

THE RETURN OF EZRA CHRISTIAN

1 The Return of Ezra Christian

Across the Sacramento valley and into the Sierra
traveling east, out of California
toward my past

The great coliseum of San Francisco Bay and Pacific sky,
impromptu fabulous jazz in a Southland hotel bar,
bluesy Chicago nights and the sport of kings at Arlington,
working for a living.

Oldest Daughter at the gate of womanhood,
the first melancholy glimpse of wisdom,
moving meditation of Tai Chi and long walks
and riding my Harley-Davidson above Crystal Springs.

Myriad jeweled faces on the Grand Canyon of the Colorado,
Mojave jets strafing Interstate 10, another time to
ride down from Crater Lake through Klamath timber on
high country lava flows where the Modocs killed Canby.

To my Uncle's, wise old gnome of the mountain forest,
brewer of the finest beer that ever satisfied a summer afternoon,
Rogue River sculptor,
depression smart guy, spent the world war on a seaborne carrier
of fighter planes and fated young air warriors,
then a quarter century in a steel mill, hard hot work well done
all duty to country and family, brother to my mother
who turned my eye to the stars and my mind from my self,
Tommy's duty to soul this Oregon freehold along gentle Limpy Creek
which waters his own Josephine County garden grave.

Ventura to Big Sur, the Golden Gate to Six Rivers,
broke in Reno and drunk in Nevada City,

no journey of mine yet took me near the hometown stretch.

Now, but for the continental crossing to Daytona,
that late winter pilgrimage of hard weather and long riding,
a return, after these many years, to Houston.

Concrete and glass, steel spires rising from the coastal plain,
vast, humid sprawl of bayou and freeway beyond the desert
Texas, Home!

Big two-wheeler rolling me somewhere across America
so the home I leave is the home to which I return,
brief passage of days and miles, inner quest of dharma

Not a quest for the tokens of youth nor the icons of wisdom,
 but a passage from youth to--whatever lies beyond youth...
 Knowledge, memory, experience, all packed to take along.

Youth to be consumed like gasoline and beer, facile resources,
 part of the fuel to make this Southwest Passage
 from what has been destroyed to what will be created.

A passage out and back,
 from love and home to home and love,
 a thing to live through, ride through,
 to be the only witness of.

Since the instant of departure I am only returning,
 moment by moment through the approaching past
 till back to now I tread the receding future.

Unbroken symmetry of wheel and road, fuel and distance,
 woman and home, man and machine, child and knowledge,
 voice and song, mind and world: each life and every journey!

2 The Cathedral and the Square

Lakers-Pistons game three on the big screen
 in the lounge of the La Fonda Hotel.

I shall offer libation to bring a Laker victory,
 and treat myself to a few beers, road-thirsty,
 in celebration of three days and twelve hundred miles.

Good medicine for the lonely rider!
 I am well-lodged and happy in this ancient city

Santa Fe, home of the finest Southwestern craftsmen
 scene of their greatest art
 jewel of their Indian spirit.

Outside the thunderstorms gather.

Lightning and dark clouds hold the celebrants
 within the Cathedral.

I stand with others, locals and tourists,
 camera in hand,
 awaiting the festival promenade down to the cemetery
 for some tribute to the glory of the other world
 and the other time...

The march begins, men costumed by their history,
 maidens lovely in ancestral gowns,
 hearts made light by the final pristine moments
 before another rumbling, flashing late spring shower.

Sunset in New Mexico is always beautiful,
 godlike and without words.

The evening sky has cleared and a strong breeze
 rushes the great oaks of the zocalo into hymns,
 choral gusts promising much which is unknowable
 but to the empty mind of the desert.

In one deep breath of the night I practice chuan fa
 along the geometric paved walks of the square,
 hidden between streetlight and starlight.

In the next deep breath I relax along the veranda rail
 of a second-story public house on the square,
 where the fragrance of cognac warms my palate.

3 Sweetwater

No buffalo remain here,
 the Llano Estacado where the Texas herd
 darkened round the whole horizon.

What took all summer then
 I have done in three hours.

Today I will not visit Billy the Kid's house,
 but I will slow down in Ft. Sumner
 for this oncoming Lincoln County smokie
 who sends me a flash from his cruiser's lightbar.

This town ain't West enough
 for an 80 MPH CBX with California plates.

On across vast agribusiness plantations,
 grain ripened by spring afternoon rains,
 descending through the Texas panhandle.

Looping Lubbock, my voice heterodynes in my helmet
 with the 1047cc six cylinder engine-song:
 in 'jun jug band hummin' and hollerin'
 like a tinny country radio station in a black mask,
 "I am just a red-neck,
 a red-neck,
 just a redneck peck-
 peck-
 peck-
 peckerwood!"

Goddamn!
 Damn it's good to be back in Texas!

The mesas of the Commanche behind me,
 I'm on the superslab to the metroplex.

Pull off I-20 for gas at Ranger,
 Bighead Rick's home town.
 Here's this Texaco by the old railroad depot
 and Dusty hands me the nozzle and turns on the pump,
 "How the hell is Ol' Bighead!
 I w's in high school some years behind him...
 reunion'd last weekend at the dance.
 I remember that rope ladder he had from his window,
 so's he could get out at night without his mom's knowin'!
 Is he still married to Linda?"

That must be the Linda Bighead's never spoke of,
 not to man nor beast nor me nor you.

"Linda?" says I, "Nah.
 He's livin' in Houston.
 I'm headed there now,
 by way of Ft. Worth."

Bighead.
 Linda.
 Hah. What a guy.

Moving east fast...starting to encounter urban traffic
 first time in four days.

Out of the prairie climbs the biggest damn plane you ever saw:
 B-52!
 Rising from grassland to sky
 as slowly as Ft. Worth beyond the Interstate,

but a lot closer
 massive tail stabilizer,
 gut full of nukes,
 airbase full of brothers,
 all seven times as fast as me.

So a city is a city is a city,
 Interstate ramp to feeder to arterial surface street,
 then to the light, then to the turn,
 then to the street my sister by marriage lives on,
 with her husband my wife's oldest brother,
 then a son, then another son, and another son out of the house,
 then all their buddies tramping in and out all summer's day.

Park the scooter in the shade
 and Karen makes us iced tea.

Cicadas blanket the afternoon stillness
 with their quilted vibrations.

The house is cool like Texas folks make it,
 dark behind the screen door
 when it is a hundred degrees outside.

The boys play Nintendo in the air conditioning,
 joystick and television,
 skateboarding through Hell
 or kicking Mike Tyson's butt.

So we eat when Dad gets home,
 throw some silly-ass dice game,
 then--
 Weird Al Yankovic on the stereo
 for a little rock and roll polka
 --then?

Then a basketball epic
 Lakers-Pistons game four from Detroit.

Just like relatives, Maverick fans,
 now they're pulling for the Pistons,
 Adrian Dantley, Isiah Thomas,
 Laimbeer, Salley, Dumars--
 you know that bunch,
 the guys who turned the Celtics to shit.

Me, I got the Lakers all the way, baby.

The Pistons win it in fine form.

Hey, the sagacity of Yogi
 "It ain't over till it's over,"

and the wisdom of Red Auerbach
 "It ain't over till the fat lady sings,"
 carry me through that final buzzer.

A seven game championship series is like a voyage.

Late into the night,
 long after bedtime of Dad and the boys,
 even while we press the morning dew through our toes
 Karen and I talk of her life and her brother.

Bobby drifted from the floating world,
 caressed only by the love of his sister
 consumed by the spreading bloody flames
 of this century's most deadly plague
 still ravaging our sapphire planet.

A lingering death so hard in awaiting
 "He was already dead," says Karen,
 "by the time that he died."

She's over it now, with the help of her God.

4 The Last Allen Rat

Here I spent the middle years of my Texas life

broken home,
 blemished face,

that time between Kennedy and Nixon,
 from the Bay of Pigs to Tet,
 between Chuck Berry and the Jefferson Airplane,
 Guthrie gone and Dylan rising
 those days of riot when the dream was born,
 between Mercury and Apollo.

Since Doctor Spock until Mister Spock,
 after Soupy Sales but before LSD,

when I was a boy.

I park my CBX under the wide motionless oak
 near the Athletic Dorm, my first bivouac.
 An old handyman sits in the shade
 and the cicadas hum in the heat.

Spit-shined oxfords and polished brass,
 we marched everywhere,
 drilled on Mondays, studied till Sundays,
 fit and misfit: Tantillo and Estes,
 Nachtrieb, Bormaster, the little guy from Oklahoma,
 Richard Brooks, Stahlman, Jamie Farrar,
 five hundred other faces without names anymore.

Now it all rushes in,
 as I stroll the empty grounds,
 sipping a beer against the Texas noon:

Sunday evening the bugler blows "Assembly,"
 march up to the auditorium,
 file into seats, see a
 talent show or student play or some crap
 like the night the Peace Corps guy bored us stiff--

Emcee the talent show,
 act in a play,
 dance with the town girls,
 write a story with too many "and's" like Hemingway,
 get a Cadet of the Year Medal,
 lead my class in academics,
 get drunk,
 dream of whores and high school queens,
 box Biggerstaff for about fifteen seconds,
 steal a book of Villon's poetry--

Once my Mother came to Field Day, my second year.
 It was me on the P.A. microphone introducing events and cadets
 to the spectators, visitors all family, soldiers and such.

I jotted some of that down once,
 in "Very Military Men,"
 you can read it when I'm dead.

I recall now J.B. Carrington, Headmaster of Allen Academy,
 grandson to Colonel Carrington of Fort Phil Kearney,
 commanding officer at the time of the Fetterman Fight
 in Wyoming just after the Civil War.
 J.B. proudly mentioned his grandfather (H.B.) to me,
 when he found me reading the field manual of Army history.
 Twenty years after Red Cloud's victory that bloody day

(a large band of Sioux, among them magnificent Crazy Horse,
 slaughtered eighty-some bluecoat soldiers in the Autumn snow
 along with their Captain cocksure disobedient Fetterman)

J.P. Dunn said the Colonel was better suited to be "a schoolmaster."

1866 to 1988, by way of 1886 and 1966:
 One hundred years, plus and minus twenty or two,
 is it only I who knows of this coincidence
 and the men who have compelled it?

The Huss Shack where you could get mayo on french fries,
 the laundry we marched to once a week,
 drill fields and everything overgrown,
 the mess hall still looming over that end of the campus,
 the way Jesse H. Jones' name did this end of Texas,
 all the dorms down there including mine gone now,
 on the day the Allen family sold the school.

Honor Military Academy of the past,
 Minimum Security Federal Prison of the future,
 today is the day it all changes,
 this day I happen to pass through Bryan on Route 6,
 twenty-two years older than that young cadet...
 a lifetime later.

This boy will never know this man!

5 Bighead's House

Ten miles deeper in freeways and burbs
 than when I last crossed this city
 built on inflated egos and oil prices

Humid and hot, jammed with concrete and cars,
 business complexes separated by shopping centers
 still the same place I joyously abandoned

Houston!

Capital of freeworld spacefarers
 New Jerusalem of the psychedelic prophet
 Rollerball champion of the future Earth

My hometown.

CBX in the garage,
 gear stashed in the guest bedroom,

beer run time at Bighead's house!

His two young sons help us hunt down the groceries,
perhaps some small part of the market is left unscathed.

What a patient one this older, married Rick is!
Not the giant mad bear of our past co-conspiracy
when no thing upon earth was safe from our lampoon,
lest we drink it or smoke it or eat it raw.

Credit long practice with bamboo stave and mask,
hot sweat and good sensei,
for this better man,
to whom I once suggested the sport of Kendo.

Theatre and dinner and all the hospitality
an ecstatic Ezra Christian could possibly absorb
goes in to that timeless time of
visiting a Texas friend

"So we have Marilyn at the police range,"
says Rick as we examine his Smith and Wesson 9mm Auto
black, deadly, and unloaded for now,
"and we're gonna let her pop a few rounds,
first time in her life,
this gun in her hands, clip in, hammer back,"

he takes the pistol to show her manner,
facing to one side, weapon out to fire,

"She pops off a round and then looks at me--"

Bighead turns at this moment,
gun levelled at my chest

instantly like Fairbairn I take it aside
heart up suddenly frowning
never point--

"--Riiick, I don't liiiike this!!!"

Just like his wife
shoved this smoking fucker at him

"I hit the deck," says he, "'time out! Time OUT!'"

I am rolling on the floor in laughter

how Bighead Rick brought me along on this day at the range.

Marilyn and I start a fad for my trip
shooting pictures in mirrors

to know thine own self, then we run off
 a whole Polaroid roll
 with a heartfelt talk in between
 and shoot dice to see who shall keep each shot.

But soon or late the moment always comes,
 over his best Remy Martin
 and a fifteenth century wakizashi,
 blade once worn on the back of an enemy aviator,
 forged by an ancient master
 temperline swirling like an ocean's break

We say good-bye, a farewell
 I hope to bid again.

6 Reunion of Those Who Never Parted

Not much is left
 for remembering.

Plush hotel and very comfortable digs
 on the weekend of Reunion
 for those who never parted.

I am not one of them
 and wasn't one then.

My CBX is parked alongside
 Rutger Hauer's Harley FLHT
 and I got a twelve-pack of Bud on ice.

I'll meet some folks later
 and we'll make the first night.

For now I take a stroll of the grounds
 to practice some moves, get loose,
 do Tai Chi Chuan, get back into myself.

Mike and Sally, married alumni, pick me up,
 and another fine fellow from out of town
 whose name nearly escaped me, as it has now.

Tonight it's a Deutsches Biergarten
 where folks'll warm up
 for tomorrow's big day of picnic and dance.

Mike's a good man and a good friend, always has been,
 works for a living and does it well,
 like everybody else I've run into lately, he's got two kids.

I wish I could tell Sally I never meant what I said,
 but I don't want her to remember I said it...
 no chance to confess I'm not the madman I was then.

A different madness, anyway,
 no threat to her and hers.

Instead I meet faces rising from the shadows,
 some with names, some without,
 twenty years have tested these odd recognitions.

So knock back some brews
 see how people get fat with families
 some full of love, some full of shit. ✓

Next day there's a picnic
 that's fun and clean
 and all of that stuff

on the campus of that high school
 Mirabeau B. Lamar sacrificed his name to.

I'd been a cadet for two years
 so this place was only a way station

not the home they remember
 as they display photo albums and half-grown kids

to each other like a ring or a passed note
 of brief, intense meaning now lost
 except for the occasional senseless dream.

Too many ex-coeds
 ask me if I've been saved

but most people here
 somehow know I made the trip by bike

once they're past that
 they're out of my life.

Ah, the night!
 Even Mike wears a tie
 against my advice,
 but Sally wants him to:

She's right, of course,
 these are her people,
 yet none of them
 as handsome as she.

I guess I miss the slow song
 the crappy band must have played,
 I'm probably outside smoking a joint,
 just like I was two decades ago.

Such was it all, now as then,
 no sadness or light
 what was missing before
 will be gone forever.

7 Victory of the Lordsburg Lakers

It'll always take two days to get across Texas.

In the light of the waning moon
 I let my spirit wander through Shaolin motions

near the railroad tracks behind this Ft. Stockton motel.

Twenty geology students from Texas A&M are happy
 enough that this is their last night on the road
 from wherever
 to play every tune on the bar's rockabilly jukebox.

Two truckers and me
 stand to the brass rail.

One trucker's wearing a Jimmy Swaggert Bible College t-shirt

"That's a joke in New Orleans, right?
 Now that ol' Jimmy-boy's got hisself in with whores
 and a pervert or two..." says Joe buying us a round,
 he owns "the only Kawasaki dealership in Henderson,

Nevada," the other trucker's name is Marlon
and the name fits.

Marlon dances with a geology grad
but he ain't gonna get laid.

I'm on the road early
this West Texas summer morning.

Breakfast in Van Horne and jam it for Lordsburg
where I'll catch Lakers-Pistons game seven.

This is the waterless nowhere I love
at the worst of the '88 drought,
due west on I-10
with an empty desert mind.

Into the hot sunshine
from my Lordsburg motel's bar and grill
I see Joe and Marlon
parking their rigs.

These boys are hauling some "Fletch" movie set
back to Hollywood from New Orleans
by way of Marlon's bootsmith in El Paso

they got twin pink Cadillacs
and a mess of other cars,
the beer's in the trunk of the BMW

and Joe's got two Harleys in the huge van.

This bar and grill has a good bartender named Vincent
and the best french fries, rippled and scalloped like chips,
that me or Marlon has ever put teeth to

on top of the shrimp, all we can eat,
the Lakers win the thing
just like dapper Pat Riley said.

Alaskan king crab in Santa Fe,
gulf shrimp in Lordsburg,
New Mexico's fishermen
must know whereof they cast their nets.

Late at the bar almost quitting time,
 a young guy named Danny takes a shot of Jack,
 his hard-ridden Sportster parked out front
 sleeping bag and teddy bear bungeed to the fork.

Two months out of Savannah,
 riding at night.

Such wandering brothers pass each other
 as the new moon would nod to the sun.

8 Their Desert Home

The world is empty at this desert junction,
 where U.S. 666 rises from Interstate 10 West
 riding north into the lands of the Apache.

This is fine motorcycling country,
 rolling, twisting
 virtually uninhabited

until you reach Safford, with the big mountain on your left.

Beyond lies the San Carlos Reservation

rock dry Indian home
 beautiful, terrible wasteland
 held by unseen strong souls
 against the cruelest century.

At the road to the Point of Pines
 I dismount while my machine rests a moment,
 1500 RPM panting in the 110 degree quiet

Invisible medicine animals watch,
 Ancient men of leather and stone listen

before the iron roads
 before the fire weapons
 before even the horse replaced the dog

reverently I'll face each cardinal point

Who remembers the tree and the mountain?
Who knows the path of the Chaco people?

Here in these burning waterless hills is the answer,
formless spirit song in the bright pale sky.

Down from the thriving mining towns and
out of the Superstitions
this vast city grows, Phoenix
giving no surcease of heat and surface traffic,
no Interstate Loop to be gone from the urban sprawl!

After Wickenburg, U.S. 93 enters the Joshua forest.
The old man of the desert has planted his garden well,
vast rarefied orchard of gnarled frozen gods.

Soon the high plateau of Northern Arizona
yields to the Great Basin
1000 miles of earth and 100 degrees of air

Open road
No-mind

Ezra Christian begins the dash for home.

9 Beyond the Mountain

Ride west on 6 from Tonopah to Boundary Peak
like a running start at the Sierra.

A last look at that Nevada mountain
through the big cut a little before Mono Lake,
then high meadows and granite faces
till the tight passes play out to sunset.

Soon the valley swept,
bridge regained,
San Francisco Bay and the night.

Peter Ahrens
December 1988