

ROBERT BHARDA

Tahitian, 2017

Digital image from organic collage, 36 x 24 in



COURTESY THE ARTIST

PETER WORTSMAN

Excerpted from Pacific Hieroglyphs, a Western

Memories from
a 1976 road trip
across America

“There is no quiet place in the white man’s cities.”

Remark attributed to Chief Seattle

Before We Get Started¹

New York’s a tough whistle-stop to skip out on. Perennial traffic jams at all river crossings discourage escape. The moment the foolhardy traverse the Hudson, the authorities activate this invisible electronic dragnet, a kind of psychic leash implanted in your soles in the seemingly benign footprinting session in the hospital at birth, a delayed-action surveillance system programmed to grow with you, to sprout and spread its tentacles little by little, and, in the eventuality of attempted defection, to send out intermittent shock waves to the urinary and digestive tracts, reeling in all would-be escapees and simultaneously ensuring a steady patient pool for the city’s plethora of specialists.

Cutting Loose

“Just trying to get untangled.” That’s how I put it to the late Nevada Ned, one of several luminaries I linked up with on my way west. It was the summer of ’76 and the highways were swarming with long-haired searchers like myself engaged in the latest round of the great American migration, only their hair fell mostly straight and mine knotted into suspect curlicues and kinks.

Ned was not unsympathetic. A white-bearded western bard originally from Cleveland, ex-able-bodied seaman, railroad bum, prestidigitator, card shark, tall tale teller, amateur Egyptologist, and former anarchist candidate for the U.S. Senate from the state of Nevada (run out of Reno for preaching public takeover of the banks, bars, and casinos), he was himself experimenting with stasis in the state of Washington at the time, then entwined in marriage number two, before flying the coop to reinvent himself yet again as an irascible alternative radio talk show host in California.

We powwowed in what he fondly referred to as the magic circle, a cloistered corner of his garden in Spokane,

¹ While all the names but my own have been altered in the following account, the events described happened pretty much as I lived them, albeit eroded by memory.