn a lot about the class system in America and also about myself and humanity in general.

This is my attempt to describe – without specifically looking for anything in particular – the way people act and live around the country in the infancy of the 21st century. The technology boom, like the Industrial Revolution, is changing culture and our daily lives so fast that we can barely imagine what the next year will hold.

The narrative has always been the main tool used by philosophers to get people to think. The New Journalists of the 1960s were aware of this. They were writing stories in a way that

“changed the way their readers viewed the world.”⁴ Autoethnography and new journalism are similar to civic journalism, which focuses on the belief that “journalism has an obligation to public life – an obligation that goes beyond just telling the news or unloading lots of facts.”⁵ Autoethnography differs in that there are no pre-set goals as there are in civic journalism. The focus is instead on the telling of personal experiences in order to reach people. A “good performance text must be more than cathartic – it must be political, moving people to action, reflection or both.”⁶ This project, and style of journalism, will shed light on many aspects of our times. The arenas I find myself involved in include politics, race, the class system, poverty, war and capitalism. Experiences are meant to be read and explored, so I lay mine out in the following pages.

CHAPTER 1 NASHVILLE

8:45 a.m., right on time.

The white narrow door swings open – ft-tshhh. I step up and through into the Greyhound bus' metal belly with spine chilling vibrations of entering a tomb. Death and a new beginning, as is, creation out of destruction. I tiptoe to the edge of my morning mind with visions of two future months riding America's vast ribbons of highway. Marietta, Ga., to Nashville, Tenn., a brief four and a half hour, 244 mile haul to get me warmed up.

People sleep as the bus roars and rumbles through dark grey clouds under cool southern wind. A pale flabby man snores, feet across the aisle. Gut hangs out jiggling under sweat-stained white T-shirt, arm bent at the elbow covering his eyes.

The first time I rode Greyhound was four months ago, in August. It was a 46 hour, 2,014-mile trial run from Athens to Phoenix. I arrived in Atlanta, after a two-hour trip from Athens, quickly realizing a long haul was to come. The Atlanta Greyhound station – a tiny, dirt-hole of misery, hopelessness and anger. It's like a jail visitation. An interesting scene, a portal to a different way of life, perspective.

“God damn it! Get outta my way man. Ouch mothafucka! W-h-y don'ya watch where you go! I swear. Fool! Almost took my baby out!” Angry grimaces and oozing violence of frustration in the sweltering Greyhound jungle. Crying children with young mothers. Definitely not the clerisy of America.

Memories of Greyhound round one come flooding back as the blue cushioned seat rattles my mind with wheel turning vibrations. I sit wondering if this trip will be as strange as the last.

Any experience is good, even when it is bad.

Today is December 7, Pearl Harbor Day – 65 years ago the world changed, America went to war. The memories fade into the big sleep, as a new generation forgets before having the chance to remember. How many people are aware today? Roosevelt's voice echoes in my mind. Of course, my dad played the speech ten thousand times, so I ought to know it. I was brought up with a religion of history; perhaps my perspective on things is different than others. It undoubtedly is. Everyone sees things from a different perspective, for it is our own experience that shapes the thoughts running behind our eyes.

Most of these faces to Nashville probably don't know. A different class with less knowledge, different perspectives. Their parents most likely didn't drive them around to major Civil War battlefields, art museums, history museums, aquaria, caves, caverns, and national parks like mine. The privileged too, seem to be lacking the knowledge that they should well know. The American education system is sinking fast, like the country, in my opinion. A system so backwards that a man with 30 years of experience doing a skill in the real world is denied a teaching position because he lacks a master's degree, while someone with an advanced degree and no experience gets a job teaching about something he or she has never actually done.

Generations slip further and further apart. So does the knowledge gap between the classes. The rich are reaching an unprecedented peak in numbers, and the mind must be entertained with anything that will keep it from thinking. The super rich of America, complaining of high taxes when they benefit from a society like blood-sucking vampire vultures. It boggles the mind. Times like these. You don't have to look back too far to see where we are headed. The human race refuses to get off the treadmill.

Naked forests and Georgia foothills pass by my window. I try to settle in, but at six feet, it's hard. The seats are filled with curves ideal for someone who is five foot five.

The bus makes a stop outside of Dalton, Georgia. A grey-haired Mexican man reboards with a breakfast burrito from McDonald's. The smell of ham and eggs quickly fills the bus.

"Free Christmas Dinner at Wild West BBQ. Happy Birthday Jesus!" The red ticker lights scroll on a sign across the street.

Christian America. Religion is everywhere, and the 21st century, barely out of the womb, is steeped in blood, hatred and ignorance.

A woman gazes out in blank face, taking long drags from her cigarette, boards the bus with tar-drenched lungs, bringing the smoke with her.

Nashville, honky tonk, country music capital U.S.A. Southern smiles and hospitality dance in the wind, except for the homeless beggars who scatter in the streets like a plague. Sullen eyes, dirt-creased faces wrapped in blankets on a cold windy day. "Hey man, spare some change? Could you help me out? I'm trying to get a blanket." Echoes of the Nashville homeless.

"I'm not givin' you she-it!" a white southern accent filled with venom spits back without breaking stride.

"Gawd bless you," the black homeless man replies on some kind of automatic reaction without blinking. This seems to be the normal reaction.

"Well his mamma, I just said...and I told him..." ramblings from a crazed overweight black man in the pity darkness of nowhere to go. He lies on a bench wrapped in a torn, faded red blanket, oblivious to all that's around reciting old conversations or conversations never had on his slow wait for death. Smiling faces with shopping bags chatter material heaven seeing what they want to see, nothing more. The red glittery shoes are always worn, and tapped often.

Women, always talking on cell phones, so it seems. Businessmen are walking around like roaming beasts on Roman streets, glazed eyes, ear pieces, jabbering business talk fading into all that is around. Modern vibrations cling to the echoes of yesterday. Empty people walk around, soulless faces.

How many musicians come here to fail? All following dreams, but end up as lifetime waiters and waitresses. But, maybe not. At least they try, for that is all we can do.

A full scale replica of the Parthenon sits in a cold yellow field a few miles from downtown. I walk inside to the womb of the goddess Athena, transported to an enlightened age. Walk out to Vanderbilt, the smell of money, dry wood and decaying leaves. “Our God is an Awesome God,” reads a blue and pink bumper sticker on the back windshield of a shiny, newly cleaned white Mercedes-Benz. Everyone thinkin’ God is on his or her side. This, of course, causes severe problems around the world. People are all killing and maiming in the name of religion, superstition, and tradition. Beliefs that can’t be let go, taught from the beginning. We are reaching a critical state here. A line in the sand. No more pretending, though it is as it is and the world will continue to go round – with or without us. The blinding light of faith is strong these days, though it should be gasping in suffocation. The Twin Towers are no more, thanks to faith.

I get back to the Ramada across the river where I am staying. A brightly lit Christmas tree in the corner attracts attention. The hotel workers are busy typing and shuffling paper. Four cop cars sit outside, lights flashing in epileptic red. Drunken Mexicans sit in the lobby looking confused.

“I scared,” the Mexican says in a shaky voice. He’s hammered, shirtless but wearing a jacket. Fear pours from his eyes. The cops talk to him, then take him to his room to talk over the events.

“Yeah, some rowdy drunk Mexicans,” says the grey-haired woman desk clerk in slow southern talk. “One boy peed himself. The cops already arrested one for disturbance.” My cab pulls up and I head out. “Honky tonk corner,” I tell the man.

The Mexican population in this country has increased at an incredible rate. They’re everywhere. But, everybody has the right to give the American dream a shot. The fading of races will continue until there are only mutts – if the human race can go that long without creating the inevitable doom that seems to be so desired. How many times can we watch the world blow up on movie screens before it actually happens? All in the end.

Get back to my hotel room, it’s 3:00 a.m. I can hear the people in the next room having sex. The woman screams as I brush my teeth feeling most alone.

Wake up hung over and head to the bus station, goin’ to Birmingham, Alabama. Bumping along, the fields outside my window dance in my head like screeching subway cars. I arrive Saturday as the sun descends behind old plantations.

CHAPTER 2 BIRMINGHAM

Sunday, my friend Adam, who is a direct descendant of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and I go to the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute across from the famous 16th Street Baptist Church, the one where four little African-American girls were murdered in a 1963 hate bombing. A fiery sermon and organ blasts swim through the window to my mind. I walk up the cement steps under the construction scaffolding and to the stained glass windows where the vocal vibrations are more audible.

“I’m talkin’ bout bein’ heeealeda...heeealedah...heeealeda. One day gonna be heeealdah from the criminals...Jesus...Jesus...but I wanta tell ya, he is the savior.” Organ blasts and claps and yells. “Powaah, gonna have powwwaah juuuu clap. He have the powah...say he saved us...organ blast juuu...organ blast gjuu...I come to tell ya, gjuuu...George W. Bush is a bum, Condoleeza Rice is a bum, Bill Clinton is a bum...Jesus said you don’t have any powah...he had the powah...they beat him...they said...I said he died, dieeed, dieeed!”

I can feel the spiritual energy, and want to be involved. Sounds like a helluva good time. Definitely one-way to let the soul loose. What a different perspective one would have growing up going to a musical church. The mind would definitely sing to the body. The understanding of how different perspectives are shaped is key to the development of society.

As I walk out of the Civil Rights Institute, I see dozens of black homeless scattered about. It’s damned ironic. And depressing. The civil rights movement wasn’t that long ago, and I think people have forgotten. The basic will to hate is still terribly prevalent in America. The clashing of cultures and ideas and religions. I hear about how a generation – the baby boomers – changed

things. Well, they caused change, but it sure as hell seems like they haven't done a whole helluva lot since then. Should the push for change stop with age? I think not, but that is what reality seems to have told most. A dark age looms near, and closed eyes to the ground helps no one. The high spirits and push for enlightenment, freedom, and peace had all the momentum it seemed to need in order to break over the hump. But it was not to be...yet.

Freedom rides and history, just a free fall through time. There are a lot of different kinds of people in this vast land. My mind is spinning as I arrive in black Memphis night thinking of the blues.

CHAPTER 3 MEMPHIS

“Leetle keids goinna be so excited!”

“I work tomarrah and off Thursday.”

“He kaint do that she-i-t!”

“Uh, huh.”

“Jesus, what the hell,” I mutter, waking up with these loud vocal vibrations pouring through the Sleep Inn door at 9:20 a.m. I get up, look outside to see two maids talking and a guy in a Santa suit getting in the elevator.

Dreary and grey outside, I walk to Rendezvous – a famous charcoal rib joint – at 11:00 a.m. It is off some small alleyway and takes me some time to find it. I walk in. Dark. Go down the stairs to the basement where people are already eating. I take a seat at a small table by the wall. Southern accents swirl under a damp basement roof.

“What ya drinkin?” a black worker asks me.

“Sweet tea.” Then I tell him to bring me the full order of ribs. Need the meat to fuel the fire. The death of one fuels another. Red and white checkered tablecloth. Old light brown tiled floor. SEC football helmets hang from the ceiling. Guy talking on his ear cell phone. “You git that money from your brother? Can you get us a spot in the infield? If you find a spot we’ll be there.”

Cell phone madness. I can remember when people talked to each other in person. People seem to always be on the go, no time to enjoy the wonderment zooming around.

An old white couple sit in front of me thinking grey cane thoughts.

“Get me a cold beer and a full order of ribs,” a working man, possibly construction, jeans and navy blue T-shirt, white, says to the waiter.

“Michelob on tap okay?”

“Yeah.”

The staff is all black, wear black pants, white shirts.

“Tell Richie I’ll pay for it,” says an obese white man in thick southern tones.

Pots and pans dangle from the ceiling.

Eat. Damn good dry rub ribs. Pay \$24, head out to wander around Beale Street.

“Hey, man, say man, give me some money man, give me some money white man.” A pack of wild homeless bums follows close behind begging for money like diseased mongrels looking to hump. Johnny Cash pours out of a bar. I hear a commotion near some benches.

“Come on then motha fucka!” A dirty white bum in red jacket yells at this other man with fists clinched ready to throw down. The other guy walks away as people turn their heads with vague interest. The frustrations of being down and out. People, and all animals, can only take so much. And there appears to be quite a few down and out in Memphis.

By the Mississippi River, a huge statue of Jefferson Davis stands in a small Confederate park. “A true American Patriot,” reads the inscription on the statue.

Memphis, Martin Luther King Jr. taken by a bullet of hate. What would he think about the times now? That statue? He’d still be protesting, for the job will never be done as long as men roam the earth.

Strange thoughts as I walk around Graceland, Elvis’ turf. I gaze at the King’s grave. He influenced millions...still does. People always try to create eternity.

Later on at night, on Beale Street, I check out some blues in some tiny hole-in-the-wall shotgun bar.

“We recorded at Sun Studio, where Johnny Cash, Elvis and all those cats recorded,” the thick, brown bearded singer tells the audience.

“Somebody say yeah!”

“Yeah!”

“Let me play my Mississippi saxophone.” He jams out on his harmonica. Music flows into the souls of the people making them dance in strange ways, possessed and free in wild Bacchic frenzy. Music, the best language of all. The gods have changed but the rituals remain the same. People, whether they like to admit it, enjoy coming together. Class, race, no, it all melts into the one human creature, and for an instant, life is as it should be.

I step out, dazed from loud sound and several bouts with John Barleycorn. Homeless people form a gang and follow me around. They can smell blood. It’s 4:00 a.m., or close to it. Not many others out on the street. These bastards want to take me down. Though my hotel is only four blocks away, I decide to spend \$5 and hail a cab. Desperate men are capable of the most desperate acts. Men are the greatest of beasts after all.

Cross the muddy mighty Mississippi for Little Rock on a cloudy morning.

Pulling in to Little Rock, I decide that I do not want to stay here. I run off the bus, wait in a short line that takes forever, and finally get another ticket. Lots of lowly mutants in this station. Mullets and NASCAR gear cover the place like sand.

Settle back into my same seat next to an old cowboy.

CHAPTER 4 DALLAS

Arrive after a 491-mile, 10-hour haul to lit-up nighttime Dallas. Dave, a guy I've only spoken to by cell phone, arrives in his black Pontiac two-door. Dave works for the Dallas newspaper. I shower, have a few beers, then hit the sack.

Warm sunshine reflects off geometric glass fingers to the sky, man's creation. Unusually warm. People walk about in business attire. Loud construction echoes off glass. Mostly white and Mexican faces. Feels like any city. I walk about observing Dallas until I reach my destination – Dealey Plaza, the site where President Kennedy met his grim fate and when a generation's hope started to die. The wave of energy that would fuel the 1960s was set in motion.

I pay \$10 to walk around in the Sixth Floor Museum – the old Texas Schoolbook Depository – the site where 24-year-old Lee Harvey Oswald took aim. Man, 24, the age I am now, Jesus. Funny vibrations stepping in Lee Harvey's footsteps, the breath of ghosts makes strange noises as video clips echo off walls repeating the past as if it were the future. Maybe it is. I spend about three hours reading everything. A quote from JFK strikes a cord with me. "Of those to whom much is given, much is required." I agree strongly with this statement and feel that in this corner of time we call now, the people who have opportunities are wasting the dawn. Banal and cruel reality television, idiotic music, bloody interactive entertainment, the worshipping of fools. Mickey Mouse, a soulless creature of ink. The world is strange enough to captivate minds. Most who are given much only look to get more in typical human greed. The privileged who spend with no imagination just because they can while others sleep in gutters reeking of their own urine.

Shivering in cold visionary tick, I look at two white painted x's on the road marking the spots where bullets tore into JFK. A large American flag dances in the breeze. Clapping, laughter and whizzing bullets fall in my mind. The plaza looks as it did 43 years ago. The grassy knoll, conspiracy theories, and chilling memories circle the site as tires spin on by in human continuation. Another day, same sun, new problems plagued by the old. History lessons unlearned or forgotten.

I head to the Dallas Museum of Art as the sun descends December 14, after getting directions from a friendly guy walking to his car. There is a Vincent Van Gogh exhibit, and Van Gogh is one of my favorite artists. I remember a quote of his that has stuck with me. "As long as men are alive the dead will live."

I pay the \$12 and go in – the rest of the museum is free right now. The crowd is definitely upper class, the ones who have the time to appreciate art. For without time, the mind is only another computer chip. I fill my mind with Van Gogh thoughts, then exit to get a bite to eat.

A jazz band plays loud in the full dining area. A very diverse crowd. Black, white, Asian, Spanish. I sip on a Heineken and wait for my grilled chicken sandwich. The luxuries of upper class freedom. I spend two hours looking at ancient Roman and Greek art – two civilizations that constantly keep my mind busy in thought.

Tired of walking, I get a cab to a bar called Lee Harvey's on the outside of town. The skyline lights the soaring architecture in the background while I sit by a crackling fire. Drink some beers pondering the day and looking more closely at my own ghost – 24-years-old.

The Dallas bus station is cleaner than most. It's packed with the usual crowd of low class black, white and Mexican. A few read newspapers while the sound of travel frustration can be heard coming from the ticket counter.

The bus honks, then pulls out of Dallas at 12:23 p.m. for a 12 hour, 604-mile rumble. Fifteen minutes later we're already stopping.

"This isn't a smoke break, get back on the bus, I said this over the intercom," the black bus driver yells at an older black man.

The old guy shakes his head, takes his inhaler between coughs. He sounds ready to die. It won't be long.

Roll on, through Oklahoma City. As we near Tulsa, I notice something strange glowing on the skyline. Huge white lights, crosses, on the buildings.

"Jesus Christ, what the hell is this?" I mutter. Better not stay here long, the bastards will burn me up. America at its finest.

"Welcome to... Tulsa, Oklahoma," reads an overhead sign at the Greyhound station.

We get a new driver, a fat, white-haired old man. Tattoos and wife beaters climb on board with pillows and large black duffle bags. The smell of alcohol from a passing lady is so strong I feel like I poured beer on myself. White guy with "Sooners" baseball hat – probably a student – sits behind me.

"Excuse me, are you saved?" a middle-aged white Latino guy in glasses with grey hair inquires.

"Not that I know of."

"Here you go."

He hands me two pamphlets and continues his whore ways down the aisle. I look at my new reading material. "The most important decision you'll ever face: Choose Jesus." Jesus. The other pamphlet is thicker and calls out, "The warnings of God," by Billy Joe Daugherty on the front. It's funny how others, particularly the religious ones, feel the need to

convert you. They're not happy just with saving themselves. You must convert, or be burned alive to rid you of flawed sinned flesh.

"Let's go! Get off the bus, we're late," the bus driver yells at the guy saving people. No ticket.

The bus rolls out. A giant billboard reads: "Get out of hell free. GotJesus.com." Man, I'll be glad when we're outta this friggin' state. Jesus.

Old man river driver has the heat cranked up. It feels like we've descended into the Oklahoma dream.

Religion is a scary thing. President Bush, a born again Christian, is the most powerful man in the world. He can push a button to start a preemptive nuclear war, the way he likes to "git er' done." It's unsettling when the man can't pronounce the word and also believes in a literal translation of the Book of Revelation. It's not a good combination for peace on earth.

CHAPTER 5 KANSAS CITY

I tell the cabby “Arthur Bryant’s please.” A famous barbeque joint I’ve been told about. Wait in line for pulled pork and fries. The clanking of silverware, Robert Johnson blues plays from ceiling speakers. Plates stacked high, gushing pork, pictures and autographs cover the walls. Place set up like a cafeteria. An old black man grabs two handfuls of dry crisp fries after putting together my sandwich. Doesn’t look up. A machine. Then I pay - \$12.40. Looks as if this is what his life has always and only been – slopping down BBQ for the hungry masses. White gloves and weary eyes. The barbeque is good, very mild, not much spice to it. Christmas decorations everywhere and the smell of fries. Pictures of Satchel Page, Hank Arron and Jackie Robinson hang on the walls.

I go a block down the street to the Negro Leagues Baseball museum. It’s hard to imagine. What a different era. But the vibrations still linger. Separate but equal fills my mind remembering images from the Birmingham exhibit. I walk out, then go to the jazz museum on the other side of the building.

I head out for Cincinnati, 600 miles, around 8:40 p.m., with hopes of a noontime arrival.

“Welcome to St. Louis,” reads a sign. It is 12:25 a.m., and my transfer bus doesn’t head out until 4:00 a.m. East St. Louis isn’t exactly a prime place to be. A young guy mutters something about weed as I get my bag from the bus. Another eyes me and my satchel – with a nice \$1,200 Mac inside – and says something I can’t understand, but the vibes are ominous. I have to piss, but decide to hold it until back on the bus. The bus station is an old bank – feels like

1920s or '30s era – run down and filled with creased and weary faces. Pigeons fly around in flapping delight. Definitely a different stratum than airport travel.

Back on the bus after a savage, cattle stomping stampede for the door, we stop at a McDonald's/Pilot gas station at 5:10 a.m., December 18, in Effingham, Illinois. Where the hell is this? Most saunter off, barely alive and not at all. I order one sausage egg McMuffin for \$2.24. Eat, then get back on the bus – which is hotter than hell. The old man bus driver has it cranked up so high I can smell my boots melting. The grease on my face drips like Jello in a microwave.

CHAPTER 6 CINCINNATI

Tired from the overnight haul, it's 11:00 a.m. and in need of coffee and food. Walk out the door and up to a cab.

"Where you goin'?" Says the black cabby.

"Take me to any coffee shop downtown."

"Okay."

The bus station is about five minutes from the heart of things. Seven dollars later he pulls in front of an Arby's.

"Is there a coffee shop around here?"

"Yeah, Arby's. Got coffee, sandwiches, everything you need."

Obviously we had a bit of a communications problem, but no matter. This is good enough. Okay, at Vine Street and 6th West. The Cincinnati Hotel is across the street. It's mildly cold, brain grey out. Get a large coffee and sit by wide plateglass windows to watch the freaks, or normal everyday people, it's all the same.

"I know he's sellin' weed because I can smell it through the vent," says a black woman to another black woman about her boyfriend. Joe Dirt's twin walks by the window in typical white trash slouch. I can't remember the last time I saw the sun. Some black guys are preaching about equality, vision for the future. An interesting conversation from what I can pick up. At least some people still want to carry on the fight. The war for humanity never ends.

A black man walks by the window with one of those cell phone keyboards, madly typing messages without breaking stride. The buildings, streets, sky - all grey. A woman walks by, open

book in hand reading and walking. I call Mark. No answer. Probably still asleep. Eventually get picked up and head to his house out in Milford, a suburb 20 minutes away. Have a couple daytime beers, shoot the shit for a while. A couple of Mark's friends come over, two girls. Mark wants to be a history teacher, and he talks about getting a job when...

“Who care's about history,” says a young cute girl with silky raven hair.

“You don't think learning about how we got here is important?!” Mark asks, utterly dumbfounded by what the girl has just said.

“Well, we're here now, so who cares. You better get used to this kind of response, that's what most high school kids think. Who cares...”

This, of course, is a very scary response. And definitely true and a testament to the computer generation. Like blind men walking on fire, turning around and walking back on fire.

Before I leave, my friend Brent, who also lives in the Cincinnati area, tells me how lucky my stay was, describing the weather as “apocalyptic.” It is normally much colder at this time of year, he tells me.

The sun breaks through clouds as the bus rattles and shakes over rivers and out of town. Pass through Lexington, transfer in Knoxville, and briefly stop in Asheville on the way to Charlotte.

CHAPTER 7 CHARLOTTE

“There’s nothing but suits and bankers in this town,” my 20-year-old cousin Reuben explains as we drive through the heart of Charlotte. At a liquor store I see a Hunter S. Thompson sticker. “Gonzo Lives,” it reads. Yes, indeed he does. We discuss Taoism briefly before I head out with Evan, 25, another cousin, to Salisbury.

We arrive at a recording studio around 12:30 a.m. He needs to pick up a guitar. Some guys he knows are recording an album. I watch as they sing in the booth. I’m in the outer room with couches and high tech equipment.

“Hey Justin, can you redo the chorus part? We think you can get it tighter. Yeah.” The song restarts and he goes back into the small glass box, back to work.

“Good job man, yeah, that’s it. What do you think?”

“Question. Do we want to take out the trumpet part and put a vocal harmony in?”

“Are these lyrics kind of random or what?”

“Just listen.”

All the guys are young, a couple bottles of booze sit in the corner.

“That’s flat man, it’s flat.” The guys surround the mike and try to sing in key.

Evan and I go grab a beer. The first bar was closing so had to hit second choice. We stop at a Waffle House on the way home. I eat a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich with double hash browns. Evan gets a Texas patty melt, hash browns scattered, smothered and covered. It’s almost 5:00 a.m. when I get in bed. It’s hard to sleep.

Worn out, gone, no sleep, road weary, hats, grey sweat suits, heads in laps, couples lean together eyes closed, hoods, jeans, white sneakers, stocking caps, suitcases, headphones, glazed eyes, young, old. Mostly black crowd with scattered white and Mexican faces - all with the same countenance. Dirt laden and dark. More males than females, no empty seats, sitting on floor, dirty brown tiles, bags line up behind doors, blue walls, military fatigues, buzz cuts, crying children, small chit-chat, cell phones on ears, pay phones, arguing with Greyhound workers, long lines, 8:20 a.m. frustration, waiting to board the 9:15 a.m. Charlotte to D.C. Greyhound bus.

A young blonde girl, 20 or so, good looking, ripped jeans, peace symbol sewed on the knee, sits in front of me hugging her knees rocking back and forth, white Converse All-Stars tapping as a purple CD player pours sound into leaky headphones.

“Do you smoke?” a black man, jeans and brown leather jacket, regular looking fellow, asks the girl. She takes off her headphones.

“No, not those,” she replies, pointing to the cigarette pack in his hand.

“Need anything?”

“Nah, well, I guess.”

She follows him outside to make the deal, walks back inside. He comes in a minute later, smiles and nods at the girl.

The action isn't surprising; I'd expected to see something of the sort much earlier.

“Why the fuck is they reboarding if we ain't leavin'?!...California takin' the Titans, that's right, ha, ha...guy got title right there...That nigga from Oakland, I used to go to school with his son...Di-do-da-do-da-di-do...That's the nigga side...They don't make people like me pay, gotta respect...This chick is like seven foot whatever...” Garbled conversations fill my ears.

Various lingoes - southern, country, Ebonics, sometimes all in one swirling monstrous drawl, high pitched and in deep growls. Sweating coffee grease, I look around and experience.

People, the same yet different wherever you go. Different wants and needs, but the same nonetheless. Ticking mind bombs each with varying angles of sight to mammoth sun explosions. The great division of class trickles down in human raindrops of dust. Knowledge, experience. Working to create time, working to survive. The basic needs are the same. But with extra time, that is what makes all the difference. And most here don't look like they have the time.

The intercom blares garbled Charlie Brown talk, but the gate number comes through. I get up; ready to leave this Charlotte morning memory for D.C.

Luckily, I'm in the front of a long line, so will be boarding the bus. There is no guarantee that you will board a bus even with a ticket. No, get in line as soon as possible; hope the bus isn't already full. The workers at Greyhound don't give a damn whether you're with the first wave or the last. Most don't give a damn period, expecting you to wait for them as if they're not being paid to do something. A lot of people seem to fall in this class. A generation of people who want without doing and get upset when you kindly remind them that they are at work.

A grey-haired, grey-suited wrinkly man at the door – the bus driver – rips my ticket. I place my bag beside the bus and take a window seat near the middle. The bus quickly fills to capacity, fogging the windows with inside warmth on a cold day. A young black man in his thirties sits next to me, lays his head back and tries to sleep.

Struggling to get down the aisle, a young black woman maneuvers her large bottom wrapped in tight Spandex past each seat. Barely fitting, she settles in with her two young kids.

A minute goes by, then trouble. One of the kids spills his juice all over the place.

“Why you do dat?!” she slaps her son, not too hard, then her daughter, a bit older, maybe three. “Let him spill on me little nigga! I could kill you!” She chuckles. “You’re lucky I love you. I got me two little rats.”

I hear her loud filling voice telling someone, or just herself, that she’s been on the bus for two days already. She must be on little sleep and cracking sanity with two youngsters. I see a lot of young mothers on the bus alone, most too young to have to bear the burden of raising kids – most are kids themselves. You can see the struggle of life, the continuation of forever being in a lower class. Her kids will learn from her, and if lucky, education might channel some hope. But probably nothing. A never ending cycle at the bottom.

The bus honks twice, like it always does before pulling out, and roars toward Raleigh, then Richmond with a few smoke breaks for glazed eyes to toke on simplicity in the dreariness of busy Greyhound terminals.

The whole bus has to get off in Richmond for a cleaning they say will only take 15 minutes. Getting off fast, I hurry to the bathroom, have to throw the curve ball, the old number two, and there’s no shaking it off. I walk in, the sound and smell of a prisoner’s ward.

“All the shitters are full, gentlemen. Wait in line.” A deep voice rumbles from a squatty black man in red T-shirt.

“Damn!” I sure as hell don’t want to get left here.

Finally go in, sit down in filth and rid myself of the beer and Waffle House from the 4:00 a.m. pit stop I had with my cousin in Charlotte. I flush, wash – which not many others do – and run back to the gate. End up waiting for an hour, and finally board.

“Whooo, Lord Jesus,” says a middle-aged black woman with rolls of fat undulating with each climb of the bus steps.

The Greyhound face is a universal reflection – tired, down, weary and worn out. Every once in a while there will be a smile, greetings with friends and family. But mostly the sleepy ice stone look from travel.

CHAPTER 8 WASHINGTON, D.C.

The bus pulls into rainy D.C. after a 10 hour, 430-mile haul.

Sleeping till 11:00 a.m., I feel rested. The D.C. Metro is clean and easy to figure out.

Grabbing a map I get my pass, go down the long silver escalator and wait for the train. Michael's apartment is in Arlington, Va., only two blocks from the Metro station. He's a friend from college. After a 15 minute ride, I get off and walk around the Mall. Blue skies, unusually warm weather for December, flags under the Washington Monument dance in the breeze. I walk to the Lincoln Memorial, slow, long, ponderous strides as my eyes fill with protest visions and ghost cheers. The sun, untouched by the memory of time, warms my face making me throw on shades. The deep, majestic voice of Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I have a dream" speech echoes off the glassy reflecting pond filled with honking geese. Stepping over huge blobs of slippery green droppings, I make my way to the massive Greek temple imitation. A faded dream, his proud vocals turned to whispers beneath the haze of capitalism – the noose of any republic. People only remember, the action seems to have gone under with him. Humans, so it seems, are always waiting. Not moved to action until the shadow of doom looms so large and ominous that escape looks slim. Not to say escape doesn't happen. Human ingenuity seems to come around – after oozing bloody corpses block the smell of flowers with putrid decay. It seems to take a plague to create a renaissance.

December 23rd, a fair amount of people waltz about in carefree daydreams. Walking around the World War II monument, visions flood my mind as I try to imagine what it must have

been like. Words do nothing. American war games in the back yard emulating movie heroes, reliving the past through imagination, the shaping of a consciousness and society.

Just another domino of history as we dive into more blood this century. We are not off to a good start. Staring at Lincoln, I turn to read the Gettysburg address carved in giant letters on the wall to the left of the monument. I shake my head. It is an unbelievable embarrassment to have George W. Bush for president. How was he reelected? What a damn disgrace – but it says a lot about America and the times we are living in. It is obviously time for a change. There hasn't been this much confusion and corruption in the White House since Nixon. America's rich have grown fat. At a time when the world is shrinking and changing like never before, the right voices need to emerge.

Sit down on cold marble steps watching happy Indian, Asian, black and white families walk up and down the wide stairs explaining history to their children. Uncorrupted, starry eyes filled with wonder gaze heavenly around at life. Still in warm remembrance of infancy's lie. Different languages fly with wings in the breeze, undulating songs of human thought. People of the world gather round in good spirits, family, the way it should be. America, just an experiment for globalization – if we make it to the other side of the sun, the world may indeed live as one.

There is a lot of ugliness still rampant in America, and in the rest of the world. When people know what's right, but run and hide, the wave of destruction grows. Or don't do anything because they're afraid they won't get reelected. The government system has failed the founders' intentions. Plato's dream of the philosopher king was almost realized at the beginning. But no, not now. We are left with whores, an aged group of used car salesmen. Power poisoned minds and minds too old to understand the new. No vision but the past. Hairless heads filled only with ideas and flag waving.

Walking over to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, thinking about the '60s, war, change, assassination and revolution. Where are the young today? Waiting for the draft, penitent children bowing to fools.

It's quiet gazing into the dark glassy black wall looking at my reflection. I am here now, trapped in the experience of time. A fleeting existence. I make a carbon rubbing of my Dad's friend Michael England, who got blown to unidentifiable hell two weeks after turning 20 in sweltering triple canopy jungle. I look around at flowers and pictures left leaning on the bottom of the wall. Scars refuse to heal. Bending over, I inspect a photograph of young army guys, most likely younger than myself, posing for a picture, trapped in a second. A note reads, "To my Vietnam brother who live & die in Vietnam (68-69) Love you, miss you, God Bless You." A lot of names, for nothing. When incompetent regimes are in power, people die. The map of the future lies in the past. Makes me think of the Iraq war with the unknown outcome already known. A Christmas tree stands in the middle corner with pictures and cards to the deceased. I recall, a few weeks ago, walking the streets of honky tonk Nashville, looking at a Vietnam War memorial that read: "We, who cherish freedom, dedicate this memorial to their unselfish sacrifice." What a waste. I wonder what they'll say about all the dead and wounded Americans in 20 years after the glory of Operation Iraqi Freedom has come to rest – although the blood will probably be past our necks by then.

Solemn faces, sunglasses, couples holding hands, babies in strollers, grey-haired guys in jeans fighting memories. Reflections of a past that shaped today, which is how it always works. People don't talk at this sacred monument. Just feel what every human can feel when they shut the outside interference out and think. Breathing in and out, you remember life. Just a dream perhaps, but an illusion that feels and can always be dreamt in a better way.

Joggers run up and down past the Smithsonian. Homeless people lie in the grass, some sit up begging for money. Of course, all claim to be war vets. I walk all the way down to the Capitol and Supreme Court. Vibrations of Rome echo off every imposing building. Power emanates like the first rosy beams of dawn. A Christmas tree with an impressive shadow stands in the lawn of the Capitol like an Egyptian obelisk. We like to think religion is not mixed into politics. But the breath in D.C. reeks with religion. You can't get elected unless you believe in a god. People would and are always ready to burn, burn, burn to tackle what deep down they know is right. But no, no, tradition will not have it. The church and other tax-free institutions must be protected at all costs. Children are indoctrinated with lies from birth, scared into submission. The disease continues to be passed down in a world that should have far outgrown such infantile thought. The only way to keep religion breathing is through war.

The steps of the Capitol are blocked off, a police guard with a massive black machinegun in hand, ominous dark sunglasses, protects the white marble stairs protecting peace. Black metal bars stand erect behind him. "Property of U.S. Capitol Police." I remember when America used to be free, or at least freer from the disease of fear. Machinegun police and the music of goose-stepping robots on a clear American day.

Walk by the White House. Christmas decorations hang from the balconies. Across the street an old woman, looks South American, Indian, sits outside of a tent with large anti-Bush posters scattered outside. One has Bush in a white beard dressed like Osama Bin Laden. One sign reads "Stay the course – this will happen to you." Pictures of bloody humans are underneath. A young girl stands before the poster silently looking, contemplating. "Hey George! Read my lips, no new wars," a sign reads, referencing H.W. Bush's slogan about no new taxes.

Again, the few who protest are old. The young sit in front of the television waiting for someone to take their hands and tell them what to do.

I ride back to my friend's place. "Keeping the Metro safe is up to all of us," booms an automatic, mindless robot voice from overhead. Getting to the top of the escalator, a dirty looking guy with a red stocking cap blurts in broken southern accent, "Can you please spaarr some change?" I've been asked so many times that I don't even hear the words until a block down the street as I wait for a black BMW to pass by.

Arlington National Cemetery. A lot of emotions flow through me watching Kennedy's flame flutter under the shadow of Robert E. Lee's mansion. There are endless pearl white headstones, a vast city of the dead, streets filled with living heel toes. You can't tell race or creed from here. In death, truth of oneness is realized. The rain drizzles down cold grey in memory's tomb. The unknown soldier's tear drop cry fills the seas like an ancient lullaby. The ways of war, the ways of men, still in infantile reflections.

Christmas Eve, just another day. The solstice has come to pass. Go to the Holocaust museum. Lots of Indians and Asian families. Some Jewish faces. I battle holding tears back fighting emotion in typical male fashion.

"Tyranny cannot defeat the power of ideas," reads a Helen Keller quote on the wall. A chill goes up my spine. These mass murders did not happen long ago. Man is easily capable of repeating such crimes. That seems to be the natural order of things. Do I feel more emotion because I'm Jewish? Knowing that others have had a similar background forms a bond in all cultures. It's basic reasoning— more shared experiences, more shared consciousness. "For the dead and the living we must bear witness," reads an Elie Wiesel quote. For that is the path of history.

“THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU SAW,” a sign reads on the outside of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Every student should take a Holocaust class. As our time moves forward, the shrinking consciousness of such tragic events gets buried until they repeat, while another generation claims it will never happen again.

Ears popping on Metro screech rock wobble brake clank vocal cord strings telling dreams doors open shopping bags and luggage under strides of black overcoat destinations.

D.C. Bus station. Flags from around the world dangle from white beams lining the ceiling. News of President Gerald Ford’s demise fills the room in CNN voices. The bus station is cleaner than most I’ve been in so far. It’s 11:00 p.m., the bus heads out at 5:00 a.m. I decide it would be better to swim the storm than wait it out and dish \$40 for a taxi.

“Hey man, I’m sorry to bother you. I’m tryin’ to go home. I only need a few more bucks. Do you think you could help me out?” I toss him a few bucks.

“Thank ya, Gawd bless ya.”

Ten minutes later.

“I don’t know anyone here and I’m tryin’ to get back home. I just need a few bucks.” I give him \$2.

“Thank you, God bless you.”

Five minutes later.

“I’m tryin’ to get home...”

“Sorry man, I’ve already helped a couple guys out and can’t give you anything.”

“Thank you, Gawd bless you.”

I put my backpack behind a black number three Dale Earnhardt bag in gate four.

CHAPTER 9 PHILADELPHIA

No sleep, I arrive in Philly, grab a coffee and a bacon, egg and cheese sandwich for just under six bucks at a side store across from Chinatown. There is much to see in this historic city. The Liberty Bell, Betsy Ross' house. Then I walk over to Benjamin Franklin's grave. What a man. The wind blows cold and I ponder what was. Walking around in Independence Hall, a chill rises up my spine as time shakes. Great minds created this country, and they convened here in this building. This is a special place. I can see the deliberations going on right now.

People of all cultures, but in the same class, walk around taking pictures. It is the upper class that has the time. And with time, knowledge can be gained.

Resting at a Starbucks, exhausted from walking everywhere and seeing all, I wait for my friend – who lives here - to call me. He is working late and I have nowhere to go. Haven't slept for some 35 hours, but am caffeinated – juiced up, as I call it. I sit trying to fall asleep, a dirty homeless bum does the same in the seat next to me. After briefly closing my eyes, I notice a cold unopened orange juice is sitting on my brown little table. There is no mistake, someone has purposefully left it there for me to drink. Many eyes had gazed in my direction as I took my seat. Guess I look like a bum. I hand it to the other guy – homeless – who thanks me. Then a young, dirty homeless white lad runs in and begins talking to us. I feel part of the tribe. I didn't have anywhere to go after all. People who share similar knowledge have a way of bonding together. Shared experience is a powerful human motivator. Finally receiving a call, I get in a cab headed for Crazy Horse II, a strip joint. It's my friend's 26th birthday.

The girls are young, and heavily drugged up on ecstasy or coke. You can tell by the way their eyeballs scream. Just another way of staying alive.

I hadn't seen Jordan, who shares the same name as my brother, in a year. We are college friends. I gave him his first cigarette while we watched the Twin Towers burn from a rat-infested fraternity room...his 24-year-old brother Josh, whom I had met just a few days prior at a home football game, was high up in one of the towers. He did not make it. He turned to dust.

Things are a bit different now. Fear and rampant patriotism symbolize America. The salesmen of the republic all jumped to capitalize off the incident. Bush, so it appears, is the lead whore. When you think about it, should 9/11 have impacted the way we live as much as it has? Or has it? We are, after all, waiting for the real attack to happen. It is human movie expectation at its best.

After getting a helluva good sleep and a dancing hot shower, I run up the Philadelphia Museum of Art stairs just like Rocky, a famed figure of the town with a statue just before you ascend. Film, a genre that hasn't been around for that long, has impacted society greatly. The overuse of computer graphics and poorly written scripts seems to be the norm now. Fancy lights and sounds to dazzle eyes so they don't have to think – for this is the era of computer thought. Why think if you don't have to? Most say. It won't be long before our creation overtakes us. For our dominance of the planet is due to the success of the mind...wilting away on the desert vine.

I go to Pat's and Gino's to eat some cheese steaks, for it is a must in this town. Pat's is better. Grab a cab back to the bus station. A five minute ride as the black driver eats his quarterpounder with cheese from McDonald's.

First in line! Cazart! Buses leave from Philadelphia every hour for New York, with the journey only being a little over two hours, depending on traffic. The station is pretty crowded.

“Is that right?”

“Onleeeey \$6 prime reeeib,” says an Asian woman talking about her trip to Vegas. She’s an Atlantic City regular.

“It’s been a long time, I’m a junior in college. I went to private school,” a young white guy says while conversing with a young black guy about sports.

Looking around, can definitely tell people are more affluent. Cities are so close together up here that riding a bus makes sense, especially when it’s \$20. Some iPods are scattered about, more than at other stations. People look more satisfied with their situations. Not as worn down with life. The time to sit basking in a warm shelter of thought is there to use.

Black bus driver, 30s, youngest driver so far, rips ticket and I take my seat. The bus is not full and I have a seat by myself, which is nice. Make a stop in Mount Laurel, New Jersey. Bus clears out for a smoke.

The withered sun fades into the deep, it’s only 4:50 p.m. Lots of traffic heading into the Lincoln tunnel, red brake lights flash everywhere. Engine noise echoes off curved walls, the windows rattle. Buses, trucks, limos and cars drink combustion heaven.

CHAPTER 10 NEW YORK CITY

The New York bus station is like an airport. People scuttle around in dizzy confusion at the quick step. Silver subway cars rumble underneath, letting money dresses out for more spending in the mall above. Herds of varying flesh shades flow like mad torrents. Faded human rainbow rivers swish over steel crags and paper pebbles vibrating the wind with song – 21st century energy. Make my way to the surface. People scramble about like ants under a magnifying glass firestorm. This is my first New York experience, buildings to the sky, the heart of the world – Rome. Eyes wide, twinkling in the wonder of childhood imagination. The bus station is only a few blocks from Times Square. A sea of people sprays noise earth language that echoes off shiny geometrical objects. I wait for my friend Adam, who works close by, then hit the subway for Brooklyn - Williamsburg. We drink a few beers and chill. Exhausted, I go to sleep at a decent hour.

Get up around 9:00 a.m., grab a bagel and cream cheese, coffee, on the way to the damp subway underworld. Each station is different, all leaky and old. People plugged into their own iPod universe, books, magazines and daily schedules as the subway rocks and roars beneath the feet of millions.

Sunny blue skies, unusual warmth, back in Times Square to see neon blinking lights sprinkle tourists with jaw-dropping eye amazement. Advertisements everywhere. Television dreams. The taste of smog, feet, roaches and metal. Cars honk and move slowly. Lots of cabs. The sound of feet.

Washington Square Park, Greenwich Village by the arch – a Christmas tree stands beneath. Grey trees, naked statues of thought, cast their wisdom down in hopes of creating. A few bohemians are out, others with little kids. I get offered weed by a Rasta. Couples stroll by holding hands. I think of Bob Dylan and change. Too expensive now to live in the village, a haven for the rich – all else are imports.

Go to Chumley's, a famous bar from speakeasy days, and a favorite for notable writers. But it's packed, so we have to 86 – slide secretly out the back door in order to avoid teetotaling cops.

The Empire State Building, back to being the city's tallest. Massive. We walk all over the damn place. Have a Heineken on the Staten Island Ferry. Look out at the Statue of Liberty, America's symbol. Ellis Island, where my relatives and relatives of many others walked through the gates of hope. People like to forget their roots of immigration. We need to stop letting vermin in that are disrupting our way of life! The American sentiment. Walk by where the Twin Towers once stood proud. Flattened symbols of an empire. "In God We Trust, United We Stand," reads a sign. People stare silently at the construction crater. Trucks rumble up and down a steep ramp. Street vendors sell framed pictures of the towers, and other little models. Has it been five years already?

Head to the Metropolitan Museum looking to enhance the mind. Could spend a year in here. I get dizzy just thinking of how much air fills this space. Hoards of world people shuffle feet, chat and observe creation. Good energy is all around.

"Isn't it beautiful," a woman exclaims to her husband.

Nighttime, drinking Guinness at White Horse Tavern. Murals of Dylan Thomas are all around. Thomas is one my favorite poets. I think about having 18 whiskies, but decline this time.

It is my first experience at the bar. Dylan's last watering hole. The vibes dance on my spine with every sip. Where are all the poets?

New Years Eve and hung-over already. Watch the Dogs beat Virginia Tech in the Peach Bowl last night at the designated Georgia bar. It was packed, drank probably a dozen beers before going to another bar barely conscious, ruined by John Barleycorn for the umpteenth time. Just another swine filled with drink. Tryin' to clear my head by walking through Central Park. "Imagine," people crowd around the John Lennon memorial across the street from where he was murdered. There are other dreamers around. Hot dogs and sorrowful jazz with open case and quarters. Monuments to Union Civil War soldiers. In the south, only Confederate statues stand.

Go to Ace bar, they've got ski ball. Drink Yingling and wait for the meaningless number shift. The bar's not too crowded, we chill and talk, glance at the television screen showing the madness in Times Square. Why do people go nuts over a number? Odd times, odd times. Tradition. We stay out till 4:30 a.m., miraculously I hail a cab in the rain the instant my foot steps out of the bar. We have a few drinks back at the apartment and crash around 5:30 a.m.

Spend the day resting, the night fills with Jimi Hendrix visions at the Café Wha? in the heart of Greenwich. Then to the Village Vanguard to listen to some jazz. Costs 35 bones, eight for a Jack. A high-class refuge. The delight of carefree dollar nights to fill mind and soul.

Wake up at 6:00 a.m., leave 6:30 a.m. with Adam going to work – one subway stop before me. Get off at the Greyhound station, walk around for 10 minutes, ask directions and find my gate. Waiting to go to Boston, 7:45 a.m. Sweat beads on my forehead, heat roars from overhead. A girl wears a Boston College T-shirt. Mostly black crowd. White guy with grey beard, U.S.A. hat, blue sweatshirt that reads: "Jesus is the rock," on one side, "rock of Israel" on the other. The sun shines through naked tree limbs as we pass yellow grass. Boston College girl

reads, young black-haired Jewish girl rocks back and forth reading a prayer book, lips rapidly move as if at the Western Wall. Pass by the small skyline of New Haven, Connecticut and the hallowed halls of Yale. Make a stop a little outside of town, get a grilled chicken sandwich and coffee for \$5.32 at Roy Rogers. Look at a newspaper, the 3,000th soldier was killed the other day. How 'bout that? It's been nearly four years since exploding bombs first began streaking across Baghdad nights. Shock and Awe turns to shock.

CHAPTER 11 BOSTON

Pull into Boston station. It's large, clean and nicer than all but New York's. Get in a cab, Pierre, black guy, drives me to the hostel on Hemingway Street for \$10.

I check in, throw my stuff on one of the three top bunks, and head out to see Boston while there's still some daylight. The hostel isn't bad. A tiny rectangle room, bathroom and showers at the end of the hall.

"Hey man, let me get 79 cents for some food. Hey, we both got Afros," a guy argues smoking a cigarette walking toward me. I shake my head and motion no with my hand. Disappointed, he walks to another victim. Confusion at subway station, get map and then board a green train headed for Boston Common. Very clean, mostly white faces.

Surfacing, the wind whips my face in friendly 40 degree breath. I see a red brick line indicating the freedom trail. I ponder which way to go.

"Care to save the Republic sir?" A young guy looking like Kennedy's cousin is talking to me in a thick accent barely understandable to a southern lad.

"We're going back to the Dark Ages," he tells me. I walk away, looking to talk with a ghost or two. Maybe I'll run into one of the so-called witches that were hanged around here.

In front of the Robert Gould Shaw memorial and just up hill from Boston Common, the Gold dome of the State House shines. About 70 people protest for gay marriage – mostly young girls. People carry large green signs that read: "LET THE PEOPLE VOTE." Protest chants, "Why are you so full of hate, we are here to demonstrate..." then it gets garbled and you can't understand. A young guy, early 20s, is leading the singing.

“One, two, three...tell me why, I never want to hear you say, don’t marry if you’re gay, tell me why...” I have never heard a gay cheer. The chant repeats, enough to make any reasonably sane human being go nuts, or at least cave into whatever demands. Like having your finger nails slowly pulled back with a plastic spoon.

“I converted to Christianity because when I was a Muslim I walked in Darkness, I rejected Christ all my life...when I found Jesus, he really blew me away,” a black man in NASA hat, jeans and jacket says while a cameraman interviews him. He holds a sign that reads: “Marriage 1 man 1 woman.”

This seems to be a topic of debate all over 21st America. Should marriage only be between one man and one woman? Well, if this country still upholds the division between church and state, then the state cannot tell the church what to do. Religion has roots of hatred. But, let’s get at what we’re really talking about here – the benefits that marriage brings in the legal sense. Yes, legal bindings of partners should involve any pairing of individuals who so desire. The system should be set up in a different way without the halitosis of religion.

I walk past news vans with raised antennas; it’s 3:00 p.m.

Next day. I get to Boston Common, it’s midafternoon. Walk by Samuel Adam’s grave, then stop off at The Bell-in-Hand, which claims to be America’s oldest tavern, established in 1795, and have myself a few Sam Adams brews.

Refreshed, I walk to Paul Revere’s house with childhood visions of him on his horse, galloping to save the town.

Gunshots echo in my mind as Boston Massacre blood trickles into drains. We must rebel against failed institutions.

People behind me talk about Paul Revere in thick British accents. Lots of shopping bags swing in leg strides. I get to a monument, which looks just like the Washington Monument, at Bunker Hill. It's the end of freedom trail, but can't go next to it because of construction.

"Yoou got that draii-va naow?" a skinny white construction worker, orange beard, green hardhat and jeans asks his buddy.

Lots of French talk as I listen to the sound of my own footsteps in boot clip clop down paved roads passing others doing the same.

Harvard Square. Pigeons and homeless people clanking white Styrofoam change cups with glazed eyes and dirt. Funny accents dance in the breeze along with American flags. Lots of diversity. A dirty homeless guy smokes a cigarette by his sign, which reads, "on the streets, need help." People walk by without a glance.

"Will you still love me?" a passing Harvard brunette inquires into her cell phone. Nobody talks to each other face to face anymore. Two girls walk together, each on a cell phone. Either plugged into an iPod music fantasy or conversing nonsense on a cell phone. No time to think, this is the 21st century after all.

Back in my hostel room, a guy from Brazil has just arrived. I talk with him briefly, he's from Sao Paulo but lives in Montreal now, a med student. The majority of hostel residents are Asian. The Irish guys I met before chill on the lower bunks. They tell me they do construction work and are visiting some friends.

"Where the lassies at?" one asks.

It's hard to understand what they're sayin', but give it a minute and it will come through. I go to a bar named Bukowski's Bar, after Charles Bukowski, one of the greatest writers of the

20th century, in my opinion. Have a few local brews and head out. The road is wearing on me a bit. Besides, nobody's out anyway, just the homeless watching their breath create clouds.

Wake up, board the bus Friday at 12:20 p.m., supposed to arrive in Chicago at 9:50 a.m. Saturday, a 1,028 mile, 24-hour haul.

Stop in Newton, Mass., then Worcester. Bus fills up a bit more in Albany. Grey and cloudy outside, not much of a skyline. White guy, red Yamaha jump suit, mustache and ponytail, dirty green hat, smells like street shit passes by me. A woman and gay black man chat. The woman says she's from Florida and has been traveling for a day already.

"I'm only going through a little torture," the black man says. "Goin' to Rochester."

Farm fields and deep grey clouds.

Lots of people get off the bus in Schenectady, New York. I make a stand, keep empty seat – just luck, but I don't mind when someone sits next to me.

I listen to Dark Side of the Moon, Pink Floyd, watching the power on my iPod dwindle to near death. Stop in Syracuse, there's a Subway. Order a Subway Club, wait in transfer line, then get back on the bus. Transfer again in Cleveland at 3:45 a.m. A humungous red-haired ogre looking fellow, at least 300 pounds, sits next to me.

"Anyone sittin' there?" he asks.

"Nope." And I slide over.

Tryin' to sleep, but it's impossible. The guy looks like he's come from a 24 hour shift at Waffle House. Snores louder than a freight train on Benzedrine. The bus rumbles and roars, he wakes, coughs, makes disgusting "gulch, achim, achim, lip smack," noises and sweats profusely under orange curls. The bus pulls over at a truck stop, god knows where, nowhere. It's 5:00 a.m.

My seat partner gets back on with a foot-long hotdog, eats and continues to sweat and snore digesting hot dog breath.

8:35 a.m., stop in South Bend, Indiana.

“Do we have time to smoke a cigarette?” a woman asks.

“You can do whatever you want to do. I’m leavin’ in a couple of minutes,” says the bus driver.

CHAPTER 12 CHICAGO

Arrive to sunny Chicago beneath the dominant, cloud piercing Sears Tower. Walk outside of the bus station, get a cab. It is 9:30 a.m.

“Four killed in Iraq today,” the radio blares over static.

“God damn!” says the black cabby in a high-pitched voice.

“President Bush plans to send more troops,” spits the radio. Then Bush’s stern empty voice comes on saying, “We must win the war on terror, see this through, stay the course...”

“People been killin’ each other since Cain and Abel,” says the cabby. “We can’t stop people from killin’ each other over here. I say let them do their own thing over there. They’re gonna do it whether we’re there or not.”

A profound statement. I agree. We pull up to my cousin’s apartment: 121 West Chestnut, a couple blocks down from the giant Hancock building. Ten bucks for an eight minute ride.

I converse with my cousin for a minute, getting information and directions to must-see areas. I hit the streets, wandering Al Capone’s turf visioning Tommy gun booze. Shopping bags swing amidst chitchat weaving in and out of homeless people sprawled out on Michigan Avenue trying to stay warm while clinking change cups.

Looking out from the 94th floor of the John Hancock Center, a sea of buildings fades into distant fog. The almost aqua blue of Lake Michigan gives off desolate vibes. Gazing out in contemplation, meat factory cattle herds in gate cities before the chop. It’s been 101 years since Upton Sinclair’s “The Jungle” came out, and while the American jungle has changed a bit, corruption’s putrid red fangs still glisten in green reflections.

“Shoeless” Joe Jackson and “Field of Dreams” thoughts.

I awake from my daydream as an Asian couple walks in front of me. Little kids and families gaze out, marveling at human construction. A concrete paradise of windows birthed from Earth’s consciousness – us.

My ears don’t seem to want to pop. I walk outside with fake yawns chomping air like a shark. Across the street under a stoplight a white man in black overcoat and gloves holds a long pole with two signs. “FBI Agent Chris Saviano stop raping my wife! Mayor Daley, The Dictator.” Interesting, people always trying to express something.

White buggies clamped to horses clop by in line. There are a lot of people out, but only on Michigan Avenue. Walk a couple blocks up, it’s like a ghost town. A couple new towers on the rise, for construction is never done. The grey fog turns into dusk, and I head back to my cousin’s for a bite to eat and a shower.

Go to Buddy Guy’s Legends, 754 South Wabash Ave. Sold out, damn. Didn’t even know Buddy Guy was playing. The guy at the door tells me to wait outside, they might let some more in. After 20 minutes, I get in, the cost: \$35.

“Everybody...if we move, I don’t want ya’ll to wait that long...what happened, I don’t know, I think I gotta notha year in here, so you can do what the fuck you want...” Cheers go up as Buddy Guy talks about how he’s moved the club before and how they’re making him move again. “I wanna do it this way ‘cause I love ya,” he says before plucking away into a jam. The crowd is almost entirely white with the smell of cash. Booze flows like a Capone blind pig.

Walking the streets again in daylight, plenty of McDonald’s, Starbucks and homeless people on every corner– just like every American city I’ve been to so far. All part of imitative culture, manufactured and sold. A white guy gives a black homeless man some money.

“Take care of yourself,” he says walking away.

A homeless man feeds pigeons, sits by his dog wrapped in a blanket on Michigan Avenue.

America, a manufactured culture. America, land where people from all walks of life come to lose their culture. America, material heaven. America, the times need to be a-changin’. With the myths long gone and religion choking on the blood of faith, it is obviously time to free human thought. Enough with the barbaric ways of tradition. Stop cowering in cold corners America, the winds of change are in the air – I hope, or else human doom shall find us quicker than mother nature’s powerful wand.

A protest is going on in front of The Art Institute of Chicago. People honk as they pass by protesters with signs saying “impeach Bush!” “Bush step down!” “Honk for peace.” A large white sign held by two blank-faced middle-aged people, a man and woman, reads: “The cost of war. U.S. Funding \$387 billion +, U.S. Troops Killed 3,011, Iraqis Killed 655,000+.” Another reads, “War is terrorism with a congressional license! Stop funding wars.”

There is a lot to be upset about in America today, but most don’t seem to notice. The young are oblivious to the outside, to war. Only worried about material heaven and what kind of makeup J-Lo is wearing today. Ignorance is everywhere as the masses follow fools.

Most of the protesters are older, the younger generation is nowhere to be seen, they’re at rest, at ease. The era of new Nixons, conservative youths. The brainwashing of religion and selling out of a generation is coming to a head. Conformity is in, the new 1950s. It’s cool to wear the same clothes, do the same things, be a part of the group, talk of reality TV. All products of television advertisements. No one left to howl at the moon in strange wonderment.

“Wolverine!” a black guy yells passing me as I board the century old EL – the elevated train. My sideburns are as long and wooly as it gets.

“Yeah!” I say back.

Get to Wrigleyville. Watch the Gator’s stomp the Buckeyes in the National Championship as I drink Guinness for health reasons. What a bummer. The Gator’s will get even better recruits than before. Now we – UGA – won’t even win our normal game every seven years. Balls! Sports, the blood we humans desperately crave. We are war people, must watch killin’ of some kind. Well, I guess every animal goes to battle in its own way. The primal rage from within.

Wake up early, need a good, full last day. I get to The Field Museum, next to Soldier Field, a little after 9:00 a.m., opening time. It’s virtually empty. I walk around and “look at infinity up on trial,” as Bob Dylan says. Spend a long time in the dinosaur exhibit before getting to Ancient Egypt. History, fascinating and scary. The future is not hard to predict.

January 9, 9: 45 a.m., Chicago Greyhound. The crowd is mostly black. Spanish vocal vibrations zing all over. The usual faces of ordinary worn down tiredness gaze out like grazing cattle.

“You goin’ to college?” an overweight black woman with a little boy asks a group of young black guys in the line next to ours.

“No,” they reply.

A black woman wears a black hat with white letters that read “JESUS.” She’s missing a front tooth and talks in heavy Ebonics to the black males in front of her. The hat reminds me of a similar one I saw on the road in Texas. It was purple and read: “Jesus, don’t leave earth without him!”

I can't breathe, got a cold. I pop two Advil gel capsules.

“Yeah man, my supervisor on the phone was like ‘get your black ass back here.’ I was like, that’s not how you talk to me.” A black guy talking to friends as the smell of fried food dances in grey smoke from the dining area.

Pass through Milwaukee thinking of Wayne’s World. Movies have shaped my consciousness. The DVD generation. I can remember when they took over video cassettes. I was 16...a lifetime ago. Technology is moving so fast we don’t have a clue where we’ll be in a year. The world is shrinking, connections in the blink of an eye. It is time for the old world of countries to die, being born to a flagless one. It will of course take some time, but like Confucius say, “Journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” And that step needs to come down with a thunderous roar, shaking minds from old faith ushering in the new, yet old worship, to nature and the consciousness of the universe.

CHAPTER 13 MADISON

Walk around Madison, people sound like “Fargo.” It’s sunny and windy as hell. Bitter cold. It looks similar to Athens. The students aren’t back from break, a guy tells me. There are still plenty of young faces beneath wool stocking caps walking about, fingers gripping tall Starbucks coffees. Walking around campus, my attention focuses on a green and white flyer stapled to a cylindrical bulletin board. “January 27 Protest the War! Washington, D.C. bus tickets www.revoltingstudents.com.” Madison is known for having a liberal atmosphere. I haven’t seen any W stickers, so I know I’m not in Athens.

It’s funny how things repeat. The universe is a heart pump, in and out and back in again, the cosmic order of things. Mandalas.

At the bus station, which is closed, I wait outside for my 12:45 a.m. departure as I drink a blue Powerade and eat sun chips, the regs, thinking of my brief stay.

I watched Wisconsin beat Ohio State 72 – 69 in basketball last night. College kids everywhere are the same. Put on a helluva drunk, went home with a dark-haired girl named Rita, said her parents are big Beatles fans. She had a Gonzo tattoo, eyebrow and tongue ring. It was the medicine I needed. Feel much better after being with a woman, had a bad case of the highway blues. My cold is still with me, though.

The bus shows up. A few other people get out of their cars and board. White, overweight mid-50s bus driver rips my ticket. As I gear up for my 45 hour, 2,089-mile journey to Seattle—the longest of the trip.

“Jesus,” the driver laughs. “You’ve got a long ride. Heh heh heh.” He shakes his head. Looks a little like Friar Tuck. The lights on the bus won’t turn off, which is perfect for an overnight haul. I dose myself with NyQuil with hopes of passing out, the only humane option at this point.

The guy in front of me, annoying Minnesota accent, drunk – I can smell it, talks to his wife.

“Alright hun.” He giggles.

I sit up front, near the bus driver. It’s 5:45 a.m., and we’re approaching St. Paul as I struggle for Greyhound sleep – periods of semi-consciousness lasting 20 minutes or so before coming awake with a startle, then drifting back to the world beyond. The driver isn’t happy about repeating what he said over the intercom – which wakes me. The traffic doesn’t help matters either.

The driver mutters to himself and makes funny faces and hand gestures. “I can’t help it. I was born to think. I worked for the military, computer systems, before this stupid ass job, you know, the stuff that kills people. My grandmother could shift gears faster than this and she’s been in a casket for 25 years. I hate to be an ass, but I was born to think.” He shakes his head.

Everyone looks miserable as we wait to transfer to another bus. It’s 6:30 a.m. I get a tag for my luggage. Jesus, I’m tired. Feel like I’m in a concentration camp – or at least headed to one.

Black bus driver talks on his cell phone as we coast through rolling hills lightly-covered in snow. Burger King. Get a terrible breakfast grease sandwich and some coffee. Cross over frozen river. Endless fields of short yellow grass and fence posts. Small farm houses and silos. Many empty seats on the bus. One thing I’m noticing in all parts of the country, girls seem to

have a stud in one nostril. I think it's a Hindu thing that spread here and has become a fad. I like it.

South Dakota, not a damn thing around. Whole lotta nothin'. A man with a mustache plays a video game, one of those damn things that constantly beeps. Headphones on, listen to "Sounds of the Sitar" by Ravi Shankar. I gaze out at brown, black and white cows walking in a single file line. Odd. The rocking Greyhound lullaby makes it hard to stay awake. In and out of consciousness, pictures of blue clothes churning in a dryer. The bus is virtually empty. Stop at a Phillips 66 in the middle of nowhere South Dakota. I think we're a little past Sioux Falls. Get peanut butter crackers, green Pringles, pretzels, and a water. A white guy at the gas station is polite with an accented "thank you." People are smoking outside, though it's windy and cold as a penguin's toenail. Time change, 3:50 now 2:50 p.m. Visions of Custer and Black Elk. We're not far from Harney Peak. The ghost dance, indeed. Wounded Knee, just another forgotten blip in time. The sun disappears once again. I go to the bathroom, can't find the light. Use my cell phone. It feels like being in a metal outhouse in Baghdad. The bus hits a bump, an I.E.D. dud I guess, and I almost piss myself. I make it out of the silver sarcophagus dry as Egypt. Walk back, swaying like a chimp until I reach my seat.

Snow gently falls in Rapid City, South Dakota. A cop fishtails out of the median, hauling ass in the other direction. Guess he's bored. The land undulates like an ocean. Damn cold outside, stings the skin. What would motivate one to move out here? Everybody gotta make a living somehow somewhere I guess. The claiming and resettling of land. Where you are born can make all the difference, usually does. Different perspectives, always. Incest must be the thing out here in total desolation.

It's -10 degrees arriving in Gillette, Wyoming. I wait inside while they clean the bus. Snow is everywhere. People stand outside and somehow smoke. Unbelievable and yet not at all. Humans are strange creatures. Anything to make boredom subside in order to speed up the zoom of being. The power of addiction, the human way. The ones who get bored easily are normally the ones who lack creativity, imagination. Stale blood unable to understand art, and therefore life – like the administration in power now.

There's a slight delay in Billings, Montana. The baggage doors are frozen shut. The workers get it opened and transfer our luggage to a new bus – the only one goin' to Seattle and it's almost full. Snow everywhere, I can't see the road. White dirt piles high on all sides. Good thing the driver is a professional...I get sleep, or Greyhound sleep, knowing this comforting thought.

Stop in Missoula, Montana for a smoke break. Beautiful country. I'll come back one day in exploration.

My ears begin to pop winding through the mountain roads of Idaho. I listen for the sound of Hemingway's typewriter. The sun is bright. Stop in Spokane, Washington. Go to the bathroom. No one seems to wash their hands walking out of the crapper – a dirty white trash lookin' fellow with mustache and gut that could hide 10 babies walks right out the door from a stall. Maybe it's just the Greyhound code. Americans, according to Kerouac, all have dirty assholes anyway.

A little blonde boy kicks and punches the glass of a brown candy machine.

“You're going to go to jail if you keep that up,” someone chimes in.

“My daddy went to jail,” replies the four-year old.

I laugh a little and shake my head, because I actually expected to hear a comment like this.

A woman, early 60s or so, sits next to me. She's going to visit her son in Seattle, he writes for the newspaper there. I tell her about my adventures. We discuss how Barack Obama will hopefully become the next president. He seems like a human being instead of your regular politician swine. But I doubt a black guy with a Muslim-sounding name can get elected. This country is filled with hate.

CHAPTER 14 SEATTLE

A homeless guy goes through the garbage, another holds a cup and talks to himself as snow gently falls. I walk around in Pike Place Market, a fish throwing tourist haven that is a block away from the hostel. I walk around in thought through empty streets. Every once in a while change rattles. I look at my map, then look to the sky for the famous space needle. Every few blocks I look up to make sure I'm heading in the right direction. I did this one time with the Eiffel Tower in Paris, reaching my destination after hours of walking. It shouldn't take as long this time.

I go up in the needle. Good view as I contemplate time and my experience of it wondering what it would be like to continually be in the present like some beast. It seems like that is what my generation is going for. There are lots of Asians walking around. The atmosphere feels different from other parts of the country. More laid back. I can't put my finger on it. But different. I think of Kurt Cobain and Jimi Hendrix, both dead at 27. Only three years off for me. I get on the monorail heading downtown.

People are about, shopping bags and cell phone garble. Lots of homeless congregate in packs by shop doors.

"Bodies...The Exhibition" is in town. A giant advertising sign for the exhibit covers the inside of several windows. My mind begins to stir. I enter into the realm of living death.

People move in slow waves, eyes filled with wonderment. Lots of young families. The human body is quite amazing. It is a highly educational experience and I do a good bit of thinking. We live in an era where it is easier to learn than ever before. The complex, intricate

flow of veins and vessels to the heart, muscles, the brain. Makes you think what we are capable of doing. Will the good overtake the bad? In a species that advances most during times of war, the ominous feel of our own doom almost seems imminent.

Have a few drinks at an underground bar. A snowboarding DVD plays on a plasma screen behind the bar. Different sports rule out here, out west. America, many different landscapes, all breeding different personalities yet all formed in the same factory. I go to a few more bars, hear some awful music – no classification, just terrible. Find some decent jazz/blues type deal, then follow a crowd of good-looking ladies to a spot where music shakes the ground. I pay \$5 and walk in amused at the new scene. Booming loud heart-beat thumps, strange graphics, electric eels burning clouds vaporize in psychedelic mist on huge movie screens moving to the beat. Black lights, green twirling hypnotic laser lines. Feel like I'm at Andy Warhol's Factory and it's 1967. Booze is no good in a place like this. Most look like they're on stronger medicine, which seems appropriate in this bizarre atmosphere. My mind isn't numb or filled with enough explosions to handle the scene. I walk out, passing many sex shop stores – I noticed earlier that there are a lot in this town – on my way back to the hostel, which is next door to a peep show.

CHAPTER 15 PORTLAND

The cold wind whips my hair around beneath sun beams. Seems to be all white people stomping about, no diversity. The city is clean, fewer homeless people than the rest, but they're here, sitting outside key locations to optimize profits. I go to Powell Books, a four-story book store that takes up a whole city block. It's packed. Get a coffee and sit down to read some classics – "The Satires of Juvenal" and some plays by Euripides.

A lot of young girls have rings through the middle of their noses like a bull. Many wear red, pink or green dye in their hair. Different fashions out here, far different from the South. The vibrations are peaceful, the people seem smart, more in tune with the mystery.

Sitting at Greyhound, it's pretty big, nicer than most, not as depressing. It's also the Amtrak station.

"You have to be half nuts to join the Marines, and when you're done with basic training your whole reality has changed," says a short stocky brunette – 23 – who tells all she's a Marine.

Half nuts? I think. No, no, all or nothing.

"I got shot in the knee in Iraq, and was in Germany for a while after that."

She's not the first Marine I've encountered at a bus station. There is always at least one in fatigues, male or female, roaming about. Sailors too. All look very young.

A crazy looking guy walks by talking to himself.

"Suck my dick ho!" he mutters in a Tourette-like fit. After riding Greyhound for several weeks, you get used to seeing people talking to themselves.

A young guy tells another he's from Alaska, down here playing hockey.

Conversation fills the air. “Yeah, I plan to retire to my ranch, fish, ride my horses, shoot my guns...”

Board the bus at 10:00 p.m. from an empty station heading toward San Francisco. A 712-mile, 15-hour trip.

Cows, fields and mountains as the wheels turn. California. Transfer in Sacramento. I stand in line reading Celine’s “Journey to the End of the Night,” while mostly weathered white faces listen to the clock tick, tick.

CHAPTER 16 SAN FRANCISCO

Arrive in Oakland, smells of smog and skunk. Then cross a long grey bridge into San Fran. Pointed pyramid skyline and 1:20 p.m. sailboats. I think of Jack London. Construction of a new modern tower grows out of a field already full of windows. Growth never stops.

“Which bus should I take to 312 Mason St. Union Square?” I ask a woman behind glass in a ticket counter. Hop on long, accordion public bus for what am told will be a short ride. The bus driver tells me it’s only a few stops ahead as we go rolling down the road in quite electric fashion beneath beaming yellow light. Roads of silver cables and wires run parallel over the street giving energy. I arrive at the hostel. Meet a 24-year-old guy from Bulgaria who went to school in Canada, named Yassen. We met outside of the room in the lobby. He says he saw the Celine book, looked at my hair and knew I was the guy staying in his room.

We walk around Chinatown, which seems to be completely closed up and it’s only 7:00 p.m. Rain begins to fall hard, and we get drenched.

Back at the hostel, we meet our new roommate, Eden. He’s a 19-year-old, six-foot-five Israeli. He lives in New York, but flew to L.A., then drove up the Pacific Highway to check things out here.

Wake up, eat two cream cheese bagels and down a coffee – 50 cents, in the hostel kitchen with the guys. We all want to do different things, so we part and decide to meet back around 7:00 p.m. tonight.

I walk around in warm, cool sunny weather up and down steep hills thinking of earthquakes. There are many music halls and theaters. The architecture is distinct. Well, maybe

it's just the geography. Telephone wires crisscross connecting buildings, most of which are three stories high – in a residential area. Trees sprout from sidewalk concrete offering a little green.

San Francisco is the bum capital of America, so it seems. They're everywhere. Sleeping on cardboard, blankets, newspaper. If you are able to breathe five steps without getting hit up for dough, you're lucky. Keep your eyes straight, avoid eye contact. The beast knows no mercy and senses fear. Keep walking, it's worse than in Memphis.

"You can't take a picture, that's my uncle's store," a young black guy on a bike yells as he rolls after me.

"Yeah," I tell him without stopping my sunglass stride. He rides off.

I see a crack deal go down in a corner, the dealer's eyes flit around quickly above his creased, dirty face before the hand off.

After seeing this many homeless people, there is definitely something wrong. But, the majority I talk with don't seem to be just down on their luck. They're the dregs of society. Uneducated and unwilling to work. Granted, there are plenty who get kicked to the gutter by life. Most probably. They all have the same story, and after hearing it over and over, you become numb and heartless and I even find myself getting mad.

Get back to the hostel, shower and leave to get some drinks with my fellow travelers. The Metro is clean, feels like I'm at the airport. The floor is covered with clean grey carpet. The crowd is almost entirely white, wearing jeans and light jackets. A few read, some listen to iPod sounds. "She's going to go deaf," Yassen tells me, pointing to a girl in front of us with music blasting from her white headphones. One girl types on her black laptop computer. This is by far the nicest Metro I've been on, and I have seen a lot. We surface in the Mission district – where

things are supposed to be happening. We ask a young couple who look like nice people where a decent music place is. They point, telling us to go straight for two blocks.

Jazz at Amnesia, a small joint filled with numerous white folks and beards.

Unfortunately, not too many ladies, but enough to keep the mind occupied. I get a steamed beer and drink with delight. Yassen, who sounds a little like Borat – he says he loved the movie – gets into an argument with Eden about the recent bombings of Lebanon by Israel. The argument stops, Yassen goes to the bar.

“I hate when people argue about things they don’t understand,” Eden tells me as the saxophone player wails away.

We catch a bus back to the hostel after the show, all in good John Barleycorn spirits.

San Francisco, the Beats. Wandering around Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookstore, I listen to the winged words of the Beat poets, whose vocal vibrations still echo strongly around these parts. The souls of the greats forever dance in shaman-like spells. Jazz tunes and the feeling of change, that something can be done, that the new can overthrow the purulent rotting corpses of the failed generation that has come before. Whores to the mighty dollar rearing whores to the same trade. At least the majority, anyway. Or so it feels.

It’s been 40 years, almost, since the famed Summer of Love. Now just a gimmick for advertisers to capitalize. The love in this country seems to have vanished in Christian heaven. We must wait for the next life to find joy. Many souls have a problem with this, mine included. Where are we going, America? Why not acknowledge the free fall that is life? Always bound, and bound to self-destruct in horror we can’t yet conceive. Where is the fuel? Sleeping, waiting for the next dream. The dream they are taught will come in the next life. Our schools, institutions, the breeding grounds for mindless computers, good for tasks, but not for thought.

How can we better sell? Sell, sell, sell. We are what we experience. And for the vast majority, we are a culture of television experience. And this has infected other countries. The propaganda machine grows, controlling minds and the future will. Is the West destined to meet the East in return cycle of spiritual bliss? Perhaps. The minds are there, keys abound but eyes seem blind and ears long deaf to headphone universe on repeat. There are always good ones out there, but they are shadowed by the mob, which feeds on fear and hate. America, waiting to be buried under the ash of tomorrow for future generations to find.

Alcatraz, the Rock. You can feel the ghosts in this place. Lots of anger. I walk around on my headphone tour, gazing around at small cells that were once full. Get a good view of the city from outside. Wind sends my mind in thought. The laws of society are of the society in power. What is bad, good, crazy – they define. The belief system, right and wrong, punishment. In the old days, an eye for an eye, unless you could pay your way out. Well, I guess not that much has changed. The rich get away with more, always have, always will. Human souls run cheap, most anyway. As it is.

Get back on the ferryboat toward the wharf. I need a drink.

Haight Ashbury – the hippie womb. There's a Gap store on the corner, a symbolic tomb. A good and proper death to hold down the ghosts. The renaissance left this town decades ago. A few bars remain, but mostly shopping. Walk into a semi-crowded bar with Eden, grab a steamed beer, then get back on the bus headed for the hostel near the Tenderloin district – where you don't want to be by yourself at night.

“What has changed tonight compared to all other nights?” says a guy in Hebrew on the public bus after Eden tells him he's Israeli. This is something you say at Passover.

Wake up, cross the Golden Gate Bridge with Eden on way to Muir Woods. Redwoods tower to colossal heights. I look out for screaming Pterodactyls that might swoop down and grab me. This is definitely an ancient place. I drift back in time. It's a sunny day, yet dark and cool in the shade of these massive aged beasts of time.

I decide to take a break from old Greyhound to travel with Eden down the Pacific Coast Highway – the bus doesn't go down this road and this is unacceptable – to L.A.

We get the silver rented PT Cruiser out of the garage and hit the road. It's 7:30 a.m. with morning cloud and traffic...traffic is inescapable, rampant in America. More and more own cars, more and more people are born. As it is.

Ah, the smell of pine and ocean wind, azure water, some almost aqua-Caribbean. Nelly Furtado booms. Some Norwegian chick gave the CD to Eden, it's the only one we have and the radio doesn't work. Balls!

It's 57 degrees out – so the car says. I press a smooth black button sending the window zinging down like broken glass. Mountains on one side, Pacific on the other. Beautiful. I think the scenery is going to end around every corner but it just keeps going. Hours of eye-popping amazement. I feel alive today. Hot damn! The Big Sur! Nothing but good vibes. This is a good place to be. I think many of the world's problems could be solved if people could have experiences like this. The “ah” feeling of looking out at this vast miracle, the universe. The wonderment that transcends all cogitations. Funny thoughts of time, the cosmos, before, after and what will be. The wonder never stops. And why should it?

A few hours down, we see a parking lot filled with cars and must investigate. The beach is littered with hundreds of mammoth grey barking creatures, Elephant Seals. Massive beasts. They throw sand on their backs trying to get comfortable, squiggling around in the warm sand

attempting to get the bed sheets folded just right. Flipper hands reach and scratch, like us. In an age in which religion preaches man is better than the beasts, disaster is sure to loom. The black cloud of man's fallen nature. It's an absurd world. Millions of children indoctrinated with such fantastic lies, ingrained in the deep of consciousness, so when grown up, they will kill unless told otherwise. The infant mind, like the shaping of a feather pillow, is not hard to mold.

Pass by William Randolph Hearst's castle from a distance, too far to glimpse his ghost. I think of "Citizen Kane."

CHAPTER 17 LOS ANGELES

In traffic outside of L.A. near Malibu, the rosy sun melts away to wait for certain resurrection. Get to Hollywood, USA Hostel. People everywhere, beer everywhere, youth, good vibes, beautiful. Accents and excitement. The first hostel to have a pulse.

Throw my stuff in a room – top bunk, hop in the shower – the six-bed room has a bathroom and shower.

Go to some highfalutin' restaurant/bar type deal – it is someone's birthday – to meet Eden's friends. Expensive dress and perfumed lips converse in dim light. Lots of glass and glowing blue and orange objects, water fountain, all the fine qualities of posh modern Rome. Some things will never change. Good-looking people all around. Eden and the rest of the Israelis speak Hebrew, I'm left in the dark in contemplative observation. The rich act the same wherever you go. Heat lamps outside warm a gentle breeze. I converse with one of the Israelis, who is an architect, about Ayn Rand and Kafka.

“Creativity is a gift,” he tells me.

The guys in my room start to stir around 9:00 a.m. I get up as well. Lots to do. The hostel is situated between Hollywood Boulevard and Sunset Strip. I start walking toward the Whisky a Go Go, about three miles away, so I'm told. Sunshine, palm trees, cool breeze, perfect weather. Pass restaurants, bars, shopping malls with all the regular offerings. Fancy cars, convertibles, kids on skateboards, In-n-out Burger, billboards, motels, Ralphs, bookstores, art galleries, tattoo shops. Massive houses sit atop hills in the background. Lots of movie advertisements. The Comedy Store, gyms, House of Blues, Pink Dot. I finally reach the Whisky as I step down in

time. Forty years ago the Doors performed “The End” here, got fired and made a record that would help create an era.

Following the stars, I walk down Hollywood Boulevard back toward the hostel. What is the obsession with movie stars? Stars? Signatures, hand prints, footprints, the Kodak Theatre, mobs of tourists, young families.

Wake up to loud Spanish radio from construction workers outside my window. Sounds like it’s coming from inside my eardrum. I grab a mug of coffee in the hostel kitchen, which is packed with pajamas, young faces and various languages – all in good spirits. Meet Josh Voreau, a musician from Germany recording with Columbia Records. We drive around a bit, Beverly Hills, Rodeo Drive. Then to a hilltop to get a good look at the city. Los Angeles, one giant suburb. Hazy skyscrapers stand in the distance. I think of E.T. Some old tourists get off a bus and walk around. We hit the road, stopping at a café in West Hollywood to get some brunch. After taking our seats, we look around, look at each other and laugh.

“I forgot West Hollywood is the gay part of town,” Josh says.

There are plenty of straight people as well, and it doesn’t matter anyway. Good food, good coffee. Back in the car, Josh hands me a CD player and tells me to listen. It’s him. He plays the piano and sounds a bit like John Lennon. It’s good. He says he’s nervous because of how many records he must sell in order to stay on the label – something like 250,000.

I get out in Santa Monica. He’s got work to do in the studio.

There is definitely money in these parts. The ocean is across a highway at the bottom of a steep cliff. There’s a model shoot going on by some palm trees – she looks good, tan, California girl. I could live here. Lots of restaurants, shops, pubs and people. Some people ride by on

Segways, two-wheeled machines you stand on and can travel pretty fast. I belong on the beach, so I head down some stairs, crossing above the highway on a bridge.

Beautiful, 60 degrees, mountains, the smell and roar of cool Pacific salt mixed in dreams of delight. Most of my ocean dreams are of the Atlantic. East coast childhood. I think of Hilton Head and how we are all products of our own experience. Some homeless guys lie about on bright green grass under palm trees – that’s what I’d be doing, too.

Walking toward the pier letting my toes sift cool pale yellow grains of rock I notice something a bit odd. Flag draped coffins and thousands of crosses hammered into the sand. “Every cross represents an American soldier killed in Iraq,” a white sign reads. Spanish is written below it. A sign in the shape of America has the figures written in chalk – to deal with changing numbers.

America in Iraq:

Killed: 3,046

Wounded: 43,287

A sign beside it reads: “If we were to acknowledge the number of Iraqi deaths, the crosses would fill this entire beach.” Another sign reads: “Iraqis Killed 655,000+ since March 2003. Millions wounded. Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.”

Pictures and information about the dead are laid out on metal stands by a wood walkway next to the symbolic cemetery. Lots of names and ages, 22, 21, 19, 24, 34, 20...mostly young. People read the information, stare out at the crosses in silent thought letting the ocean breeze flow through their hair.

The crosses sit in the shadow of the Santa Monica pier. Sea gulls fly overhead. It is a chilling site. An attempt to bring the war to everyday consciousness. For Americans don’t think

about the war because they don't have to. Life is the same, no different than before. American flags flap in the breeze. There seems to be a lot of Europeans around. People fish off the side of the pier, others perform or sell things.

Kids build sand castles, run to the ocean, then back. Childhood heaven. Parents happily watch, trying to soak in the moment, for it is already gone.

"I'm goin' for a run, call me when you get it up," a young guy yells at his friend trying to get a kite up in the air.

"RICHARD!" The kite flies up immediately after the man starts heading out on his jog. This seems to be how it goes.

"Trick shot baby! Whooooo!!" Volleyball laughter.

"Tell her I'll call her," says a cell phone walker cutting through cement rollerbladers. A pack of slim blue and red bikers whizzes by. Many smiles under dark sunglasses. It's hard to be in a bad mood on the beach. Black, white, Asian, Indian, young, old, lots of diversity. It feels good, like America. I can't feel any tension like back in the South. The South is still extremely segregated and behind in the times. Religion is a powerful beast. So is tradition.

I walk down toward Venice Beach, barefoot and rolled up jeans. People take pictures to capture time. A large peace symbol washes away in the sand.

Kids and swing sets where the original Muscle Beach stood. Young laughter and mother chit-chat close by.

"Will work 4 marijuana," reads a sign on the Venice Boardwalk held by a guy beneath blonde dreads. He sits Indian style with clouds in his eyes.

"Be a pal, read my book...please," guy in dreads sits, copies of his book laid out on a table. He talks to a young woman. "It's hard to age when you're on the beach. I'm only 27."

There seems to be a lot of psychics in Venice, the boardwalk is packed with signs. “Doreena Psychic Palm Reading & tarot Cards, Gifted non-touching healer, Palm reader, TAROT.” Tents, tables, chairs scatter the pavement next to grass and palm trees. The beach yells from behind. Palm readings, why not? No crazier than the religions in power now, more peaceful too. As for me, I give offerings to the gods every once in a while in blood sacrifice like the Mayas. Most have customers with palms to the sky. Lots of people on skateboards. Anti-Bush signs everywhere. Booths with pamphlets, bumper stickers, CDs, websites. “Stop Bush! Constitutional Democracy! War is not the answer. War destroys family.”

Lots of people are out. The basketball courts are full, new Muscle Beach has one guy pumping himself. A loud hypnotic drum pounding echoes off buildings. A drum circle of at least 50 people bangs away, beckoning the sun to fall. People dance, some watch, others join in. All with hopes of releasing the soul. Airplanes soar in single file distance, out to where the earth curves.

The sun melts yellow to orange to red, bleeding into the ocean. Everybody stops what they are doing and walks toward the ocean, hypnotically gazing out in wonderment. It is very calming to watch the sun set over water. I need this more than a few times a year. Perhaps I’ll move here, or to another beach. Good atmosphere for thinking.

Walk into a bar on the crowded boardwalk to watch the end of the Colts’ playoff game – they beat the Patriots, advancing to the Super Bowl. Peacefrog, a Doors cover band, begins to play. Robby Krieger, the guitarist from the Doors, makes a special appearance to jam back in time.

Generations brought together through music. Energy pours through the human soul with rhythms that just feel right. The Doors, getting their start in Venice, were just becoming popular 40 years ago at this time. Music that shaped a generation and continues to mold minds.

I wait outside in the cold dark night for the public bus. I'm freezing in my T-shirt. The concrete bench is cold, graffiti sprayed everywhere. No one is around. Very desolate vibes. The first bus whizzes by without stopping.

"Thanks a lot, you bastard!" I yell, breath heavy with drink. Thirty minutes go by, I finally board. Forty minutes on the bus, get off and transfer for my final 20 minute ride into Hollywood. Only a few others on the bus, all sit silently. This is not a town to be in without a car. Well, riding the bus isn't bad, you just have to be patient. So I do well with my Greyhound experience, and the journey goes fast. The drink didn't hurt either.

Downtown L.A. "You should get back before dark," one of the hostel workers tells me as I walk out the door with bus instructions. Hop on the public bus for a 40 minute ride into town. I buy a day pass for \$3. I come up a quarter short. A Mexican lady offers to help, but I find the fourth quarter and put it in the slot as the bus rumbles off in a cloud of smog. People talk, look in general to be happy, noon is always a good time of the day. Young Mexican girls converse rapidly, mixing Spanish and English – seems to be the new American vernacular. Tall buildings, lots of Mexicans and homeless people. Downtown L.A. feels drearier than most – except Memphis. The shadows of the buildings, roaring cars and trade as McDonald's doors forever flap. A dead town, worn out people just trying to make a living, mostly Mexican faces. Typical doughnut hole American city. Two Mexican guys play some sort of game on the sidewalk. Tossing quarters to see how close they can get them to the crack. Amusing.

Back at hostel. “You look British,” the very attractive, black-haired hostel girl working the front desk tells me. We converse for a minute as I sip a Sierra Nevada. “Yeah, the whole point of staying in hostels is for all the wild and crazy sex,” she tells me.

Well, for me this was not the case. I ended up dancing too long with good old John Barleycorn, waking up hung over feelin’ like a degenerate sot. Can’t ponder it too long, for it would be a shame to miss the bus and throw my schedule off.

Board the public bus.

“He’s a millionaire,” an old guy comments. “That’s why he rides the bus.”

A Mexican swigs what smells like Tequila from his bag. The bottle is hidden ‘cept for the top, which is barely visible under the man’s thick black handlebar mustache.

“I say ‘fuck it,’” a black Rasta says to a black man who he’s seen on the bus before. “Every teem I git high I tink of you playin’ with dat string.”

The bus is all Mexican. Two black guys and myself being the only one with blue eyes.

Vegas Bound. I busted my ass to catch an earlier bus leaving the downtown Greyhound, missed it, got on a bus that went straight back to the Hollywood station I just left. But to hell with it. On the bus now, and that’s all that matters. L.A. hills, sunshine, California, a Garden of Eden, but only if you got the dough, as Woody Guthrie sings about.

“Welcome to the Mojave,” a sign reads as the bus rumbles through the desert. “Goats for sale,” with pink and black graffiti that says “shoot me” underneath on a piece of square wood.

Stop in Barstow, bus driver forgets to close luggage doors, but a passenger reminds him. Red graffiti on the side of a building reads, “most crooked sheriffs in U.S.A.”

The sun begins to fade behind brush and red hills. Casinos dot the highway.

CHAPTER 18 LAS VEGAS

Arrive to lit up nighttime Vegas, downtown, January 23. The State of the Union Address beams from a plasma television in the Greyhound station. It is just beginning. Weary faces look up from their metal seats listening to President Bush. “I congratulate the Democrat majority...”

I put my things in a locker. Nate – my friend who lives in Vegas and works at Enterprise, the car rental place, is having dinner with his boss or something. I can’t stay and watch Dubya, too depressing. I’ll read his enlightening words via transcript. All in the Greyhound audience would fall below the category of middle class, but I’m sure a lot still voted for him.

I’ve never been to old Vegas, so I go out in exploration. A high, white roof spreads out between casinos creating a tunnel. Lights blink and flash reflections in all directions. Walk into Binion’s under lines of baby blue pulsing lights. Cigarette smoke pours from creased faces forming cloud cover for chirping slot machines and clanking quarters. Almost all here are over 65, mindlessly dropping quarters in automatic fashion, hoping for a big winner. I decide to try my luck. Win \$30 bucks after playing a dollar, then walk to the window and cash out beneath the metal bars. Feeling on top of things, I buy some cigars – Romeo y Julieta. This area is not where the big spenders go. Cheap slots for low income wages to blow. This is where Nate says he spends a lot of time.

Night of the living dead out here. Somehow they’ve managed to crawl from their caskets with handfuls of stored money. Zombies on stools, pushing buttons for hours. Metallica’s “Nothing Else Matters,” plays from overhead speakers as I walk the white covered street.

“Whatcha ya talkin’ to those young girls for? You think they want to hear you?” An old woman talks to her old husband who was joking with some young nice-looking girls. Obviously struck a nerve.

Nate pulls up in his silver Chevy pickup with chrome brush guard. I toss my rucksack in the back. Stop at a liquor store to get some beer – Beck’s.

Get to Nate’s apartment in a giant white building 20 blocks or so from the strip, behind the Wynn Hotel.

“Fuckin’ juked him out, that was nasty!”

“Red card? That motherfucker!”

“I just missed a penalty kick.”

I listen and watch Nate and his friend play FIFA soccer on the new X-box 360 as we pass the pipe around. Feels like college worthlessness again. I never got into video games, and still don’t play them. But it felt good to relax, have a few beers on a comfortable couch. Greyhound can be damn rough on your back.

Technology generation. No need to read or think, amusement is always around, and that has crippled a whole generation of youth. Never time to wonder about the magic miracle of being, living, experiencing life. Minds shaped by television, graphic video games. The unborn dead walk in mass numbers while the ones who know hide. Even though we are indeed living in a time where we are advancing at an unfathomable rate. Plenty of good is going on in the world. But socially, the world is still lagging, and technology, ironically, is holding us back. We are losing touch with basic human bonds and spirituality. As it is.

Cars zoom by, a few Mexicans wait for the bus as I walk under the monorail toward the strip. Perfect weather, cool wind breathing in cloudless air. I sip a Bud Light and watch the

madness of wonderland loonytuneville Las Vegas. America's playground where debauch is the style. I must indulge.

"I can't believe I lost all that money. It's okay, I get paid today so I'll be able to pay you back," a guy chats under gold flashing lights.

"You know I hate litterbugs," a man says, bending over to pick up some gum with a piece of paper in front of the Bellagio. "Grave diggers. Bitches with big ole fake titties, must be nice."

Plastic smiles and tight pants. Friendly women zoom about with snake eyes spotting the best stacks of chips. No clocks in the labyrinth.

"Hunter Thompson." A guy sees my shirt, a gonzo fist, and explains the meaning to his wife as they walk by me. The couple, probably in early thirties.

Homeless are everywhere, most don't ask for money, just sitting down with cardboard signs.

Walking over one of the street bridges, a young white guy holds a sign and wears an eye patch. "Back from Iraq with one eye, government won't help, will you?"

Have time to kill before boarding my 5:40 a.m. bus to Salt Lake City. Nate has to work early, so he leaves for home around 1:00 a.m. after several rounds of drink. I seek entertainment, so grab a cab to Treasures, a very, very top-notch strip joint. The place is huge, two levels and is packed. Many ladies walk about, the best of the best. I grab a Jack on the rocks, sip, look around and think. These ladies make bank.

"You should have got a massage or gone to a whore house, both would have been cheaper and better," a black cab driver tells me riding to the bus station. I'm not drunk, but ain't feelin' bad either. Have about an hour before the bus leaves. A dozen or so people walk around. A dirty-looking white guy comes up to me and starts talking. He's a friendly guy, tells me he just

got out of jail and is looking to start over. A call comes on over the intercom asking people to take their tickets out for a check.

“Gotta go,” he says, turning toward the door.

“Like they say on the *Price is Right*, ‘come on down.’” The bus driver is in good spirits. White guy, white hair, must be at least 70. Christ. They seem to get older with each trip.

Snow and mountains as I gaze out the window in semi-conscious blur, eyes open and close like saloon doors at peak hour. The powerful pull of sleep brushing my mind yet it cannot seem to take hold. The roaring bus is like a kicking bull as the alcohol wears down and the sickness of debauch sets in.

CHAPTER 19 SALT LAKE CITY

Arrive at 3:20 p.m., throw my stuff in a locker and hit the bathroom. A black man is singing and shaving.

Out of the bus station, the air is frigid, chunks of ice gather on corners. A few people walk the streets. I grab a coffee, a beautiful tall brunette works behind the counter. There are good looking girls everywhere I go.

Not much here, more homeless people, cold weather, signs of a past Olympics. Give a homeless guy a few bucks and the usual “thanks, God bless you” return. I have to get back on the bus at 8:15 p.m., and I want to stay the hell away from Greyhound for as long as possible. It’s just depressing to stay at a Greyhound station for long periods of time.

Back at Greyhound. “Get me some motherfuckin’ food from that motherfucka, sheeee-it,” a wide woman shouts as I take a seat and begin to read Celine.

No one is ever happy to ride Greyhound. All look like waiting for the big sleep. Perhaps we all are in our own way. I climb on board yet again, settling in for my 592-mile, 10 hour overnight haul.

CHAPTER 20 DENVER/BOULDER

Arrive in Denver at 6:35 a.m. It's snowing, white winter fog as I attempt to find out where the hell I catch the bus to Boulder, where my friend Eliot lives. The lady at the Seven Eleven gives me wrong directions as I get coffee with dire attempts of obtaining a reasonably conscious state. I figure out the right way. Thought I was going to end up face down in a snowy gutter for a moment. Everything is white. I go underground, wait for an hour before the bus arrives. The tires slip on the ice. "Be nice if they sanded the roads," the bus driver says.

Finally get to town. University of Colorado students walk about outside. I gaze out the window looking for my friend to pull up in his gold Acura.

Pull into his small house a few blocks from downtown. I throw my stuff in his room.

"Hey bus scum, will you hand me the bong, the one on the right," Eliot orders. He walks outside, loads it up with snow so the tokes will feel cold and refreshing.

We leave to get a decent breakfast to start the day. I feel delirious and can barely walk straight.

Back at the house, Eliot and I talk about how messed up the world is, and always has been, and will be. His younger brother is in the 82nd Airborne in Afghanistan right now and is virtually guaranteed to go to Iraq.

"Yeah, they shout kill, kill, kill when doing calisthenics," Eliot tells me, describing his brother's graduation. "Everybody at the graduation ceremony was poor, mostly white trash. The general's speech was all this pro-war anti-liberal garbage. It's a different world where these kids come from."

Go to a Nuggets basketball game. This is the first NBA game I've attended in six years, and it is crowded. It's mildly entertaining; I don't really care about sports any more. I look around at the people, mostly white crowd, upper class. Seats aren't cheap. We got ours from a scalper for \$20 each. I got profiled at the door because of my long hair and side burns. I was the only one who had to empty pockets and stand to the side. Amusing. A bit stoned, I gaze around at the ball bouncing spectacle. Humans, strange beasts.

Cross the continental divide after going through the Eisenhower Tunnel and arrive at Copper Mountain on a cloudy day. Snowboarding ain't easy, I fall on my ass all day trying to learn the rhythm. Though I'm able to stand quickly, I have difficulty turning, so confidence is very low. And like anything in life, to do something right, you must be confident. Snowboarding is expensive. This is an area for the rich. There is definitely a class divide here. It takes money, and lots of it, to come out here. But it's packed, for the rich grow richer on the backs of the poor. For there can be no rich without them.

Colorado is a beautiful state. It feels good to be in this high altitude.

Anvils of snow blanket the sky covering narrow mountain roads. The bus goes full speed to Santa Fe. Light from a full moon reflects off the snow, creating an eerie hollow glow. Pass over deep gorges on snowcapped bridges. Sitting in the front, I begin to go through what I should do when the bus hits a patch of ice and goes careening over the edge. Maybe duck down under the seat, lock my legs around the bars to keep from rolling to the ceiling. Yeah. Pass through Taos. It's snowing like crazy, can't see the road. We stop barely long enough to open the doors; I can tell the driver is scared we might get stuck. And getting stuck would be a bummer.

CHAPTER 21 SANTA FE/ALBUQUERQUE

Santa Fe, just shops under adobe roofs for shit-hoarding tourists. The Native Americans sell their goods outside on the street like the second-class citizens they are. Dark brown, creased faces, hover over cracking joints feeding rapid fingers making bead creations. Snow begins to lightly fall. Not much to Santa Fe. Lots of shops and Indian art. Unique building structures like you'd imagine.

I walk around for a few hours, then get on the bus headed toward Albuquerque, an hour and a half away. It takes two hours though. We get caught in traffic. America's roads seem to be full of exhaust.

Old Route 66 runs through the heart of town, memories of an America long gone. I think of Billy the Kid riding around on his horse in true American legend fashion.

The bus to San Antonio is four hours late. I miss my connection in El Paso – it left at 3:50 a.m. Arrive at 5:00 a.m., catch a bus at 6:25 a.m. Thirty minutes after leaving, the bus pulls over at a border patrol stop. Two Border Patrol guards get on the bus.

“If you're not a citizen of this country, please have your documents ready.” He then repeats this phrase in Spanish. Drug dogs go berserk outside the window. The officer gets back on, reports that drugs have been found. They search for the person, but can't find him or her. An hour drips by. We finally begin to move, rolling past exciting Texas landscape of dirt and brush on an endless repeat.

“When you old, shit happens,” says an old black lady. “Young bitties runnin' 'round, glad I'm old.”

CHAPTER 22 AUSTIN

Don't get to San Antonio until 11:00 p.m. or so, too late to go to the Alamo like I planned. Board a bus for Austin. Arrive at 1:30 a.m., grab a taxi for 6th street, the main drag of bars. College kids stumble around drunk in and out of bars and pizzerias. I go back to the bus station. No place to stay, my friend has fallen asleep. I make a bed on five metal seats using my heavy jacket as a cushion/blanket. CNN blares from a plasma television to a few zombies sitting upright. Hard to sleep with powerful electric lights beaming into my eyeballs. Dream finally whispers in my ear, but only for a little while. Wake up at 8:00 a.m., walk to an IHOP across the street. White cowboy hats, families, T-shirts. The smell of bacon, eggs, sausage, and grease, the good stuff.

K.D., a girl I've known since high school, and I dress up to go to Carnival, a Brazilian style Mardi Gras held at the convention center. I wear a colorful red, gold, black and blue sequined mask and a red and black jester's suit that is silky soft. It kind of looks like a dress, but, whatever, it's time to get weird with it. K.D. dresses in a revealing, scandalous salsa dress emphasizing her voluptuous body. Booze and nakedness as drums pound and protoplasm shakes. A true Bacchic ceremony, wild souls. It would not be wise to sneak up on frenzied creatures in the middle of such a sacred ceremony. Most revel in the weird. Escapism is the human way. Some walk around in plain clothes. What's the point? The crazy ones always have more fun.

Hung-over, somehow get on the bus at 8:00 a.m. K.D. wakes me up, calls Greyhound so they won't leave, hauls ass and gets me to the station. A miracle. My head feels as if one hundred

little iron-fisted puss-filled rotting monsters are digging for gold behind my eyes in true human greed fashion. I lay my head back on the dirty cushion, close my eyes and try not to think.

Super Bowl Sunday, February 3, Colts vs. Bears and I'm on the bus headed toward New Orleans. Stop in Baton Rouge for an hour. I don't really care who wins, to be honest. The Super Bowl has become more about sales than the actual game. People go on and on about the commercials. Makes my stomach churn. Brainwashing on a mass scale. Of course, beer commercials rule the day, for alcohol is the American way. Though talk about other competition drugs, such as marijuana, you might get locked up. We need to keep the country free of things that make you become pacifistic. Violence, anger, dumbness, all part of the American dream – capitalism at its greatest. There is no stopping the American dream. The richest one percent own more of the world now than ever before. The gap is almost unfathomable. The general wickedness of the human species. Step on whoever gets in your way on the path to riches. God bless America...and no one else.

“Before you die, you gotta...it gonna catch up with you, disrespecting god,” a black guy preaches in the Baton Rouge station. “Be as humble as a child. One day you gonna wish you would've been. I'm not gonna lie.”

“Get outta here with that nonsense before I knock you out,” the young black Greyhound lady yells at him from behind the counter. The sunset is a magnificent orange. It melts away behind trees and metal.

The bus driver jokes with people as we pull into New Orleans. He overheard some of the riders say they were rooting for the Bears.

“The Bears are losing, Colts winning, just so you know. But I know you in the back with them cell phones already know that. If it weren’t for you I’d be drivin’ a truck, UPS or something, so ride Greyhound.”

“Thank you bus driver, but you sure did take a long time gettin’ me home. I know it wasn’t your fault,” a black lady tells him stepping off the bus. People seem happy to arrive. I get a \$7 taxi to my friend’s place and catch most of the uneventful last quarter. Colts win.

CHAPTER 23 NEW ORLEANS

Scott – a college friend and Tulane grad student – and I drink a few beers and talk of what has been. He lives in uptown, near Tulane. He almost stayed for Katrina, said he was going to have a hurricane party, but ditched at the last second.

We leave to go to Cooter Brown's Tavern and Osyster Bar, 509 S. Carrollton Avenue. The cooks are so drunk they can't see, and are rude bastards. We get burnt burgers an hour after ordering, but the beer is good – always is.

This is my first time back to the great city since Katrina. Murders and drug deals are rampant in the poor sections of town – so I read in the paper. I don't see those parts. The rest looks pretty much the same as I remember it. There is a little construction replacing ravaged buildings, and you can see water lines on downtown walls. It's amazing how high the water got.

New Orleans is a unique place. It looks exactly like you'd picture it. Has a very Old South feel. Old architecture, monuments of Robert E. Lee and General Beauregard. Mardi Gras preparations are everywhere. The first parade was Friday night. Mardi Gras is chaotic, but a helluva time. I went in 2004 to enter the weird. I got punched by a cop – didn't get arrested though.

New Orleans, helluva a town. It is a separate country, U.S. laws do not apply.

A grizzled white man sits puking on a Bourbon Street gutter on a warm afternoon. Scott and I drink Hand Grenades, this grain alcohol drink that will get you feelin' fine in no time. Strip joints are all over. People are out, but not too many. We pop to a bar to watch a band as we sip

our drinks. Walking along the Mississippi, visions flood my mind. The river is damn wide. I've crossed it many times on this journey.

Scott and I listen to some Dr. John, good New Orleans music, drinking Jack and Cokes and a few beers to warm the belly. We feel like chillin' tonight, so head to Dos Jefes, a cigar bar that's nearby. We drink Jack on the rocks, puff cigars and listen to a good acoustic guy strum his guitar. Good night.

The New Orleans Greyhound station is large, like an old gym or airplane hanger. Lots of open space. Hung-over for the umpteenth time, I leave New Orleans at 9:30 a.m. for Miami, 961 miles in 24 hours.

CHAPTER 24 MIAMI

Get to Miami around 11:00 a.m. I hop in a cab. “South Beach,” I tell the man. I don’t know where the hostel is, but I have a general idea. Twenty dollars down, I find my hostel in the heart of things two blocks from the aqua-colored ocean. Lots of fancy dress and slick cars. Everyone look as if they spend hours in front of a mirror making sure they look good before going on a jog. The whole town has a techno-pulse. Beats thump out of every shop. Lots of Spanish in these parts. This city vibes in a unique way.

Construction cranes dot the sky like modern dinosaurs. The city in total development. Rivers of money up to the neck. The smell of plastic. This is material heaven. A place to show how much shiny shit you can afford to purchase. The showoff, shit-hoarding capital of America – even beating out L.A.

I buy a Corona six-pack and hit the white sand of South Beach. The splash of crystal clear waves soothes the soul. Happy family faces jump around. Some women lie about topless. Lots of good-looking people here. A man jabbers on his cell phone in business conversation. The beach is a nice setting for an office. The smell of gasoline as jet skis fly by pounding the wake in engine roar. The wind twirls my hair as I hang loose, focusing on the moment at hand. For it will serve me well when my mind needs a vacation. Moments like these last an instant and eternally.

I meet some guys from Argentina, Buenos Aires, back in my hostel room. They work at Disney World. We talk with John Barleycorn a bit, then follow him to a bar. The road has worn me down, and so has the drink. I bale early – 1:00 a.m., to crash.

I head out of Miami at 9:20 p.m. Supposed to get to Charleston around noon tomorrow. A 16-hour, 646 mile trek. The bus is finally starting to get to me. I am ready to travel by different means.

Arrive in Orlando at 2:40 a.m. and have to get off the bus while they clean it. My sunburn is killing me. Bodies are scattered everywhere in attempts to sleep. It's a depressing scene. Baggage, dark light, little conversation, droopy faces, headphones, and impossible to sleep.

Get to Jacksonville at 6:00 a.m. Feel like I drowned in Miami and woke up here in this dismal bus station reality. I chew gum, and watch the first morning rays of light beam through the windows. Get back on the bus, head out at 6:45 a.m.

Transfer in Savannah, 9:30 a.m. An hour layover.

"Better not have missed my fucking bus," a dirty white trash looking guy says waking up. A young black guy in an army coat sits listening to music.

"You in the service?" a middle-aged black man asks.

"Yeah, goin' back to my fort in Louisiana."

"Have you been to Iraq?"

"Yeah."

"I hate to see brothas' go."

"Yeah, someone has to do it."

CHAPTER 25 CHARLESTON

Charleston, 12:50 p.m., a city rich with history. The cannons at Fort Sumter are now silent. The island is no more where Robert Gould Shaw fell, leading the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry Regiment, to its doom. I feel the strong sensation that the Confederate flag still flies here. Clouds hang low as the sun tries to break on through. Lots of people are out walking. It's pretty warm. I begin to sweat. Since I'm running behind schedule, I only have a couple of hours to explore. I have to get to Macon for my friend's wedding.

"It's a shame about Anna Nicole, pretty girl," the cab driver says taking me back to the bus station.

"What? She died?"

"Yeah, it's all over the news, nonstop."

News, what news? Every channel talks about the death of Anna Nicole Smith. Her death, by prescription drugs, is getting far more coverage than the 3,000 dead in Iraq, or any war death, for that matter. Goes to show what newspapers and the rest of the media are worth today. Have to flip past the front-page pictures of fools to find out what is going on in the world, which is far down the line in the media's concerns. The almighty dollar has vastly impacted the Fourth Estate, if you still want to call it that. Large corporations fueled by the rich control America, and the world. Journalism has deteriorated to an unthinkable state. News agencies today are no better than the rest of the whores out there trying to sell their souls for a buck. Getting information, the truth of what is happening in the world, is far, far down the list.

CHAPTER 26 MACON

I get to Macon around 11:00 p.m., walk across the street to get out of the cold and call a cab – the Greyhound station is closed.

“I stand with Jesus,” reads a guy’s shirt, passing me as I enter the gas station.

Get to the Sleep Inn, first thing I notice, the Ten Commandments prominently displayed in the front lobby for all to gaze upon. Yep, back in Georgia alright.

Wake up early, the wedding party is going paint balling. I feel like Audie Murphy, running around shooting people, living out my American war fantasy.

The wedding is a mixed Baptist/Catholic ceremony. It lasts forever, over an hour. Kile, the groom, faints in the middle. I almost do, too. Cheesy songs and other bizarre rituals giving thanks to Jesus. Might as well sacrifice a bull to Zeus, it would do the same thing – not to mention it would be more entertaining. For what we really deep down want to see is the spilling of blood. It is quite fascinating. Humans don’t change.

Riding back, feels good to be in a car again. Hung-over, for I put on a helluva drunk, like everybody else at the open bar. No more bus...at least for a little while.

I get back to my apartment in Athens, a Jesus flyer is stuck on my door. Fitting.

CONCLUSION

The journey is over for me now, a second childhood left behind as the world rotates and I along with it. But the road and visions will stay in my mind, picture memories carving out reality for the rest of my days like a master craftsman chiseling in Florence. The thirst for knowledge and experience, as well as book-born curiosity about life traversing America's roads, led me to travel the country in order to glimpse pictures of what is happening in this window of time. I chose Greyhound to be my guide, surrounding myself with constant human contact wherever I went. The long hours on the bus gave me time to look at myself, my dreams and hopes to better understand what it is I am searching for on my personal quest through time. No one else can live your life, once the door has been illuminated. It is up to you to break through.

I have now seen more of America than most have or ever will. From Marietta, Ga., to Nashville, Tenn., to Birmingham, Ala., to Memphis and Dallas and up to Kansas City. Passing through St. Louis headed toward Cincinnati. Down to Charlotte and up to Washington, D.C., New York City, Boston. Over to Chicago, Madison, Seattle, then down to Los Angeles, Vegas, Salt Lake City and Denver. Santa Fe to Austin, New Orleans, through Mobile to Miami, up to Charleston, S.C., where the Civil War began, then across to Macon, Marietta and back to Athens. Yes, through every region, dialect and dance, sparkling glimpses of America whispered in my ear telling a story of what the country is, and offering hints as to where it might be going. I have been in the middle of nowhere in every region of the country, and open space makes up the vast majority.

A 67 day journey, 14,026 miles, 39 states, through snow, rain, plains, deserts, mountains, blue and grey skies. I gazed dream-like into the azure, mesmerizing Pacific, crossed the Mojave Desert, went snowboarding in the Rockies, made it through Texas, drank grain alcohol on Bourbon Street, gazed into the aqua Miami Atlantic, and stared out at Fort Sumter.

America is a vast land brought together through technology, shared visions, dreams, heartbreaks, disappointments and dirt, but also a land of shared hopes. I found a manufactured culture of gaudy outlet shopping malls and fast food, a culture ruled by television and other forms of advertisement propaganda. Technology continues to shrink the world as the population spike towers higher and higher. And although I found different regions of the country to be unique, I also found an overall theme – material goods are coveted and chased and sought after more than living life. America is a land in which every culture from around the world comes to lose its culture, fading into a ubiquitous, same-same image. Culture and spirituality are essential for the human mind, and both seem to be on the way out.

America is not what it used to be, though everything must change as time ticks and melts down the river. We are no longer brought together by a shared history. World War II and Vietnam still weigh heavily on America's consciousness, but the population has bulged and now includes large numbers of people who have no ties to these events, which to the masses are little known, if known at all. Technology, cell phones, computers that become obsolete soon after they are unboxed – we are entering anew into uncharted waters. But human beings never really change, and the future map has already been drawn and lies in the past. Generations quickly forget the ills of yesterday, eager to repeat and then apologize. Or forget.

I heard many different accents during my journey, and sensed different vibes in the various states. Seeing and hearing cultures from around the country allowed me to focus the images in my mind that were once fuzzy. The picture is clearer to me now, more real.

I saw huge class divides, desperate people and people without worries. I went from talking to lower-class Greyhound riders to bar-hopping with upper-class travelers. It is not that I was unaware of class differences, but there are some things that require you to get down in the trenches in order to be able to see. The impact of seeing so many grotesque ills while traveling in the world's richest society has stirred something in my guts that won't go away. My feeling is that there is work to do, and it will always be this way.

In the previous pages, I tried to reveal glimpses of my journey to give snapshot images of a massive country with many different climates, cultures, scenery and faces. This was an exploration, an adventure with the goal of discovery. Though many of my discoveries were not new to me, some were profoundly startling and opened my mind from its warm slumber.

I can now feel an energy, in myself and – surprisingly – in others, that I couldn't before. Change is in the air. This trip confirmed many ideas I already had about the machinery of society. But now I feel a strong need to act, to contribute, to get others to look around beyond their own comforts. I want to travel and experience, learn, understand, explore with open perspectives in order to write. And by writing, to teach. Travel, I feel, is what opens one's eyes.

The American Century is over, and the course of the 21st seems to be heading in the wrong direction. But the trip has shown me that the point of no return has yet to pass. The will to do good, the right thing, is a human quality that never fully dies. In order to birth a new renaissance, consciousness awareness must reach the masses. This trip shook my mind hard, past all the books and everything that I had previously known and disliked about society. By being on

the road and sleeping on buses and in bus stations, I was able to witness things that others only read about or are happily oblivious to. People of all classes need to do more than just feel, though. It is impossible to escape the destitute, crying souls drinking from concrete gutters. We could all just drift along in our own dreams, oblivious to the plight and pain of others. But I have felt, and feel more strongly on the matter now, that we must all contribute, and teach others around us how to live in this world like human beings instead of rabid monkeys gnawing on their own bleeding skulls.

The story of my journey is an attempt to break through to an awareness that dances in front of our faces. There is knowledge there that we often have a hard time seeing. We don't know where we are going, but change and evolution are sure to happen. That is the only certainty. And that is good.

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NOTES

¹ Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, "Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), 740.

² Norman K. Denzin, *Performance Ethnography Critical Pedagogy and the Politics of Culture* (London: SAGE Publications, 2003), 14.

³ Tom Wolfe, *The New Journalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 16.

⁴ Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Wolfe, Thompson, Didion, and The New Journalism Revolution* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2006), 7.

⁵ Pewcenter, <www.pewcenter.org/doingcj/>

⁶ Norman K. Denzin, introduction, 11.

The United States is a very diverse country. At 450,385,000, the US is the 4th most populated country in the world. It has 50 states and is the 3rd largest country in the world. The US got its independence in 1776. It had a rough start but 200 years later, it became the most powerful country in the world by GDP and military might. In January 2001, Bill Clinton (D) left office and was succeeded by George W. Bush (R). On September 11 2001, the twin towers were brought down by Al Queda. In the december The book features essays by African American studies scholars who explore how film, drama, fiction, performance art, graphic novels and philosophical discourses represent or fail to represent slavery, and the relationship of slavery's legacy to the 21st century. Impact of Slavery. "There is a conversation being staged across cultural media that speaks to the way in which black cultural production's preoccupation with the historical era," says Patterson, who authored the book's conclusion and a chapter on the 2013 film. "There is a conversation being staged across cultural media that speaks to t These are notes on ideas and concepts I found interesting " not a comprehensive summary of the book. Buy the book " Unlike Sapiens and (to a lesser extend) Homo Deus, 21 Lessons feels like a " During the last century technology has been distancing us from our bodies. We have been losing our ability to pay attention to what we smell and taste. Instead we are absorbed in our smartphones and computers.