

backwards
the drowned
go dreaming



CARL WATSON

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by CARL WATSON

SENSITIVE SKIN **Books**

BACKWARDS THE DROWNED GO DREAMING

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IT WAS MAYBE 10:30 PM, EARLY OCTOBER, 1974, A TIME OF PROFOUND spiritual dislocation and emotional collapse. Only scientists had computers. Television had not yet begun dictating public behavior. Some people even lived without phones. The level of dialogue on the street was less confined. There were three eggs frying in a pan along with some leftover Chinese rice. Half of a bottle of Jim Beam was waiting on the window ledge when Tanya McCoy climbed into that window on the southwest side of Portland, Oregon. It was my window, but she was looking for somebody else.

She knocked the Beam bottle off the ledge and I heard it break in the alley below just as I cranked up the volume on the radio. The song was Janis Joplin's "Piece of My Heart." I should have thought it meant something, but I wasn't thinking anything. I began singing along in a theatrical manner. I used such music as a purgative. Get drunk, go through my repertoire of gut-wrenching facial expressions. Wring my heart like a rag of tears. Usually I felt better in the morning.

But if I looked stupid doing it, she looked ridiculous watching—dressed in a stocking hat, railroad overalls, strapped and buckled square-toed Frye boots. She was packing a bottle of Gallo Tawny Port and a joint of Vietnamese bozo weed. She said "All right," as if she could identify with my folly. She apologized for the loss of the whisky as she twisted the cap off the port for a toast. Within hours, we had sewn the seeds of our middle-class discontent and would spend the next three years running toward or away from our separate demons.

Think Heloise and Abelard, Dante and Beatrice, Hammett and Hellman, Humbert and Lolita Hayes. This wasn't one of the great love stories of the ages, though. To tell the truth, I'm not even sure it was a love story. I'm not sure love stories exist other than as models for emotional oppression. Concrete walls erected by tiny romantic sadists in our minds to batter our souls against, like bags of broken toys. But if it wasn't the stuff of legend, it *was* a story of passive obsession and two people who thought they could turn their ennui into religion.

Romantic fatalism aside, we would be travelers in strange times. The previous heady decade had degenerated into some sort of collective entertainment anxiety. Individualism was about to become a disease rather than a cure. People were dropping like flies from various vague illnesses. One guy I knew went crazy from the "Fun," a term he used to describe the ominous evil out there, manipulating him, turning him into a party animal against his will. This "Fun" looked like a clown, or a punk from a nightclub, or a babe from a beer ad. Sometimes it looked

like his own face in a hotel mirror. Another guy died from what was later called “Denial.” Actually it was the same guy. Then there was the “Fear,” but that’s been around a long time, under different names. Some called it the “Horror.” Others knew it as the face in the mirror.

So that’s pretty much it—Kurtz and Bozo, hand-in-hand, walking through the collective psyche in bell-bottoms and running shoes. Of course these days those days seem like a veritable renaissance. But you can’t go back. So this is how my story begins—the story of Frank Payne and Tanya McCoy. It begins with fried eggs and whisky in my Portland, Oregon kitchen, and Janis Joplin.

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BUT WE DIDN’T stay in Portland. We didn’t stay in Ogden or Denver either. In fact, we didn’t stay anywhere. We stopped in Chicago briefly for a drink, but we didn’t stay there. Within weeks we were headed down to New Orleans. We got a ride in a school bus headed for Normal, by way of Peoria. The driver, whose name was Doug, had a bag full of porn magazines, some righteous pot and what seemed to be a trained dog. The way the dog used his tongue was a clue. We didn’t really want to know any more than that. It was too early in the morning.

Outside Normal, we got ride with a family of glassy-eyed kids heading to some Tennessee commune by way of Evansville and Bowling Green. They had invisible TV sets tuned to a better world glued to their eyes. They asked us to join them, but we declined. There would be other such offers of companionship, lifestyle choices. We avoided the possibilities these parallel universes offered. We were going somewhere.

We had to backtrack on 40 through Memphis because we had gone out of the way. Next, some half-pint-sucking, crumpled-hat hillbilly with one eyebrow and a hidden agenda gave us a tour of the local back roads which I mostly remember as a black-and-white film of rapidly approaching tree trunks looming in front of the windshield. He dumped us at some god-forsaken intersection in northern Mississippi, and we were happy to be there in one piece.

Next we got picked up by a country-western band, and that’s when we met Mary Stone, aka Jessica James, a runaway, a kid really, but a clever one. Mary became our friend. She would go the rest of the way with us to New Orleans. Mary Stone was a seasoned hobo and knew all the hobo ways of being in the world, especially that tactic of disappearing and not being seen again for days, weeks, months, or ever. This happened in New Orleans. We didn’t see her again for weeks.

There’s always that part of your life you spend chasing clichés. And New Orleans is nothing if not a road-dog cliché. You have to pass through there if you want any credibility. So the road-dogs say. It’s a town where the smell of alcohol and Spanish moss blends into a murky bouquet that soaks into your skin, lungs

and liver until you feel like you're living in some soft-focus nostalgic version of your own life. Some say the city makes you mean and lazy. Some say it makes you think you know something that you don't. Either way, it's dangerous.

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ME AND TANYA got a cheap three-room joint in a mostly black part of town just upriver of the Quarter. We rented the back room hourly to horny couples in exchange for drugs. But we made the greater part of our money selling flowers on the street—dyed carnations, roses, and some sticky, carnal, orchid-style number that smelled like old sweat and soap. We ate crawfish and fried oysters. We drank all day and pretended we still had a thing. Tanya got involved with a band for a while, but they never played anywhere. The rehearsals were just excuses to get high.

We knew everybody on the street and they knew us. There was the Chicken Man, Clyde, Sal the Money-Man Mazolowski, and Raul the Candy Man. There was Charlie the Lucky Dog Man, too, and a runaway adding-machine heiress who called herself Antoinette, or “Andi” Salmon. It was a good life. It was almost as if we belonged somewhere.

We had a few people living with us—and off us—on and off. An emancipated stripper named Sheyly, a waiter/hustler named Smiling Bob, a half-Cherokee pot dealer who was called Steven Long Claw and his pregnant Italian wife, Sofia Cenci. There were two others I don't remember well—two thieves who snuck out one night with half our stuff. They were all fakes, but then we were, too, so we couldn't call them on it.

We loved the fringe people, the freaks. Unfortunately, these fringe people, these freaks, didn't like each other as much as we thought they should. One day Steven Long Claw hit Smiling Bob with a length of motorcycle chain. I can still see the way it snickered out of his pocket—an articulated steel-link snake with a voice like a whining cat that snaps back into a cry. Bob was suddenly bleeding from the link marks on his cheek. For a second it looked like red quarter notes dripping from a red music staff. He had two smiles, Bob did. Both red.

As usual the fight was over a woman—something she said, or, more likely, showed. Sheyly thrived on trouble—a genuine glow-in-the-dark blonde, flaunting her teenage sex up and down St. Bernard Avenue. like it was a prize. Maybe it was. Her friends were mostly Harley riders. Heavyweight guys with bad posture and testosterone problems that rubbed off on others. Even Smiling Bob took to practicing nunchuck poses in the front yard. Road-Kill Pete did Buck knife tricks. It wasn't exactly a welcome-to-the-neighborhood sign. And they were doing dope all the time, too. I was glad when they finally left, but I would have been gladder to be the one leaving.

MEMORY CAN BE A TRICKY THING, EVEN A TACKY thing. it uses you. You might remember killing someone when you didn't do it. Many people do. They say the bedroom is the most dangerous room on earth. Police know it. Emergency room workers can tell you. I wish I could say such passion was mine to regret. But reconstruction is hard. They say it's in my head, my sin. Apparently this is true.

"There are already enough people who have as their mission in life the extinction of the fire." I read that once. Simone de Beauvoir. It's a nice thought—that the soul is not immortal by nature—it can only become so if fed. So I guess the road is more food than geometry—more consumption than myth. In fact the modern road story is the opposite of myth. There are no heroes. There are barely any actors. There are only observers and what might be called events, or non-events. As time goes on you move less and less.

No one feels they make anything happen, except maybe by bumping into things, moving through life as a means of making contact with the world. But the harder you look, the further it recedes: there's the fourteen-year-old girl you loved as a child, or the stepfather who sent you into a psychological tailspin. They dissipate, mutate and reconstitute. The effect redefines the cause. A car and its driver traveling down the highway might think they're fighting fate when they're really only illustrating the second law of thermodynamics. The White Queen bandages her finger, then begins to bleed—then comes the act that wounds. Backwards is the direction of order. Without punctuation the sentence can't mean anything. The mistake you made is the last thing you see.

There's a way to beat the system, though, to trick God and chaos. You punctuate your life—you tag emotions, connect them to senses, smells, sounds. In fact the whole of experience is a trackless web that begs to be labeled. I think there's a term for it—transubstantiation, transfixation, transference neurosis, something like that—the intense codependent association of particular sensations and events in memory.

For example, take a song from the 60s—"The Lion Sleeps Tonight," by the Tokens. Because of the conditions under which I first heard it, it will always remind me of a neighborhood girl, Beatrice, who looked like a figure in a surrealist painting by De Chirico or Magritte. Then there's

“Daniel,” by Elton John—the song he wrote about his blind brother. I always associate it with the sight of a writhing dying dog, hit by a car during shift change traffic on US 20 as I drove toward the Gary Mill gates. The sulfurous air, the anticipation of the bone-deadening job: I’m placed right there in the driver’s seat every time. “California Dreaming,” by the Mamas and Papas will forever be associated with the fork in I-80 where it goes north or south. I had decided to leave the land of steel mills. Me and Eddie Mercury sat there in a ’69 Opel Cadet. I flipped a coin. We headed north to Portland, Oregon. That was the song on the radio. We did the opposite. The next thing I remember was Patsy Cline’s “Walking after Midnight,” on the jukebox in a Boise, Idaho Bar, while two women circled each other with bloody pool balls in their hands, a crowd of truck-driving drunks egging them on. That’s how the system works. The image is pinned to the bulletin board of the brain by the song.

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ANOTHER INSTANCE IS “Pusher Man,” from *Easy Rider*. But I didn’t associate it so much with the movie as with the smell of US 30 dragstrip. I went with my brother’s friend, Roy Latoure. The motorcycle is the connection here. Roy had one. So did Dennis Hopper. Roy Latoure was a displaced Texas biker hippie with an eye patch. He lived with my brother in a basement pad in Hammond, Indiana. He was from Beaumont, not far from Port Arthur where Janis Joplin was born. He was the same age as Janis. He might have drunk in the same bars, or met her at a high school party, or even seen her sing in an Austin cafe. Being outcasts, they might have been thrown together like that. I didn’t connect any of this at the time.

Roy was skinny as a stick. But he had this 200-lb. girlfriend named Ginny-Lynn, a gal very much like Tanya, and who was also an aspiring country-western singer, although she might have been a little better. I don’t remember. She could have been worse. They used to come to the burger joint where I worked over on Highway 41 and I’d fix them up with a sack of burgers for the price of a cold drink.

Roy was tuned in. He had traveled, and he always had something new lying around. *The Chicago Seed*. Acid Rock albums. *Surrealistic Pillow*, by Jefferson Airplane, and *Cheap Thrills*, by Big Brother. I remember the grainy picture of Janis on the inside cover. I remember the exultation in her face.

Roy rode a Triumph Tiger 650. It was really a rat bike, but he tricked it out with odd parts. I used to hang out at his garage while he worked on it. Since then I’ve always had a predilection for the British machines. It

was Roy, in fact, who turned me on to my first bike—a BSA 440 Victor. I got it at Molnar's in Hammond. It was fun and fast but hard to start, so I sold it. Then there was the Triumph Tiger 500. It didn't run very well. But it ran until I wrecked it. I jumped it into a ditch to avoid eating the grill of a Mack truck. After that, it never ran at all. It looked good sitting in my front yard, though. I sold that one to this guy, Jerry, who paid me by taking money out of his girlfriend's purse while she was passed out.

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SIX YEARS LATER, Tanya and I were wondering how not to be in New Orleans, when, one day, I was walking down Rampart past the Mr. Acropolis used car lot. The song "Pusher Man" was playing on someone's radio nearby. Then I saw it—a 1969 BSA Lightning. Smiling Bob dared us to buy it. The bank cashier knew I was locked in a self-fulfilling prophecy and had no intention of straightening my life out. She probably didn't care either. And Mr. Acropolis didn't care as he counted out our cash on the metal desk. He knew the bike wouldn't make it to the edge of town.

In fact I had to walk it home because the brakes didn't work. It wouldn't start either and the kickstand was broke. But that's the great thing about machines—unlike people, they can be fixed. And Tanya wasn't one of those women who stalk the outskirts of a broken-down scene bitching. She never gave a thought to any physical, financial or chronological impossibilities. To her it made no difference that the bike didn't work. We would make it work. She didn't mind if we spent the better part of our lives making it work. We were gonna ride the Beezer to LA and then up the coast on Highway 1. We had a couple hundred dollars between us. No problem.

Tanya called around to some friends of hers in LA, making sure we would have places to hang. One of her old boyfriends, Reggie, called back. He told us to hook up with Elaine when we got to town. Elaine would know. Tanya said Reggie seemed hyper, over-alert. There was no reason to think anything was wrong, though, because he was always like that when he wasn't high.

Tanya quit the "band." We said goodbye to our "friends" and left New Orleans before noon on May 3. I remember sleeping out near a bayou access road that night. We caught some blue gills in a backwater at dusk and burned them into the bottom of an aluminum pan. We chased the seared flesh with cans of Dixie. The night was murky but there were some Van Gogh-style stars to be had. The intense call-and-response rhythm of the insects was like a million African fiddle players hidden in the trees. There were soft breezes and clouds of blood-sucking mosquitoes to keep

me awake. When I finally did fall asleep, I had a dream of having my head bitten off by a praying mantis.

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THE RAINBOW BRIDGE over the Neches River between Louisiana and Texas was a kind of Wagnerian passage to Valhalla. For some, at least, I suppose it is. For us, the crossing meant we were in Janis Joplin's hometown. It was exactly as I pictured it—oil derricks, oil fields, great pumping cranes, burn-off stacks—it was like a southern version of Whiting, Indiana, but more spread out, more humid. We stopped at the first liquor store we found and bought a bottle of Southern Comfort, most of which we drank in the parking lot of a laundromat. Then some guy came and chased us out of the parking lot. I guess Port Arthur is not so much like Whiting after all. In Whiting, Indiana, you could drink in the parking lot. I think you were supposed to.

They say machines are an extension of the body. One thing's for sure: a motorcycle makes you hyper-aware of every nuance—flowers, dead animals, wind and humidity, and the cold odor of tires, oil, road dust and gas. I liked the motion of the springs, the way the headlights cut a tunnel in the dark, the guttural pipes, and how, if you were slightly drunk, the asphalt winding out ahead of you could seem like your guts being rolled onto a spool somewhere in the future, as if you were being disemboweled by your dreams.

We lit out for the long crossing: Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, California. We drove over white mountains and red deserts, romantic wastelands and ravaged pastorals. We crossed fields of sunflowers like the yellow eyes of old men, reptilian and tired. Morbid one moment, elated the next, we drove and drove. But while we should have been experiencing some incredible lightness of the road, that freedom from emotions and home, we were actually more attuned to its opposite—a heaviness we didn't want to admit to, a sluggish cosmic humidity that made everything somehow sinister, like we were under an intolerable curse and had to keep moving to stay free of it. And we felt this weight, this density, in states of awareness that should have been the most subtle—the trembling of water in a roadside ditch, the vibration of a flower petal.

There were times when the bike actually seemed out of control, racing along an asphalt swell, and the progression of images, the beauty that flashed along either side, often seemed lost on us, even as we enthused about the grandeur. Still, with Tanya's hands upon my shoulders or in the pockets of my insubstantial jacket, one might say we were looking for trials, tests of mettle. But we were just drifting, buoyed up on a sea of

Port Arthur oil products—road tar, rubber, gas—all churned out from the distilled energy of an ancient sun, a thick soup of flesh and circumstance, which we, as sacks of sentient chemicals, were part of. And no amount of mechanical clairvoyance or intuition would save us. Life was always elsewhere. Further back. Farther ahead.

Janis Joplin wasn't going to save us, either—that raw voice of hers like sandpaper and motor-oil—but we heard it anyway, in our heads as we drove. We pretty much drove straight to LA, stopping briefly for drinks in Houston, Tucson, San Diego, Nogales, Tijuana, El Paso. We passed through Salinas, the artichoke capital of the world. Tanya loved artichokes. She was the only person I ever met who did.

We took the little roads when we could, the blue highways, the diner-lined routes, the 66s and the 77s. There were scorpions in our boots in the morning, skies salted with stars, trucks like giant glowing grasshoppers in the night, naked drunks screaming in small town gas stations. But we had no flat tires and only one actual engine problem—from time to time the bike would cut out erratically. I thought it was the carburetor. She said vapor-lock. We were both wrong. Loose battery cables.

TANYA HAD FRIENDS IN LA. SOME WERE “WEEKEND warriors” and some were full-time. Reggie was full-time. It took nearly half a day to find him. He changed addresses every couple of months. Sometimes he changed names. We spent a lot of time running down false leads. LA is all stop lights and telephone wires. It’s hard to know where you are in the first place—forget about finding anything. Nobody is sitting on their stoops to help you either, because of the carbon monoxide.

Santa Monica had some tacky sections back then. We found them. We got to Elaine’s house first. Elaine Robinson was a friend of Connie who was living in Colorado with another biker dude named Bobby Jesse, or Jesse Bobby. He had two first names. Jesse Bobby was a friend of Reggie’s from the old jail days. Connie was Tanya’s friend from different old days, partly in jail, partly in the golden light of a free and righteous life.

Elaine’s mother, Camille, answered the door. “Well . . . Tan, been a few years . . . you clean?” This was a woman having no fun in life and she wasn’t trying to hide it. Her face had that California pancake-colored-mud-slide-frozen-in-time look that lets you know.

“Been clean for a while, living in Oregon now,” Tanya said, as if that were proof, like you couldn’t be dirty in Oregon, even though we hadn’t been living in Oregon. Camille opened the door to let us in. Whatever coated the furniture and the windows in that house was soon coating our skin.

“How’s Naomi?”

“She’s cool. Living in North Africa, Tunisia I think.”

“Cool,” said Camille. The word seemed an odd coming out of her mouth, like she was too old to say “cool,” but she had to say it in order to communicate with the kids. Then I realized she was mocking us. I felt appropriately embarrassed.

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EVERYBODY ASKED ABOUT Tanya’s mom. Naomi was a legendary figure among Tanya’s less-than-legendary crowd. They called her Naomi, too—using her first name as a way bringing themselves closer to her legendary status. If they were asked to describe her they always said that Tanya’s

mom was “cool, man, really cool.” She was simply a very cool person.

By all accounts Naomi O’Connell had had an eclectic career. She ran around the country collecting kicks with the beats. Supposedly she was one of the characters in *Howl* and *On the Road*, but no one knew which one. She had been in the SDS. She had been at Woodstock; someone said they had seen her in the movie. I never did. She was an existentialist, an early hippie, a mystic, an anarchist and an intellectual. She worked with Dorothy Day and Dr. King. She knew Steinman and Mailer. Lived in a squat in Paris with Sartre and Beauvoir. She’d hung out with the abstract expressionists and the Golden Dawn. She worked as an activist and organized labor, was a major anti-Vietnam protester and a proto-feminist.

There were many stories about Tanya’s mom—too many for them to be true. She’d have to be 150 years old and have the ability to travel in space. She’d simply done way too much in too short of a life. Still, her myth was out there, mutating, attracting inconsistencies. Nobody pushed it, because they needed it, especially Tanya. The myth served her sense of inadequacy. By maintaining an image of Naomi that was more than she could ever live up to, Tanya could justify her lifestyle as an underachiever and a drug addict.

At first it seemed odd to me that Tanya hadn’t changed her name to follow suit with her mother. Years ago, Naomi had traded McCoy for O’Connell, perhaps to avoid the hillbilly connotations. Back in the ’50s there was a TV show called *The Real McCoys*. Understandably, Naomi wanted to avoid any association. Even though she hung with a liberal crowd, no one liked hillbillies; they were the same as rednecks to most northerners—the cause of segregation and war. The name O’Connell preserved her Scotch/Irish identity while dropping the negative traits. Tanya, however, sought to reclaim the adjective *real* that clung to McCoy like an appendix. It suited her career aspirations and her personality. It also severed the nominal umbilical cord. Tanya needed to have control over the use of her mother’s legend, and not being immediately identifiable as Naomi’s daughter helped. It provided some distance and let her weigh her options.

People often used the idea of Naomi to bolster their own obsessions. I think it was Reggie who once told me Tanya’s mom had been one of the first women to take birth control pills, before government approval. They’d been smuggled in from Europe and passed around like candy amongst the hippest people. Supposedly Naomi’s crowd was all taking them and screwing all the time. According to Reggie, Naomi was a party girl and she and her friends had virtually invented orgies.

At first I assumed he was only into the prurient aspects, but as

time went on his agenda became clear. Reggie knew that while Tanya *thought* Harry Sandman was her real father, the fact was she didn't know. This subliminal doubt was one reason she was crazy or depressed, and in Reggie's acute mind, that doubt was his trump card—a key to some Pandora's box of demons in Tanya's psyche. Thus the flexibility of Naomi's myth gave him a leg up. It fed his sense of power. Like I said, it was in his mind. But for most people the mind is no different from what is real.

I myself pictured Mother Naomi as both vixen and scholar—obviously something to do with my own Greek tragedy. Truth be known, proximity to her legend gave my life a sort of roguish intellectual quality that it didn't really have in those years, as if I was drifting for a “reason” as opposed to simple laziness or cowardice. However, since I had never actually met Naomi I had no way of knowing what she was like or by what right I could lay claim to my fantasies of her.

There was also a dark side to the woman that no one talked about, something beyond the name-dropping and history-making. There was Naomi the absent mother, Naomi the tyrannical control-freak, Naomi the reckless libertine, Naomi the unbalanced moral compass, and Naomi the alcoholic whose scrapes with the law often had little to do with leftist idealism. These traits were seldom elaborated on, however, since they were of little use to anyone.

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“HAVE A SEAT, Lainy's upstairs. She just got out of jail last week—big bust down in Venice, but I guess you heard.”

We hadn't.

“Hey Lainy, your *old friend* Tanya's here!” The words *old friend* were uttered with a measure of sarcasm. Camille returned to her lounge chair, and her vodka and lemonade. There had been some music, but the needle was merely skipping around the center of the record now.

“Reg around?” Tanya asked.

“Not much,” Camille answered indifferently.

Elaine came downstairs. She looked dull and under a lot of strain. She and Tanya hugged each other lightly as if they had forgotten exactly why they were friends and found little interest in rekindling the memories. Distrust was like some horror-movie goo coating them, gluing them together in the worst sort of way.

“You clean?” Elaine asked, glancing nervously toward the kitchen.

“Yeah,” Tanya said. “I don't do that stuff anymore, livin' in Oregon now. Where's Reg?”

“Staying in Venice, in that old building Tom Parker was in. Got

himself this white woman, Redondo Beach. They've even got a kid, someone says. He calls himself Rolando, at least when he's with her."

We heard a door close out in the kitchen. Elaine seemed to relax a little.

"Rolando?" They laughed. A car started. A large cockroach crawled across the wall. I smacked it. A glass broke somewhere.

"What an ass." Tanya laughed.

Apparently it was Roland for a while. Then Rodrigo. He finally settled on Rolando as the credible alternative—given that it was California. Reggie was one-eighth Mexican, which to his way of thinking gave him a diluted version of Andalusian blood. Apparently he had taken to wearing scarves tied around his neck, sporting Spanish berets, and affecting a roguish swagger to pick up chicks. Rich chicks. Why bother, otherwise? It was something you could do in California.

"The white woman, she likes the danger," injected Camille, sarcastically, with a put-on accent, swirling the ice cubes in her glass as a form of punctuation. Most people couldn't pull off such an obvious cliché. Camille could. You got the feeling she invented it. Then for a second I saw her face go completely slack, as if she had just seen death walk through the door with a box of candy. It was hard to tell whether this distortion was due to thorazine side-effects, simple boredom or some other primal force working its geological will under her skin. It was fun to watch, though—a pleasant distraction.

She took another drink and managed to reign her muscles back to their holding pattern—the perpetual smirk of the fallen debutante, the has-been actress with a pill problem, a woman with so much past that it all canceled out and you could pretty much attribute anything to her you wanted. But I'm being too harsh. Maybe she *was* a cipher. And she didn't deserve my judgment. Still, I couldn't imagine the woman ever being seductive. Someone must have. There was a daughter to prove it. And here was the daughter now—talking. She was talking to Tanya, and they were snickering at some inside joke. I reached out and tried to join in. I wanted to laugh, too.

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Carl Watson is a writer living in NYC. He has published some books including *Beneath the Empire of the Birds* (short stories) by Apathy Press, and *The Hotel of Irrevocable Acts* (a novel) by Autonomedia. These books have also been published in France by Vagabonde Press and Gallimard respectively. Recently Vagabonde has published *Une Vie Psychosomatique*. Watson also writes regular opinionated essays (under several names) for *The Williamsburg Observer*, an anarchist publication that originated at the Right Bank Cafe in Brooklyn. Currently he is working on a book about Henry Darger's autobiography which he hopes will dispel the myth of literature and romantic genius and condemn all writers to the category of biological machines engaged in redundant self-constitution no different than the growth of crystals, the birth of stars, or the splitting of amoebas.

“Amongst the oil fumes and the briny dinge of the sea, greasy, tired, frustrated, I had a flash. Suddenly, I had it all figured out—the psychology of despots and CEOs. I figured that in order for civilization to exist, people have to stay in one place, and so it seems somehow natural that the evolution of society would be to create an illusion of motion where none exists. Faster cars. Faster editing. Increased sensory stimulation. But all the while we are actually sitting more and more still. The population is placated by the feeling of progress, when in reality they are imprisoned. Even if we feel or strive to be utterly irresponsible, we’re still somehow doing our job.”

Carl Watson evokes his desolation angels with great empathy and care, but also with ruthless candor. He writes like someone who pushed himself to the wall, then pushed through it to the void and came back with stories to tell. Here he reclaims the Seventies, one of the more desolate of recent epochs, with the clarity of Proust, the balefulness of Bodenheim, and the raw honesty of an Iggy song.

—John Strausbaugh, author of *Black Like You* and *Sissy Nation*

“CW writes like he put his thumb in the air on some two-lane American highway that used to be an Indian Trail, where he got picked up by God. Like he has come back to the fire in the woods we have gathered around at the end of the world with our loved ones to tell us what he saw.

—Andrew Huebner, author of *We Pierce* and *American By Blood*

With prose unfurling like cigarette smoke bleeding into that cloud of half-forgotten memories forever shadowing missed opportunities that hangs over a noonday dive somewhere during the twilight of the last blown century, heartbreak rock-n-roll on the radio crackling in exquisite precision between AM stations and windswept interstates, Carl Watson daydreams before silent black-and-white televisions in SRO lobbies or as he drinks himself sober in crumbling Chicago tenements. *Backwards the Drowned Go Dreaming* explodes the bleary-eyed myth of the American road.

—Donald Breckenridge, author of *This Young Girl Passing*

Carl Watson’s work is desolate poetry. He writes with sharp nostalgia for a past that really wasn’t all that great. It feels like a stay in a down-and-out motel, but right on the other side of the paper-thin wall is transcendence. Watson never lets you forget that even in the most desperate situations, there is humor (even if it’s mostly black) and greatness of the spirit.

—emily xyz, contributor *United States of Poetry*

Cover photograph: Hal Hirshorn

SENSITIVE SKIN