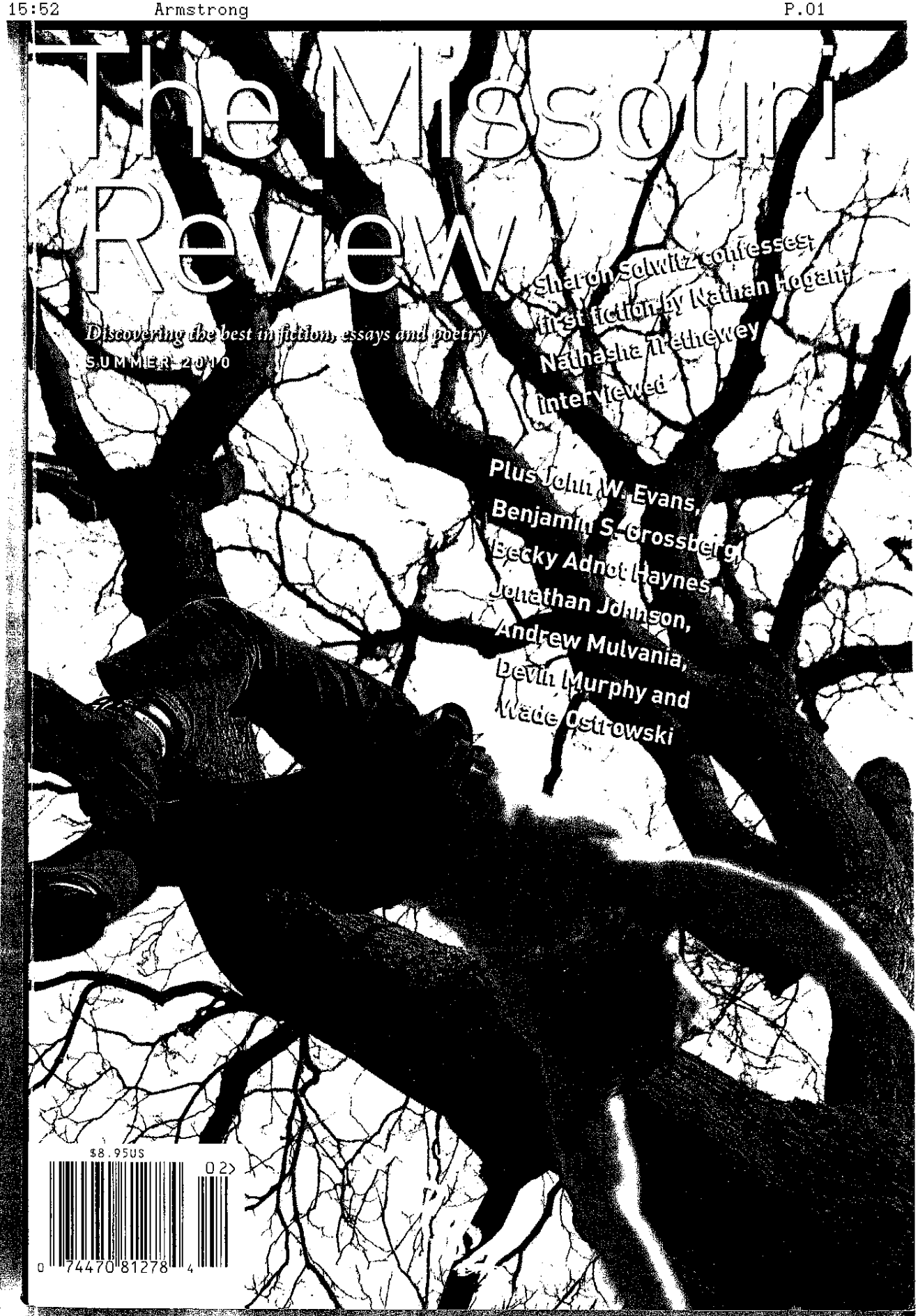

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SUMMER 2010

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first fiction by Nathan Hogan

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Nathan Hogan


Devin Murphy


Wade Ostrowski

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(contents)

"When God wants to get your attention, he always has to use blood."
—Ken Kesey

Between the Sailor and the Sail

The Faith of Ken Kesey

M. C. Armstrong

use blood."

(essay)

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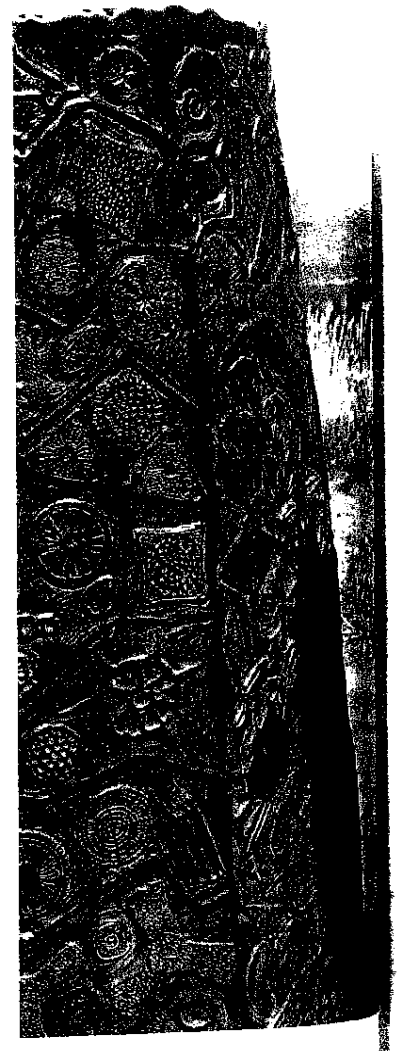
K E S E Y



I

Ken Kesey was stuck on the tracks in his mother's old Pontiac, his daughter Shannon and his son Jed and his dog Pretzels in the car with him, when a train came through and "ripped away everything from the backdoor back and sent the rest spinning down West Q."

"Shannon was crying and bloody," Kesey wrote. "On the floor my little dog whimpered, her teeth through her lip. The train was stopping somewhere behind me. Where was Jed?"

Kesey discovered an eight-shaped wound in his own head. He found his son and carried him into the house of a neighbor. "He didn't look hurt anywhere," Kesey wrote, "but oh he was such a desolate heaviness in my arms. I sat down in a chair, holding him. And he sighed, a curiously familiar sigh though I'd never heard another like it before, and I felt the life go out of him."

With his head bleeding, Kesey prayed out loud: "O dear Lord, please don't let him die."

He began to give his son mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Paramedics arrived and made no attempt to intervene. His injured daughter stopped crying to watch. "Finally," Kesey wrote, "Jed sighed again, the same soft wings except this time they bore the life back into its sacred vessel."[1]

I recently visited the Kesey home in Pleasant Hill, Oregon. The walls of the living room were painted red. There was a pitchfork on the west wall and a window the size of a small bus looking out on the lands to the north. I told Kesey's wife, Faye, that it was the most colorful home I'd ever seen.

"Not as much without him," she said.

Ken Kesey died in 2001. Faye, wearing a dark blue turtleneck, her sandy, shoulder-length hair just a shade darker than her University of Oregon sweatpants, led me up to his study on the second floor. A black cocker spaniel named Happy tried to follow us up the stairs.

"Happy was his," Faye said, carrying him for the final steps. The name seemed appropriate, with that constant curious smile some dogs have, the perpetual pant.

I looked around the room: psychedelic art next to prints of Vermeer, a sheep's-wool cover on the desk chair, photos of Kesey baling hay, two racks of hats in the back, one loaded with styles in straw, the other with more festive chapeaux: the Uncle Sam he sometimes donned at Grateful Dead concerts, the black sailor's cap he sometimes wore for readings. There was a cross on the wall.

I told Faye I'd heard her husband used to write in a building out back. She told me he had, but after his son died, he'd moved up here. "This used to be Jed's room," she said.

Ken Kesey was that rare hybrid of a man: he was both story and storyteller, the lightning and the rod. He was the author of a classic (*One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*) and the hero of another (*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*), and that doesn't even begin to paint the picture.

Kesey was a cattle farmer. He was a fugitive from justice who faked his own suicide and was hunted down by the FBI. In 1960 he took part in the government acid (LSD) tests, and several years later conducted tests of his own, a series of public gatherings which led to the rise of the Grateful Dead

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and perhaps the entire psychedelic movement. He was, according to Robert Stone, "The Prince of Possibilities."

Yes, Ken Kesey was a truly American phenomenon, but by the early 1980s it seemed he didn't want to be a phenomenon any longer. He hadn't released a novel in nearly twenty years. He'd retired the magic bus. He didn't appear to be interested in a second act. He'd become The Missing Author.

Of course his virtual disappearance from the stage of American popular culture created interest. And as it turned out, Kesey wasn't without a plan for a comeback. He'd raised his children. He still had time on his side. He was working on what his old friend Mike Hagen called "a brilliant screenplay" about the first Pendleton Rodeo, and according to his oldest son, Zane, he was also impassioned about an idea for a novel about Alaska.

This latter project would develop into *Sailor Song*, a novel that *New York Times* book reviewer Donald Westlake skewered when it arrived in 1992. Westlake compared Kesey to a punch-drunk boxer. He scolded the author for drug abuse. He wrote of wanting to kill the protagonist's African American sidekick, Emil Greer. He called Kesey's prose "out-of-control." He said that "*Sailor Song* does not make one single particle of sense." And after briefly describing the novel's hero, a middle-aged eco-prankster who likes to drop planeloads of manure on the enemies of environmentalists, Westlake finished his review with an angry recommendation. He wrote: "The publisher of *Sailor Song* is Viking at 375 Hudson Street in New York. If you happen to be flying over there with full tanks . . ."[2]

That was August of 1992. But in the early 1980s everything was still up in the air. Kesey's screenplay had not yet been shelved out of frustration with a figure from Hollywood; he hadn't yet made a movie producer the villain of *Sailor Song* and he hadn't concocted the story's strange, apocalyptic ending.

In the early 1980s there was just a seed in the brain of a writer whose sons had spent a summer working in Alaska.

Kesey, whose works always had a deep concern for wilderness, was taken with the Alaskan landscape when he went to visit Zane and Jed. Although historian Frederick Jackson Turner claimed the frontier had been closed since 1890, Alaska (which had just become a state in 1959) was suddenly an exception. There were places in Alaska in the early 1980s that were still unexplored (by white men), and although the *Exxon Valdez* spill had not yet happened, Kesey could read the writing on the wall. Newspapers from the time were full of stories about drilling in Alaska, suicide bombers in the Middle East, impassioned discussions about foreign oil and American dependence.

So he started to write, would come into the house late at night, excited about the story. His son Zane said he would read passages aloud and that the stuff was good. And his children weren't the only ones to notice. *Life* did a piece on the emerging novel in late 1982. *Esquire* interviewed him in 1983 and published an early excerpt of the book shortly thereafter.

That same year, *Newsweek*, in its November 28, 1983, issue, asked Kesey to contribute to a retrospective on John F. Kennedy's assassination. Kesey complied. His brief but poignant essay was framed between a piece by a nun and another by a director of TV commercials. There was a picture of him on a tractor with a bandana covering his scalp, his hair mostly white on the sides, but his face still beaming with youth and laughter. He was in his forties. He told the story of November 22, 1963. He had been with George Walker and Sandy Lehmann-Haupt. They were headed west, on peyote. Kesey wrote:

> *I never paid much attention to politics, but as we drove, and the news came in over that car radio, and we stopped in at service stations and Howard Johnson's and little fast-food places across the United States, a really profound thing happened to all of us. We felt like we were seeing the real soul of America with its shirt torn open in grief. Everybody you saw was united in shock and grief. The only thing close, I think, was with John Lennon. And as we drove we saw this look in people's faces, and they would look at us, and there was an energy to it. It was a good energy, and we liked it. We liked the feeling of the country and the look of the country and the look of the people. It was like a light was shining and everything else was foggy.*[3]

Two months after this essay was published, Kesey's youngest son, Jed Melvin Kesey, was killed in a crash.

Jed Kesey was smaller than his father, but who wasn't? He had the same blue eyes as the rest of the family, and his straight dark hair was more his mother's than his father's, and he often wore it parted down the middle, a little wild on the sides. Like many kids in the '80s, even ultraconservative commentator Ann Coulter, Jed Kesey loved the Grateful Dead.[4] He was a National Honor Society student, finished sixth in a class of more than a hundred and was a serious athlete as well. Upon graduation, he wanted to wrestle at the University of Oregon, just like his father.

In addition to being one of the most talented writers of the 1960s, Ken Kesey had also been an Olympic-caliber freestyle wrestler. One can easily understand a generation's fascination. Kesey was the stuff of gods: a curly-haired philosopher-warrior brimming with visions. But whereas the father was a champion in the 177-pound weight class, the son struggled in the 150-pound slot.

Early in the 1983–1984 season, discouraged by his lack of progress on the mat, Jed Kesey made a choice. Ron Finley, coach of the University of Oregon's team as well as the American Olympic squad from that same year, said Jed decided to quit the team in the middle of the season. Then one day he came back, suddenly inspired to wrestle for his love of the sport, not his father's.[5]

Jed's brother, Zane, had also wrestled for the U of O. The entire Kesey clan regularly showed up for meets, often making up more than half of the crowd. The night of Friday, January 20, was no exception. Despite the meet being several hours away, in Pendleton, Kesey made the trip with Faye and Mike Hagen, a close friend who was living there at the time. The event was held at Blue Mountain Community College, just down the road from where the first Pendleton Rodeo was held in 1911. Kesey was there to do some last-minute research for his screenplay.

He had been working on the script since 1976 and wanted to have it complete within the next few months so he could announce the project at the September roundup. Pendleton was an important place for him. It was where his father used to take him to see the rodeos in the '40s, trips that gave the young author his first exposure to the way Native Americans were treated.

I used to take the bus . . . down through the Columbia River Gorge where they were putting in the Dalles Dam to provide electricity to that part of Oregon so the fields could be irrigated. . . . One time,as we got closer to this dam project, we were pulled over by the cops. We were in a big line of traffic. The bus driver got out and walked up to see what was happening. He came back and told us, "One of them

crazy drunk Indians took a knife between his teeth and ran out into the highway and into the grill of an oncoming diesel truck, which was bringing conduit and piping to the dam project.". . . It was really the beginning of Cuckoo's Nest*—the notion of what you have to pay for a lifestyle.*[6]

January 20 was a cold and snowy night, typical for that time of year in northern Oregon. Jed Kesey lost his match to a young man named Jeff Birbeck, 14-4, but the team emerged victorious, defeating the University of Montana, 29-9.[7]

After the meet ended, Jed talked to his father about one of the assistant coaches, Dean Dixon. Finley, who was training the Olympic squad in Colorado Springs, wasn't there that night. It was Dixon who would be driving the team to the next meet in Pullman, Washington. Reportedly, Jed and Ken talked about Dixon's driving being terrible, and although Faye didn't believe Jed would say such a thing, she did remember on a previous occasion driving with Ken behind the team bus, watching Dixon wildly fishtailing through icy conditions.

In any event, perhaps the problem was as much the car as the driver, the 1976 GMC Rally Van the university had borrowed from Fircrest Poultry, a vehicle with only two seatbelts, no snow studs and doors that wouldn't even fully close.

At eleven o'clock the next morning, in Pomeroy, Washington, Dixon made a left turn on a steep slope. He began to skid to the right side of the mountain road. The 1976 GMC Rally hit the guardrail and launched into the air, tumbling three hundred feet down an embankment, throwing the entire team from the cab. The van came to a rest on its tires. One boy, Lorenzo West, died immediately. Another, Larry Topliff, was left a paraplegic. Jed Kesey, lying in the snow, was still alive.

The press descended upon Deaconess Hospital in Spokane. It was Super Bowl weekend. Ron Finley arrived from Colorado, took over the phones at the triage desk. Photographers snapped pictures. Journalists asked for interviews with family members of the team while Ken and Zane stayed with Jed, carrying plastic bags of snow to pack his head

. . . trying to stop the swelling that all the doctors told us would follow as blood poured to the bruised brain. And we noticed some reaction to the cold. And the snow I brushed across his lips to ease the bloody parch where all the tubes ran in caused him to roll his arms a little. Then more. Then too much, with the little

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monitor lights bleeping faster and faster, and I ran to the phone to call the motel where I had just sent most of the family for some rest.[8]

Kesey thought his son might make it. Faye knew fairly quickly from listening to the doctors that Jed's brain stem was destroyed, but, she told me, "it was so hard for Ken because he looked so alive. There were bruises and his arm was in a sling, but it really just looked like he'd been in a hard wrestling match."

Of course, there was also the past, the memory of the way Jed had pulled through that day on Q Street, the way prayers had been answered with a sigh. But eventually, Kesey himself could see what was happening:

We could see it in his clenching fists, his threshing legs. And then aw Jesus we saw it in his face. The peacefully swollen unconscious blank suddenly was filled with expression. He came back in. He checked it out, and he saw better than we could begin to imagine how terribly hurt he was. His poor face grimaced with pain. His purple brow knitted and his teeth actually did try to clench on the tubes. And then, O my old buddies, he cried. The doctors had already told us in every gentle way they could that he was brain dead, gone for good, but we all saw it . . . the quick flickerback of consciousness, the awful hurt being realized, the tears saying "I don't think I can do 'er this time, Dad."[9]

Thus, Ken Kesey and his wife began the process of paperwork. By six o'clock the following morning, Jed's kidneys were in two new bodies.

II

"It is a burial pine, Mister Cody. A ponderosa, hollowed out by lightning. I keep the bones of our little boy in the hollow. It is very old and very scarred, but it stays alive and keeps standing. I say prayers to this tree."
—Ken Kesey, *Last Go Round*

In a nation where in 1984 our most fundamental acts and rituals were increasingly being mechanized, the Keseys elected to conduct a funeral on their own, right down to the coffin.

Along with friends, they built Jed's coffin out of clear pine and a redwood trim. The lining, stitched into the wood by Kesey's wife, was made of a Tibetan brocade given by Mountain Girl, his ex-lover. The design was "gilt and silver and russet phoenixbird patterns, unfurling in flames." Jed's pillow was stuffed with down from a swan Zane had mistaken for a goose and killed—an illegal kill, yes, but an accident best left unadvertised at the time.[10]

Zane and Jed's fraternity brothers dug the hole between the chicken coop and the pond.

Such a scene, strange to the modern eye, would certainly have been recognized by William Faulkner as a traditional way to cope with loss. But Ken Kesey, who often talked of Faulkner (and had *As I Lay Dying* on the bookshelf in his study), was never too concerned about seeming strange.

In his own community, Ken Kesey wasn't a stranger. One can see his influence everywhere in Eugene and Pleasant Hill, whether it's yogurt from the family creamery in a local store, a statue of the writer reading to children on Willamette Street, or a farmer in a tie-dyed shirt ploughing his fields. In the Willamette Valley that winter, there was vast sympathy for the man who had disappeared from the rest of the country. The family received hundreds of letters, and reading through local newspapers, one finds commiseration and indignation from the most unlikely of sources. A week after the accident, on February 1, 1984, Arista Miller, an eleven-year-old girl, wrote this brief letter to the *Register-Guard*:

I feel there should be seatbelts on school buses because then kids would be a lot safer. When we go on field trips it's real crowded and if there was an accident a lot of kids would probably get killed or seriously injured because there are no seat belts on buses. The new car seat law is terrific, but what about older kids? Shouldn't they buckle up, too?

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Kesey wrote a letter of his own to Senator Mark Hatfield, a document that bears the mark of his best writing—a rhythmic colloquial voice blended with a strong sense of a moral struggle, a grappling with the notion of responsibility:

From the very first my response to this anguish has been nagged by a terrible teeth-grinding of blame, of blame un-laid. I tried to stanch it. Don't blame, I told myself. It just hurts people. There's been enough hurt already. Turn the other cheek, I kept telling myself. But the nagging kept on: "What if the other cheek is somebody else's kid? In some other slapdash rig? On some other ill-fated underfunded trip next wrestling season? Or next volleyball season? Moreover, what if this young blood has been spilled not merely to congregate people and their feelings, but also to illuminate a thing gone wrong?"[11]

Kesey was seeking wisdom, illumination. He was contending with anger toward the rules of the NCAA, the designs of General Motors, the paltry budgets of athletic departments and, yes, the federal government and its costly obsession with war. Although Ronald Reagan was preaching "Morning in America," Ken Kesey saw a different picture. Days after his son's death, Reagan proclaimed in his state of the union address that "America's back, standing tall," but in Oregon there was a drought and a recession, unemployment as high as 16 percent in some parts of the state. In his letter to Hatfield, Kesey wrote:

The other night, as I watched the national news, it came to me. We were lobbing those 16-inch shells into the hills of Lebanon. The Pentagon spokesman said he wasn't certain exactly which faction we were hitting, but he reassured us that we were certainly hitting somebody. Then he was asked what each of those shells costs. The price was something enormous. I can't remember. But the spokesman countered by saying that the price for national defense is always high, yet it must be paid. And I began to get mad, Senator. I had finally found where the blame must be laid: that the money we are spending for national defense is not defending us from the villains real and near, the awful villains of ignorance, and cancer, and heart disease and highway death. How many school buses could be outfitted with seatbelts with the money spent for one of those 16-inch shells?[12]

At the end of 1984, the Keseys filed a lawsuit against General Motors, the state of Oregon, Fircrest Poultry, the Pac-10 and the NCAA. During this time, it was difficult for Kesey to write. Driving home from town, there was always the dramatic left turn before the driveway, the echo of another left. Inside the barn the past was everywhere, nowhere. But instead of leaving

Jed's room a ghostly shrine, Kesey moved in among the things, would sometimes look at the pictures and medals on the corkboard. Sometimes, to get a little solitude, he'd walk across the road to the trailhead for Mount Pisgah. He'd walk up the mountain his son used to run when he was training for the team. He'd climb through the savannah oak, the scotch broom and the blackberry, old man's beard like Spanish moss on the rotting limbs of tall trees that must have seemed gothic and vertiginous at times. And the top of Mount Pisgah: there was little cover up there, which was how all the mountains had been back when Indians burned all the trees to expose the hunt. This was the sort of place where you could feel the wind.

Looking out from the tallgrass meadows, Kesey could see other mountains covered with firs. He could see the coastal range to the west, the land he'd written about in what he believed was his greatest novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*. He could see the orchards of neighbors, the snowy cap of Diamond Peak. He could see the gray retirement-home high-rise at the base of Skinner's Butte, and, looking down, to the east, he could see the family farm where his wife, some days, was alone with her grief.

The desire for solitude during this time must have been fraught with new implications. To be alone was to be away. To write about Alaska was to write about a place he'd been with his son. To climb Mount Pisgah was to see windy shapes in the meadows where his son had caught his breath before heading back down the trail toward home.

If the comforts of solitude were no longer the same, imagine the scouring effects of a trial, the long days of legalese, the occasional bursts of graphic detail returning the father to the son, over and over .

The buildup—the motions and depositions—took time. The trial finally began in 1986. The Kesey's attorney was Art Johnson, arguably the best lawyer in Eugene. There were forty-five witnesses, two hundred exhibits. The details of the crash were replayed over and over. Faye had to testify. As Jed's personal representative, she sat in the plaintiff's seat with the lawyers while Ken sat in the spectator section. They were told their son could have reasonably been expected to live to the age of 59.4 years. They listened as the arguments were being made on their behalf, claims of negligence that bore a touch of resemblance to the lawsuit Ralph Nader had successfully brought years earlier against GM in response to the faulty design of the Chevrolet Corvair.

But Nader was the advocate for safety and the common man. Kesey was a man of letters on LSD sitting atop the magic bus, hurtling across the

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"Who won?" Kesey asked in a press conference held after the trial. "The Grinch won. The Scrooge won. The insurance companies won. But they won't win for long because we're going to keep fighting this battle."

country while the wildest driver in the history of literature, Neal Cassady, hero of Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*, negotiated the hairpin turns. Ken Kesey was the irresponsible leader of the hippies. Ken Kesey "didn't make a single particle of sense." He was a burnout who disappeared from the responsibilities of public life. No, Ken Kesey bore little resemblance to men like Ralph Nader and his band of raiders, advocates for safety and responsibility.

A look at the second half of Kesey's life reveals complications in the caricature, though. Ken Kesey, national symbol of irresponsibility, was the local emblem of its opposite. Ken Kesey, national symbol of iconoclasm and counterculture, was actually a devoted Christian citizen.

When his son died, Kesey's life was shattered. Looking around him, he saw himself in a lawsuit, surrounded by the language of the law. Looking on TV and in the papers he saw a war on drugs, war in space, war in the Middle East, recession in Oregon, televangelists in handcuffs, and perhaps he also saw oil prices dropping and new poverty in Alaska, and perhaps he saw the police on the local news announce the discovery of a bag of marijuana at the scene of his son's accident, and maybe he saw that the very senator he'd written to for help was being bugged by Charles Wick, director of the United States Information Agency, a man who was also bugging conversations with Kirk Douglas, the man Kesey had originally wanted to play McMurphy in the movie version of *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*. With an outside world like this, one has to ask, what's the story inside?

When I sat down with Faye Kesey for the first time, in the back room of special collections at the University of Oregon, I asked her if the death of Jed had shaken the faith of her husband. "His faith never wavered," she said. "His faith was always very strong."

Faye Kesey teaches Bible-study classes in town. I'd never met her before this conversation about her son, and her first few answers were understandably guarded, perhaps a wary response to the legions of pilgrims who'd come to Oregon to pick her husband's bones, steal paint from the bus. But the conversation slowly relaxed. People have different ideas about the divisions between the characters of the left and right, the caricatures. Because Kesey was an "iconoclast," many Americans thought of him as a pagan or a Buddhist, or perhaps a flaccid New Age amalgam of everything but the country's dominant faith.[13]

Faye talked about the mystery of her husband. She explained that yes, it was true: he used to roll the I-Ching before writing, an exercise in which one tosses coins that yield up hexagrams that yield up passages of Confucian wisdom, poetry similar to what one finds in Lao-Tzu. This practice was not an element of faith so much as a meditation, a way of finding focus for the writing of the day, just as his discussions of karma were not so much a profession of faith as they were a way of "talking to the culture."

She told me that her husband believed in the resurrection, and although he was fascinated by the Old Testament and often sought guidance in the stories of Christ, he didn't usually go to church. She didn't know ultimately what to make of his approach to faith.

In 1994, he told *Paris Review* interviewer Robert Faggen:

I'm for mystery, not interpretive answers. The answer is never the answer. What's really interesting is the mystery. If you seek the mystery instead of the answer, you'll always be seeking. I've never seen anybody really find the answer, but they think they have. So they stop thinking. But the job is to seek mystery, evoke mystery, plant a garden in which strange plants grow and mysteries bloom. The need for mystery is greater than the need for an answer.[14]

On the morning of December 24, 1986, the Keseys waited for the verdict. By this point in the trial, the suit was limited to the State of Oregon and Fircrest Poultry, the company that had lent the school the 1976 GMC Rally Van. In the months prior to that Christmas Eve day, the Keseys had settled with the three other parties: the NCAA, the PAC-10 and GM. According to Faye, the settlement wasn't large, somewhere around fifty thousand dollars. But the settlement was not just about money. It also included a means by which the Kesey family could petition athletic organizations for the adoption of improved travel and safety rules.[15]

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Prior to the court's decision, the arguments of the community had already led to the Oregon Board of Higher Education instituting new travel rules, including mandatory seatbelts for every passenger in every bus.

At eleven A.M., the Keseys returned to the courtroom, Ken in a rare jacket and tie, considerably aged since the photograph of the man in the bandana laughing on the tractor. The decision was 9-3 in favor of the state, 10-2 in favor of the poultry company.

"Who won?" Kesey asked in a press conference held after the trial. "The Grinch won. The Scrooge won. The insurance companies won. But they won't win for long because we're going to keep fighting this battle."[16] And indeed they did. It wasn't until 1988 that the court of appeals finally affirmed the lower court's ruling. This would not be a glorious act of public redemption, a lesson for the Grinch. The lessons were mostly private.

In Kesey's interview with the *Paris Review* in 1994, one doesn't get the feeling of the caricature—the burned-out boxer—that Donald Westlake evoked in his review of *Sailor Song*. However, one does get a sense of a man who has wrestled with loss. When asked by Faggen about *Sailor Song*, Kesey said, "I set out to do this book in the early 1980s but got dragged away, mainly when my son Jed was killed. That really took the wind out of my sails." Although he didn't mention his son's death again, he did discuss what he called "the Great American Hollow," a notion Faye and I addressed in our first conversation.

As a young reader, I could see the obvious connections between Kesey and the Beats. But I also felt in Kesey a kinship with the core of American letters, with writers like Melville and Emerson and Thoreau, righteous men like Edward Abbey who were deeply concerned with civil disobedience and wilderness, not wilderness just as a random scattering of national parks but as a setting of spiritual strength, the sort of place you go when you're in what a young Kesey called that space "between the tick and the tock."[17]

In other words, wilderness as church.

When Faggen asked Kesey what he sought to explore when he got on "the bus" after giving up the novel back in 1964, Kesey responded:

What I explore in all my work: wilderness. I like that saying of Thoreau's that "in wilderness is the preservation of the world." Settlers on this continent from the beginning have been seeking that wilderness and its wildness. The explorers and pioneers were out on the edge, seeking that wildness because they could sense that in Europe everything had become locked tight with things. The things were owned by the same people, and all of the roads went in the same direction forever.

When we got here there was a sense of possibility and new direction, and it had to do with wildness. Throughout the work of James Fenimore Cooper there is what I call the American terror. It's very important to our literature, and it's important to who we are: the terror of the Hurons out there, the terror of the bear, the avalanche, the tornado—whatever may be over the next horizon. It could be the biggest, most awful thing in the world. As we came to the end of the continent, we manufactured our terror. We put together the bomb. Now even that bomb is betraying us. We don't have the bomb hanging over our heads to terrify us and give us reason to dress up in manly deerskin and go forth to battle it. There's something we're afraid of, but it doesn't have the clear delineation of the terror the Hurons gave us or the hydrogen bomb in the cold war. It's fuzzy, and it's fuzzy because the people who are in control don't want you to draw a bead on the real danger, the real terror in this country. When people ask me about LSD, I always make a point of telling them you can have the shit scared out of you with LSD because it exposes something, something hollow. Let's say you have been getting on your knees and bowing and worshipping; suddenly, you take LSD, and you look, and there's just a hole, there's nothing there. The Catholic Church fills this hole with candles and flowers and litanies and opulence. The Protestant Church fills it with hand-wringing and pumped-up squeezing emotions because they can't afford the flowers and the candles. The Jews fill this hole with weeping and browbeating and beseeching of the sky: "How long, how long are you gonna treat us like this?" The Muslims fill it with rigidity and guns and a militant ethos. But all of us know that's not what is supposed to be in that hole. After I had been at Stanford two years, I was into LSD. I began to see that the books I thought were the true accounting books—my grades, how I'd done in other schools, how I'd performed at jobs, whether I had paid off my car or not—were not at all the true books. There were other books that were being kept, real books. In those real books is the real accounting of your life. And the mind says, "Oh, this is titillating." So you want to take some more LSD and see what else is there. And soon I had the experience that everyone who's ever dabbled in psychedelics has. A big hand grabs you by the back of the neck, and you hear a voice saying, "So you want to see the books. Okay, here are the books." And it pushes your face right down into all your cruelties and all of your meanness, all the times that you have been insensitive, intolerant, racist, sexist. It's all there, and you read it. That's what you're really stuck with. You can't take your nose up off the books. You hate them. You hate who you are. You hate the fact that somebody has been keeping track, just as you feared. You hate it, but you can't move your arms for eight hours. Before you take any acid again you start trying to juggle the books. You start trying to be a little better person. Then you get the surprise. The next thing that happens

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Kesey's own wisdom seems to suggest that our energy is often misspent in interpretation, that there's a middle ground between interpretation and silence. Seeking mystery—seeking the hollow itself—is "the answer," the place where you experience a voice calling out in the wilderness.

is that you're leaning over looking at the books, and you feel that lack of the hand at the back of your neck. The thing that was forcing you to look at the books is no longer there. There's only a big hollow, the great American wild hollow that is scarier than hell, scarier than purgatory or Satan. It's the fact that there isn't any hell or there isn't any purgatory, there isn't any Satan. And all you've got is Sartre sitting there with his momma—harsh, bleak, worse than guilt. And if you've got courage, you go ahead and examine that hollow. That's the wilderness that I've always wanted to explore, and it's connected to the idea of freedom, but it's a terrifying freedom. I'm working on a book called The Seven Prayers of Grandma Whittier. *The idea is to take someone who is a very strong, very devout Christian and put her into a situation in which she loses her faith and show how she wrestles and comes back from this hollow. And so my grandma, who's a hundred years old this year, and I are in some way linked in an excursion into her dark hole of Alzheimer's. You know she must be something even though she can't remember the Lord's Prayer or read the Bible anymore. She's alive, but that's it. . . . That's the new wilderness. It's the same old wilderness, just no longer up on that hill or around that bend, or in the gully. It's the fact that there is no more hill or gully, that the hollow is there and you've got to explore the hollow with faith. If you don't have faith that there is something down there, pretty soon when you're in the hollow, you begin to get scared and start shaking. That's when you stop taking acid and start taking coke and drinking booze and start trying to fill the hollow with depressants and Valium. Real warriors like William Burroughs or Leonard Cohen or Wallace Stevens examine the hollow as well as anybody; they get in there, look far into the dark and yet come out with poetry.*[18]

This passage may well represent a testament of both artistry and faith. And there is much here to consider: the relationship between terror and faith, stigmatized "drugs" versus conventional "medicines," geographical and psychological notions of wilderness—what we mean when we talk about heaven and hell in America. Yet Kesey's own wisdom seems to suggest that our energy is often misspent in interpretation, that there's a middle ground between interpretation and silence. Seeking mystery—seeking the hollow itself—is "the answer," the place where you experience a voice calling out in the wilderness.

As a bright sky broke down on a late May day, I turned out of the Kesey farm, could see the practically bald knob of Mount Pisgah, a pile of black brush burning at the base of the eastern trailhead, the one Jed was likely to take for his training runs, the one his father would take during the years that followed.

I pulled over. I liked the smell of the wood smoke. I wasn't ready to go home. I stopped and looked back at the farm, the fields all around. I returned several days later to climb the mountain, to try to see what Kesey must've seen, to try to feel more of his story.

After the trial concluded, the Keseys took the remaining money from their son's bank account, as well as some from the settlement, and bought the University of Oregon a new van, a vehicle that was still in use until last year. Such a gracious act is more than most of us might expect from ourselves, especially in light of the long battle and the petty payoff. But there was more. As I walked up the trail on that warm blue morning, I saw turkey buzzards wheeling in the sky, saw their perches in the Douglas firs, the tall-grass meadows at the top of the mountain, the warm, bright silence of that space broken only by the occasional sand-shaker sound of wind in the grass.

Then, in front of me, I noticed kids a little younger than me sitting atop a monument. As I got closer, I could see what Kesey had done with the rest of the money. Pete Helzer was both a wrestling coach and a sculptor. With the remainder of the money from the settlement, Kesey commissioned this piece from Helzer. A recent visitor to Mount Pisgah, John Gustafson, described it well:

The monument looked like a bronze tree stump. It had vertical slots on the side, not horizontal grooves like the ones cut by loggers so they could insert planking to stand on while felling huge spruce and fir trees with crosscut saws. The bronze sides of the stump featured reliefs forming fossils of ancient mollusks and

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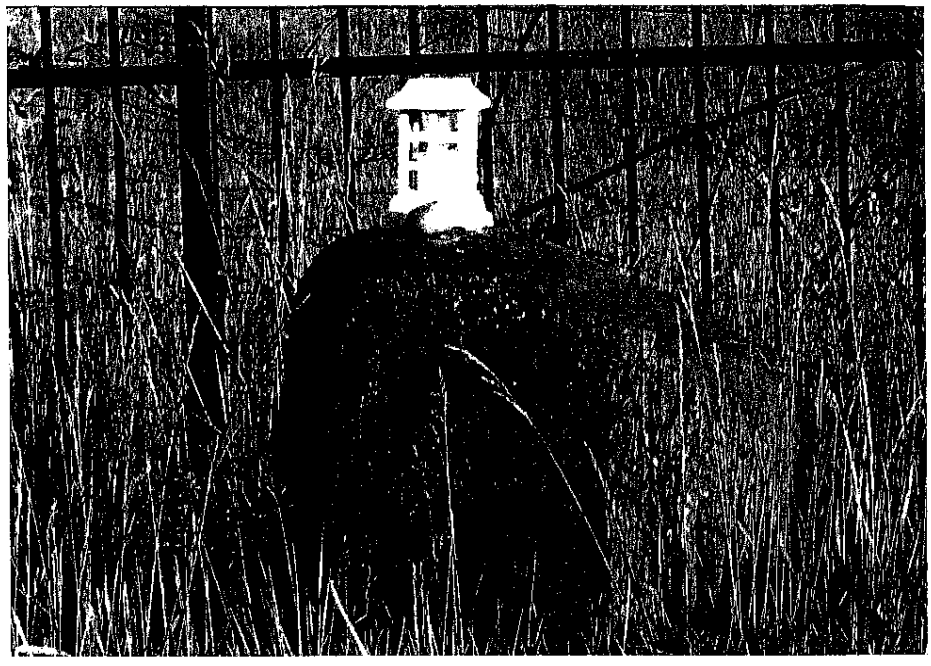

crustaceans, leaves, and ferns, correlated to time periods 10 million to 200 million years ago. Notes gave the longitude and latitude.[19]

The sculpture appears to be a grave for wilderness, land without humans. There's no mention of Kesey or his son. But there is a hole in the middle that gives way to a very particular view of the valley. I sat down in the grass, felt the sun and the wind. Moving closer, I looked through the hole, looked down at the land on the edge of the woods and saw the converted red barn.

There's an empty office down there that used to be a boy's bedroom. There's an arthritic dog named Happy. There's a peacock in a chicken coop, and behind it a black iron enclosure around two stones: one for a son and one for a father, the letter K inscribed on the west gate, a heart on the east, just as the sun sets on the front of the red barn and rises behind the shady little pond in the back yard—where an old bus was once parked.

That mythical bus is now in a gargantuan garage, more monument than machine. It's no longer safe to drive, and the paint has been chipped by vandals, the glass spiderwebbed and shattered in places. Next to it now is a newer bus, another old bus with new and wild designs, many of them painted by Kesey himself. And although he's gone and the van he donated to the university is now retired, this other bus is still driven by his son and his friends, the dense, fiery surges of peacock feathers and purple handprints

and golden stars and blue vortexes a moving vision of a man who wrestled gleefully with the big picture, the great never-made movie of tragedy and comedy, explosions and roses, fruit and blood, wheels within wheels in the electric sky, the landscapes of Ken Kesey's mind enshrined in the old metal like an outtake from the Bible—like the brightest tomb you've ever seen.

Notes

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3. Ken Kesey, "Loss of Innocence." *Newsweek*, November 28, 1983. 78-79.
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6. Robert Faggen, *Paris Review* (Spring 1994). 61-94.
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