ANDREW HEM

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COURTESY THE ARTIST

TOM BENTLEY

Tripping with Twain and Thompson

Taking Writers Mark Twain and Hunter S. Thompson to Heart

For much of Mark Twain's life, the horizon was what he aimed for. If he hankered to go West today, he'd ditch the wobbly wagon for Hunter Thompson's Great Red Shark, a fire-engine red '71 Chevy convertible. At the end of his Adventures, Huck Finn had to "light out for the Territory"—but he would have deep-sixed the raft and dug the Shark. Twain and Thompson's visions were the same: fuck it, and keep moving, in style, at speed, and with the top down.

Americans have a good-natured restlessness: we come, we look around, we keep going to look some more. That kind of crazylegs imperative runs through our history. For a wide swath of the populace, seeing what is over the next hill—and the next after that—is the thing. Reading the journals of Lewis and Clark, you can hear the yips of discovery and delight behind every dry catalogue of fauna or tilt of topography. They were on a road trip, pure and simple. The siren song of adventure, the new, the unseen pushed them, government commission be damned.

Before I had enough money for a Shark of my own, I used my thumb to make tracks down the road. Ahead of turning twenty, I hitchhiked multiple times between Los Angeles and Seattle and across Canada from Vancouver to Ontario. Sure, I'd been influenced by *On the Road*: Kerouac had the same mad thirst to fill his lungs with highway air and his eyes with the syncopated jazz of roadway improvisation, which is at the heart of travel. He *had* to hit the highway.

Kerouac partnered with Neal Cassady, the legendary jive-talking, womanizing, behind-the-wheel sermonizing magician for many legs of his continental cruises, and despite all the trouble and heartbreak the two caused in their various romantic, financial, and wine-drenched entanglements, they shared another slant that's so very Thompsonian Americana: a kind of deep optimism curled within the cynicism, a feeling that, if curdled, it's still all gonna turn out okay, and what the hell, let's drive as close to that cliff as we can—it's the only way to take in the view. What a terrible twosome Hunter and Neal would have made—a blizzard of mad declarations, a hurricane of motion and tumult, an earthquake of crazed desires and crazier fulfillment.

Of course Neal would've had to drive, but that would've given Hunter a chance to light the pipe.

I took Kerouac fully to heart: I hitchhiked across Canada with his coast-to-coast thumbings in mind. Once I hitchhiked to Seattle from LA barefoot, because that was my year of sniffily adhering to the mantra of "If you wear shoes, the earth is made of shoe leather." Barefoot I might have been, but I had a shielding copy of *On the Road* in my backpack, a road-tripping talisman.

Out of high school, once I got a little dough, I bought a giant, black '48 Dodge in partnership with one of my pals. That was long ago, so the fact that we bought realistic-looking machine guns to poke out of its big windows at startled passersby was funnier than it would be today, when someone might shoot back. But wheeling that massive black machine up and down the Pacific Coast Highway with the windows down gave me a taste for voluptuous American steel, the giant steering wheel piloting a bulky beast.

That '48 infused in me a need to find substance in a car, substance of look, of mass. Many of today's cars seem to drive themselves (and will do so soon enough); they are polite and transparent and subservient under the slight wiggling of your fingers at the wheel. That's not a car, that's a trained terrier. Give me a vehicle like my old '62 Caddy, a vast expanse of carchitecture, a car whose rear end was in another time zone.

Though I never took that two-toned beauty on any real road trips, it was a missile I once took up to 105 mph, a blissed-out state in which the car's chassis only had a modest communication with the frame, so that it felt like the car was rolling through the air, softly shuddering and shifting like a giant dreaming lion. There's an American Dreaminess in trusting your fate to those moments, a kind of reptile-brain bravado like those zestily undertaken in so many of Hunter's exploits.

A couple more years out of high school, the friend I'd partnered with to buy the old '48 Dodge had the bad sense to team up with me again: we bought a titanic (and indeed it devoured road—and fuel—like a doomed ocean liner) '64 Dodge station wagon and left Southern California to find jobs somewhere in Northern California. That we ended up living and working in Las Vegas for the next year made no sense, but we didn't need for much sense to be made in those days. Many were the fears there, many were the loathings, but through it all we were wide-eyed with wonder.

I didn't committedly have Hunter's appetite or capacity for high-grade pharmaceuticals, but I did bring my own variant of a bloodshot-eyed, missing-the-steering-wheel mind to the blackjack tables now and then—and sometimes more often—which figured heavily in my leaving Las Vegas on the cash-light side.

I finally got a chance to own a variant of the Great Red Shark when I lived in Seattle and bought one of the sweetest vehicles I ever owned: a '65 Galaxie 500, for which I paid less than two hundred dollars. After I had some cheap valve work done, the cherry-red Galaxie became a fire-breather: a charmer with the perfect V-8 purr, something that no computer-tuned lithium-ion battery pack buzzer will ever have. Okay, okay, so fourteen miles to the gallon isn't economizing—knowing that when I leaned on the gas pedal I'd get that soulful sound and satisfying surge wasn't something I put a price on.

Driving that car down to California on the move back only made me hunger to take a *real* road trip. A fair chunk of time passed, but I had my moment in the early nineties. I drove across the country for the first time, and I was alone, so every decision seemed powerfully *mine*: when to stop, when to go, when to blast through the Dakotas at speed or slow down for days of beignets and coffee in New Orleans. Of course, I had to stop by Vegas on that trip as well, and I spent some more time laying my money down on the green felt—and as it turned out, leaving it there. But no matter, the play's the thing.

Hunter's life and work seemed to carry a corner of bedrock America: a kind of devil-may-care enthusiasm conjoined with naïveté, a willingness to dream big, an urge to get out there, roll down the window, eat some country. Even when he was reporting on the vilest exercises of venal politicians, the slanderings of democracy, Hunter himself seemed to remain in a kind of pure, Zen state (if you can deal with the contradiction between "pure" and the apothecary's shelf of substances in which he bathed his fervid brain). To me, Hunter trustingly left the keys in the ignition, and he was already ready at a moment's notice to put the car—his life—in gear.

I'll pull this Shark into the driveway by circling back to Huck Finn. Huck was Twain's greatest invention, a kindred soul with Twain himself. Huck's long, meandering wanderlust down the Mississippi mirrored Twain's westward gallop, a flight to find fame and fortune, but more tellingly, soul. Twain found the West big enough to hold the yarns that first made him famous. He found jumping frogs, obtuse rams, and wily blue jays, but mostly he found his writer's voice. The call of the road (and the misfortune of his multiple crushed fortunes over the years) tingled in Twain's ears most of his days.

I've always felt close to Twain, but I wanted him even closer, so ten years ago I had a fine black-and-white rendering of him tattooed on my left bicep. The bicep isn't much, but the tattoo is a dandy, down to the lit cigar. Mark left his mark on me, forever.

Twain and Thompson, great writers with an unerring ear for the voice of the people. Both unveilers of the truth, even when it hurt, both skeptical, occasionally disillusioned, both witty, cutting, both wise guys, occasionally wise men. Both big souls.

Both irreplaceable, and both drivers of the Great Red Shark, around, across, and through this big country of ours. Both still driving, because the road goes on forever.

Tom Bentley is a business writer and editor, an essayist, and a fiction writer. (He does not play banjo.) He's published hundreds of freelance pieces—ranging from first-person essays to travel pieces to more journalistic subjects—in newspapers, magazines, and online. His small-press short story collection, *Flowering and Other Stories*, was published in the spring of 2012. His self-published book on finding and cultivating your writer's voice, *Think Like a Writer: How to Write the Stories You See*, was published in June of 2015. He would like you to pour him a manhattan right at five.