

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 Started<sup>1</sup>**  
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,

<sup>1</sup> 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.



smoking his home-grown crop, camouflaged by tall stalks of native corn and noisy crows circling overhead.

“What’s your game, friend?” asked Ned, visually and ideologically a cross between Santa Claus, Bakunin, and Smokey Bear, smiling expansively.

Two tokes of his peace pipe is all it took. “Actually,” I confided in a conspiratorial whisper, “I’m a secret emis-sary from the Planet Doubt!”

“Welcome to Anarchy, capital of the Eternal State of Chaos!” Ned beamed back, his smile like a mighty sus-pension bridge spanning the width of his white whiskers from ear to ear.

“I’m a time traveler from the eastern time zone,” I riffed on under the influence, “traveling incognito as a cosmic vacuum cleaner salesman.”

“DAMN IT, MAN,” Ned winced, the smile suddenly inverted into an upside-down horseshoe of disgust. “WE DON’T WANT OUR VACUUM CLEANED. THIS IS THE WILD WEST, MISTER, WE LIKE IT GOOD ’N MESSY!”

The crows, meanwhile, were noisily feeding on Ned’s corn, but Ned didn’t seem to mind. On the contrary, he welcomed them as fellow freeloaders off the planet’s sur-plus and useful decoys to distract the authorities from other crops. “CRAW CRAW!” he squawked back, flapping his arms in winged solidarity. Generous by nature, averse to all forms of repression, and ideologically committed to the fair distribution of wealth, Ned had a soft spot for outlaws of every feather—“Great American tradition armed robbery is, Jesse James, Billy the Kid, Bonnie and Clyde, Willie Sutton. Try it some time.”

“Are you kidding?” My turn to wince. “I’m Jewish, for Christ’s sake, I’d die of guilt before they ever caught up with me!”

“In that case,” Ned stroked his beard, “the only other lucrative scams left are con man and preacher, and frankly, son,” he speculated, “far as I can tell, you’re not cunning enough for the con or polished enough for the pulpit.”

Feeling utterly defeated, nixed out, good for nothing, a nebbish to the bone, I was fiddling with the straps of my backpack, when, by hemp-induced association, I plucked out the damaged dancing clown marionette with clipped strings I’d spotted and picked up for no good reason that very afternoon at a thrift shop downtown on Spokane’s

Skid Row—a bad habit I have of acquiring useless things—and slumped over, mimicking the puppet’s sorry state. “I’m all tied up in knots, attached to invisible wires, primed and plucked by the fingers of the dead, a dummy in search of a ventriloquist!”

Ned pondered and puffed.

“Seriously,” I said, “my father thinks I have the makings of a businessman. My own inclinations are literary. ‘Writ-ers are supposed to be knowledgeable people,’ he says. ‘So what do *you* know about life?’”

We sat in silence for a while. The effect of the weed was wearing off. The sun was setting. The crows gave off a fearful clamor.

That’s when Ned rose to his feet, signaling the end of the visit. “Cut loose, son!” he counseled, snapping a red suspender against his great, bare belly bedecked with a tat-too of a busty mermaid on a bed of billowing waves by way of punctuation. “Out West, you invent your own destiny and history, wake up tomorrow, be anybody you please, it’s the American way!”

\* \* \*

So, bright and early the next morning—actually it was closer to noon, Pacific time, my sleep cycle being a little off-kilter with all the time zones I’d crossed—I stood on the entry ramp to I-90 West, thumb extended, casting a crisp new shadow.

My first lift, a long, skinny string bean of a man folded into a tiny green Honda, had spent the previous week laid up in a hospital bed in Spokane being fitted with a pace-maker. “Listen to it tick, will you. Feels as good as new!” He tapped his chest, demonstratively satisfied, a latter-day Tin Man with a ticker. As we raced along, Earl Smalls—“Funny name for a tall fella, don’t you think?”—an inde-pendent cleaning contractor by trade, revealed the hidden mysteries of high-gloss linoleum and plate glass. “Look out the window, what do you see, son?”

Truth to tell, eastern Washington is flat and dull, not exactly the “amber waves of grain” and “purple mountain majesties” I was expecting, the monotony broken only by a succession of filling stations, fast food concessions, and assorted houses of worship.

“I’ve done ’em all,” he hastened to reply, “done every linoleum floor tile and window pane of every schoolhouse,

social club, convenience store, church, and chapel from Ritzville to Wenatchee,” shaking his head with evident pride, moved at the sheer magnitude of his accomplish-ment. “It’s a fine thing, let me tell you, to let God’s good sunshine in!”

“I see where you’re coming from, Mr. Smalls,” I nod-ded, sincerely trying to appreciate his point of view.

“Call me Earl!”

“Earl.”

“The Lord’s been good to me, thirty years wiping win-dows without a fall! What line of work did you say you were in, son?”

“Traveling.”

“Encyclopedias? Cosmetics? Bibles?”

“Just traveling.”

Earl looked perplexed.

“I’m kind of in-between things at the moment, explor-ing possibilities,” I put it judiciously.

“You won’t believe this,” Earl’s eyes lit up, “just last week I was sayin’ to the missus, ‘Missy,’ I said, ‘I’m get-tin’ too old to climb the scaffold alone. I could use me a helper!’ Ever wipe windows?”

“Not lately.”

“Nothing to it, really, it’s all in the wrist,” Earl demon-strated, his left elbow and wrist flexing, rag in hand, lanky forearm stretching out across the windshield, straining to reach that remote triangle of grit beyond the mechanical swipe of the windshield wipers, a no-wipe zone splattered with bird droppings, insects, and miscellaneous highway scum, waxing lyrical as he wiped. “There’s no sweeter sight this side of paradise than sunlight streaming through a plate of polished glass.”

“You said it, Earl!” I feigned enthusiasm, though, hon-estly, I was not altogether convinced in the streaky wake of his wiping.

“Say, where you from?” Earl asked.

“Back East.”

“Butte? Billings?”

“A little bit farther east.”

“Kansas City?” he hazarded, clearly reaching the outer limit of the imaginable.

“New York,” I finally blurted out.

“Not New . . . York . . . City?” Earl paused between each word, like he was stringing together three separate

places, eyeing me in sheer bedazzlement as if I were a visi-tor from another planet, which in a way I was. “Never been there myself but I seen pictures in *Life*!” He sat up a little straighter and taller, straining the roof of his Honda. “Say, how many windows do you suppose they’ve got in that there Worldwide Mall?”

“You mean the World Trade Center?”

“That’s the puppy!” Earl slapped the dashboard.

“Couple thousand panes per tower, give or take a few hundred,” I roughly figured.

“Man that keeps them clean sure must be sittin’ pretty,” Earl opined.

“Forget it, Earl,” I callously burst his bubble, “the Mob’s got the *grime* market cornered in all five boroughs!”

Crestfallen, he slumped a visible story or two.

“You ought to see the show window at Steuben Glass,” I said, to make it up to him, “they keep the glass so spotless the pigeons collide, some kind of optical illusion.”

“Me,” he said meekly, “I’m from Moses Lake just up the road. Never did get to see much of the world.”

“Home is where the heart is!” I soaked that old chestnut for all the mileage it was worth.

Whereupon Earl perked up a little, tapping his re-tuned ticker. “The good Lord blessed us with His bounty, three sanctuaries already up and running and another two under construction.”

“That’s a lot o’ stained glass,” I allowed.

Whereupon, altogether without warning, like a bolt of lightning in a clear blue sky, Earl fixed me full in the face with the high beam of his stain-sensitive gaze—“Tell me, son, are you sinner or saved?”

“Tell you the truth, Earl,” I stalled for time, not wanting to jeopardize the ride, “I’m not really all that spiritually inclined, must be a congenital deficiency.”

But Earl would not be swayed. “The way to be saved is so sim-ple,” he split the adjective for double-barrel ef-fect, “still, many good people, like yourself, will not be saved. They will not let Christ Jesus into their lives! My friend,” he locked me in the laser light of Christian Love and gripped me hard by my left shoulder blade like he meant to crush all resistance, “won’t you pull back the blind of cynicism and doubt and let in the rays of the Lord’s redemption?”

“I’ll think about it, Earl.”

In response to which, Earl screwed up his eyes and tightened the vice of his grip. “There’s no better time and place to be saved than right here and now!”

Even hitchhikers have their tolerance level, an amalgam of danger, boredom, and annoyance, beyond which walking becomes an attractive alternative. “I’m Jewish,” I said, “we do all our saving at the bank!”

But rather than hit the brakes and turn me out as I expected, Earl’s eyes glazed over with a molasses-like glimmer and his vice grip slackened into an almost tender touch. “Dear God, a child of *Is-ra-el*,” he subdivided the syllables, like he was getting three potential converts for the price of one. “Verily the Lord works in wondrous ways, imagine Him sending one of His little lost sheep westward into the wilderness of Washington for His humble shepherd to find and deliver back unto His bosom!”

I lost all patience. “Deliver me back unto the highway, will you please?”

Oblivious to my blunt rebuff, Earl pressed on. “Just to prove I mean business, I’m goin’ to take you straight to my attorney and sign you up as a full partner in the business. You can build your home in my own backyard, stay with me and the missus in a spare room till the roof’s on tight. What do you say, son?”

“Thanks, but no thanks.”

“I tell you what,” he said, sweetening the deal. “I’m going to underwrite the mortgage, throw in the linoleum, storm windows, and aluminum siding. All I’m asking in return is that you open your heart to the Redeemer.”

Coasting along at seventy miles per hour, my options were limited, till we left the highway and rolled into Moses Lake.

After taking in the sites downtown, a combination Amoco gas station/7-Eleven convenience store flanked by Luke’s Laundromat on the one side and Dolores’s Hair Salon on the other, we rounded a couple of corners and pulled up to a pink ranch house with purple shutters.

“There she is, the *Promised Land*!” Earl pointed behind the house to an empty lot overgrown with prairie grass tall as biblical bulrushes minus the Nile.

Head splitting, stomach churning with nausea and fatigue, for a fleeting instant I actually pictured the prospect of putting down roots; erecting an identical pink ranch house with purple shutters; marrying the neighbor’s

daughter with a hyphenated name like Betty-Lou, not bad looking but for her acne and buck teeth; alternating every Sunday between one of four local sanctuaries of the Lord with the little lady and the little half Hebrews in tow, Bryl-creem, the hair tonic of my childhood—“a little dab’ll do ya / . . . Watch out, the gals’ll all pursue ya!”—breaking the stubborn mongrel grip of my tribally intransigent kinks and curls, my prize pups extolled from multiple pulpits as good Christian boys, just like their God-fearing, hardworking father, formerly a stiff-necked member of the tribe of Is-ra-el, born in the Babylon of New . . . York . . . City, saved from eternal perfidy and shown the Light Eternal by Brother Smalls; come Monday morning, donning overalls and climbing the scaffolding, armed with squeegee, Windex, and a Bible for study breaks, on a crusade to let God’s good sunshine in.

“So where’s the lake, Earl?”

“What lake?”

“Town called Moses Lake’s gotta have water.”

“We do all our baptisms out by Potholes Reservoir!”

With a liberating flick of the door handle and a yank at my backpack, I was up and out, a born-again pedestrian kicking up the dust of creation—“So long, Earl.”

\* \* \*

The sun was sinking and so was my spirit. A couple of cars passed but nobody stopped. “Dear God!” I prayed, agnostic though I be, “deliver me up from Moses Lake!” It took a while but my deliverance finally came in a battered black Mustang with a tinted windshield.

“Can you drive?” asked the angel at the wheel.

“I could learn.”

Honey hewed, green eyed, shredded-wheat-blonde headed—“There’s black African, red Indian, freckled Irish, and a little bit of everything else in me, hell I’m the *IOU*-nited Nations all rolled up in one—have a sip?” Tina tittered, tongue against her teeth, passing the dented 7UP can with the flattened plastic straw she was sucking on like a baby bottle, the contents of which tasted oddly medicinal, as we sped westward to Seattle. “Don’t you go getting the wrong idea now,” she cautioned, “I don’t ordinarily pick up strangers, but you looked different.”

“Different?”

“Sweet!”

Slurping down the last few drops of her homemade remedy for whatever ailed her, she crushed and flung the can into a heap of beauty magazines and miscellaneous debris at my feet. “Be an angel, will you!” she curled her lower lip and raised the red varnished big toe of her bare right foot by way of directional signals in the general direction of the glove compartment, a sleek left knee rising out from under a tight black skirt to brace the steering wheel while she reached forward, primed and plucked out the glowing car lighter.

The glove compartment exploded at my touch and a nickel bag and rolling papers tangled up in panty hose, Kleenex, and Tampax landed in my lap.

“Go ahead, sugar,” she said, “make yourself useful!”

The pitiful mess I made of it spilled weed at either end.

“Can’t drive, can’t roll, whatever *can* this white boy do?”

“I’m good at reading road maps.”

“Never mind, Billy,” she said, “maps don’t tell you nothin’ ’bout the road ahead!” and, grabbing my misshapen handiwork, lit up and took a toke.

“The name is Peter,” I protested.

Tina insisted. “Every white boy I ever knew was a Billy or a Dick, and you sure don’t look like no Dick.”

“Okay,” I conceded, “call me Billy.”

“You’re a doll,” her lithe tongue took its sweet time licking the sticky residue of gin-spiked 7UP from her lips, “a living baby doll, I declare, all shiny ’n porcelain white!”

“Is that a compliment?”

“Not no doll neither,” she bit her lips to keep from laughing out loud, “you a dancing clown, you know, the kind with strings?”

“A marionette?”

“A *mary-net*, tha’s it,” she nodded, “Daddy give me one for Christmas, only time he ever give me anythin’ he didn’t take back after and hock the next day for liquor!”

“What does your daddy do?”

“*Did* do.”

“I’m sorry.”

“He ain’t dead,” she laughed, “just deadbeat. A baker *when* he’s sober and so inclined, Daddy likes his grain a whole lot better liquid and distilled. ‘Wild Billy,’ Mama called him, ‘white as Wonder Bread with long yellow hair like Custer, the Indian killer’—she’s one quarter Cherokee and the rest black—‘hair too pretty for a man,’

Mama, she combed it out till it shone like the sun in the sky while he lay in her lap sleepin’ it off. ‘Better behave yourself now, Wild Billy,’ she warned, ‘else I’m goin’ go ’n scalp you like Delilah in the Bible!’ My mama, she’s a hairdresser.”

“Dolores of Moses Lake?” I guessed.

“You psychic?” She gaped.

I grinned.

Tina shrugged. “The ladies, they all loved my daddy, and my daddy, well, he loved ’em all back, fat, skinny, white, red, black, or yellow, he wa’n’t prejudiced that way. Mama, she never said nothin’, pretended not to notice—guess she figured it was good for business—till the day she found him out back messin’ with the white trailer trash from Wenatchee she’d hired to sweep hair.

“It ain’t what it looks like, Dolores,’ the trailer trash trembled, her clothes all undone. Wild Billy, he just grinned.

“Mama didn’t say nothin’ then neither, but that night she took her shears ’n cut off every last strand of his goldy locks in his sleep, just like she said she would, ’n turned ’em both out in the morning. She forbid me ever to breathe his name again, but hell, he was still my daddy, ’n I loved that, that . . . that *thingamajig* he give me.”

“Marionette,” I filled in the blank.

“I loved it more than anything”—Tina tried hard to hold back the tears—“cause it reminded me of my daddy and the funny wooden way he walked when he’d had him a couple. Made it go clip-clop, clip-clop back o’ the beauty parlor.

“Stop that racket, Tina!’ Mama shouted, ‘It bothers the customers!’

“But I knew *who* it bothered. Next day I couldn’t find it nowhere—‘Mama, where’s it at?’

“Where’s what?”

“Where’s Li’l Billy?”

“First she whooped me, then she fessed up: Put him out to the trash in a bag o’ hair.”

The tears welled up in her emerald-green eyes.

“Better pull over!” I advised.

Skidding the Mustang to a stop on the soft shoulder, she tensed up when, instead of hopping out to take a leak, I reached around for my backpack. “Don’t get funny with me now.”

Then and there I fathomed what she meant about maps, that the road reveals its true direction in the rear-view mirror.

Hand shaky with a solemn sense of purpose, I dug through layers of wrinkled shirts and sweaty underwear till my hand collided with a head. And in a snap I plucked out the clown with clipped, tangled strings I'd been drawn to and picked up for no good reason at the thrift shop in Spokane and dropped it in her lap. "Happy Birthday, Tina!"

First she peered from the puppet to me and back to the puppet with wonder and disbelief, and then she grabbed it and held it to her breast like she never again meant to let go.

"It's yours to keep," I whispered.

The fruit and vegetable stand just up the road seemed as good a place as any to celebrate.

"How do you tell if a watermelon's ripe?" I asked.

"You tap it," Tina demonstrated.

And the two of us went skipping like jubilant children through the stand, tapping massive melons, listening for the elusive sound of ripeness.

"Don't touch!" yelled the prune-faced woman at the register.

"It's a family reunion!" I chirped back, oblivious to her poisonous look.

"*She* better keep her hands off the fruit!" the prune-faced woman warned.

Only now did it dawn on me that it wasn't the fruit but Tina's tint at issue. Hoisting up a mammoth melon, I held it aloft with dramatic flourish and hurled it to the ground, Ten Commandments-style. "ROTTEN!" I proclaimed, trampling splattered fruit.

We drove on in silence, the puppet bobbing his porcelain head back and forth between us, just like a little family.

"Slide down," Tina tensed up suddenly at the outskirts of Seattle, "somebody might see you."

"So what?!"

"Slide down, I said!"

"Who for?" I asked. "A Billy or a Dick?"

We checked into a motel together, but Tina insisted on separate rooms, making vague reference to "some personal business" she had to take care of in the morning. "You can pick us up after," she said, clutching Li'l Billy, "and we'll take it from there."

"Pick you up where?"

"Angel factory," she patted her belly by way of clarification. Only now did I notice the bulge.

Sleeping late—the hell with all those time zones—I leaped out of bed the next morning and rapped on her door, but there was no answer.

"No, sir," the motel manager assured me, "the lady left no message."

I riffled the Seattle yellow pages under "Abortion Providers" and rushed to the location of listing after listing.

But it was always the same scenario.

"She's got a honey-colored complexion and green eyes, I tell you, first name Tina."

"Last name?"

"I don't know."

"Your name, sir?"

"Just tell her it's Billy." (Which my ID failed to confirm.) "It's a nickname."

Dubious eyebrows hovered above thick-rimmed glasses: "Your relation to the patient?"

"She's carrying our clown!"

### Of Mermaids and Mummies

The Mariner's Inn, a vintage establishment in Seattle's Harbor District, an unacknowledged landmark in the seventies now more than likely razed to make room for a Starbucks or a depot for Microsoft parts, was situated along a string of topless bars and tattoo parlors—one of which, lauding the indelibility of its product, had a rickety sign in the window, The Only Guaranteed Tattoo Removal Method, dangling lopsided above a fish tank marked Hungry Piranhas.

Momentarily tempted, a mermaid maybe, or a snake, I pictured the reaction back home:

"What's *that*?"

"What's *what*?"

"That schmutz on your arm."

"That's body art, Dad, a souvenir from Seattle!"

"Dear God, I'm gonna have a heart attack!"

My room had a virtual harbor view (if you stuck your neck out and twisted it ninety degrees due west) and classic decor: a sagging spring mattress, more like a metallic hammock, really, with uncoiled springs that rocked and sang you to sleep; a night table with various numbers, names,

and anatomical figures etched in vintage Formica; and a well-thumbed Gideon Bible in the drawer. The lighting was intimate, a 40-watt bulb dangling faint and naked from the paint-chipped ceiling.

The hotel's other amenities included a cocktail lounge and laundromat nestled at opposite ends of the lobby.

First things first. Travel makes you thirsty.

Bathed in a perennial aquamarine-blue glow, the windowless Mermaid Lounge sported a plastic swordfish with a twisted sword and a battered wooden mermaid entangled in a net above the liquor cabinet. Even the barmaid dressed the part. A tall blonde in a jaunty sailor's cap, she had on navy-blue fishnet stockings and not much else. Ordinarily I find tall blondes intimidating, but she flashed me a welcoming smile and a naval salute, idling over to dish out the peanuts, a complimentary basket per customer, unshelled. "Hello, sailor boy, I'm your mermaid, Linda, what'll it be?"

"In New York," I said, "the nuts come loose."

"This is Seattle," she said, "you crack your own."

Taking, drawing, and pouring my order, she sent my whiskey and water sailing toward me, Wild West-style, like shuffleboard pucks down the counter.

"Know any nice beaches hereabouts, Linda?" I inquired in between sips.

"I share a bungalow on the beach," she smiled.

"No kidding," I said, "maybe I could come by for a swim sometime."

"Pacific's pretty cold, skipper," she cautioned.

"I like it cold," I countered, cracking a nut by way of punctuation.

"I knew this fella from New York once," she said, drying and stacking beer mugs and stemware.

"So now you know *two*!"

Linda didn't bother looking up. "Jimmy was a professional skin diver, a regular fish in water."

It was the *way* she said "skin." Downing my whiskey in a single gulp, I ran my tongue suggestively along the rim of the glass. "Wouldn't mind doing a little *skin* diving myself sometime!"

She stopped stacking the glasses she'd been wiping long enough to shake her head. "Jimmy drowned."

Several refills later, head spinning, shuffling empty shells, leering at legs in an aquamarine-blue-tinted whiskey haze, feeling more or less amphibious myself, I nursed my

drink, sitting shivah for poor dead Jimmy on my barstool, when out of nowhere a fist came crashing down on the counter, spilling my whiskey and water, scattering my nuts. A terrific tidal wave of knuckles cleared the counter, in the wake of which a mountain of muscle, with an arrow-pierced, purple heart tattoo bulging above biceps inscribed with the words *I LUV LINDA*, rudely plowed a path between me and the bar, leaning over the counter, planting a kiss on the barmaid's neck. "How ya been, baby?"

Call me a fool. Maybe it was the whiskey, or maybe it was the Pacific time zone scrambling my eastern standard sense of reality three thousand miles west of Times Square. "Say, mister," I said, rolling my shoulders, mustering up my injured pride, "I'm not done with my drink yet!"

Pivoting to scrutinize this minuscule source of annoyance, the tattooed colossus extended a mighty paw, scooped up the toppled shot glass, and, upending it over my head, dribbled out the last few drops before crushing and pulverizing the glass in a clenched fist and sprinkling me with the shards. "You're done now."

Spinning off the barstool, Popeye minus the spinach, I flexed that idiot muscle of feeling with unmeasured menace. "Don't offend me, mister!"

Given the difference in scale and frame of reference, as a shrimp is to a bull shark, or more precisely, a minnow to Moby Dick, the prospects for a peaceful diplomatic resolution to the standoff were extremely limited. This I came to realize belatedly, suddenly aware of a tightness at my collar and a widening gap between the soles of my sneakers and the sawdust-strewn floor.

Speechless, I dangled.

"Five years, five years in the tank!" bellowed the Creature from the Black Lagoon, swinging me around now like a captured fish. "And believe me, buster, I ain't no first-time offender."

"Put him down, Al," Linda calmly interceded with a loaded speargun pointed at Al's nuts.

The floorboards never felt so good.

Still shaking back in my room, I sought consolation in a passage of the good book in my night table drawer, the only reading matter at hand.

*"And it came to pass in an eveningtide, that David arose from off his bed, and walked upon the roof of the king's house: and from the roof he saw a woman washing herself;*



and the woman was very beautiful to look upon. . . . And David sent messengers, and took her; and she came in unto him, and he lay with her . . .”

“Amen,” I moaned, putting myself in David’s sandals, metaphorically speaking. Praised be the foresight of the Gideons who provide!

The next morning, still sore from my first run-in with the locals, I set out to visit Seattle’s sites. From the quaint Chinatown (Manhattan’s Mott Street in microminiature) where fierce-fisted grimacing Bruce Lee look-alikes glowered from tattered posters and chop suey joint menus flickered with a neon insistence, I rambled over to Pike Place Market, where—amid wriggling mounds of Pacific sea life: Alaskan king crab and monstrous mollusks called geoducks, clams the size of elephant hooves with their schlong-like siphons obscenely groping about—a wiry old Native American in a ten-gallon hat, who claimed to have performed as a boy with Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, stepped lithely in and out of his swirling lasso for tourist snapshots and tips. I pushed on to Skid Row, the original, where a faded rainbow brotherhood of bums clung to the battered raft of existence for one last round. Boarding the monorail, I hurtled to the future and back, or what once passed for the future at the Seattle World’s Fair of ’62, then the site of the seedy Fun Forest Amusement Park.

I wrapped up the day’s sightseeing with a visit to the world-famous Ye Olde Curiosity Shop at 1001 Alaskan Way, notable for, among countless other curios, the leathery remains of Sylvester, the desert mummy; the purported skeleton of a bona fide mermaid; and the black-and-white photograph enlarged to life-size of the wrinkled Princess Angeline, daughter of Chief Seattle, billed as “the Oldest Living Indian” at the time the picture was taken, proudly claiming more than a century of residence on this earth, with whom I imagined conducting the following interview:

“Were they happy years, Princess?”

“Bah,” she replied, “I had my moments.”

“What were your most vivid memories?”

She paused to shoo away a persistent fly. “Well,” she said, “I really can’t remember.”

“Surely your Highness must have had ample opportunity to witness the hand of progress boldly forge ahead!”

“Would the pale face please repeat the question?”

Which he did.

Whereupon Princess Angeline scratched her white locks and flexed her jawbone (studded with the artificial ivories generously provided, as the faded caption recounted, by President Franklin Pierce, compliments of the American people, along with a nebulous promise of territorial sovereignty—the teeth, at least, being hers to keep). Her two favorite white man’s inventions, she averred, were the rocking chair and the window seat of a speeding iron horse. “I like motion,” the centenary Native American princess nodded, smiling almost.

On the back of a postcard print of which I put it poetically for the folks back home:

*Sailboats, dark profiles like fish fins in the setting sun in a shimmering triangle of light, dissolve as dusk falls over Seattle. Drunk without whiskey from the kiss of the Pacific. Miss you.*

Love,

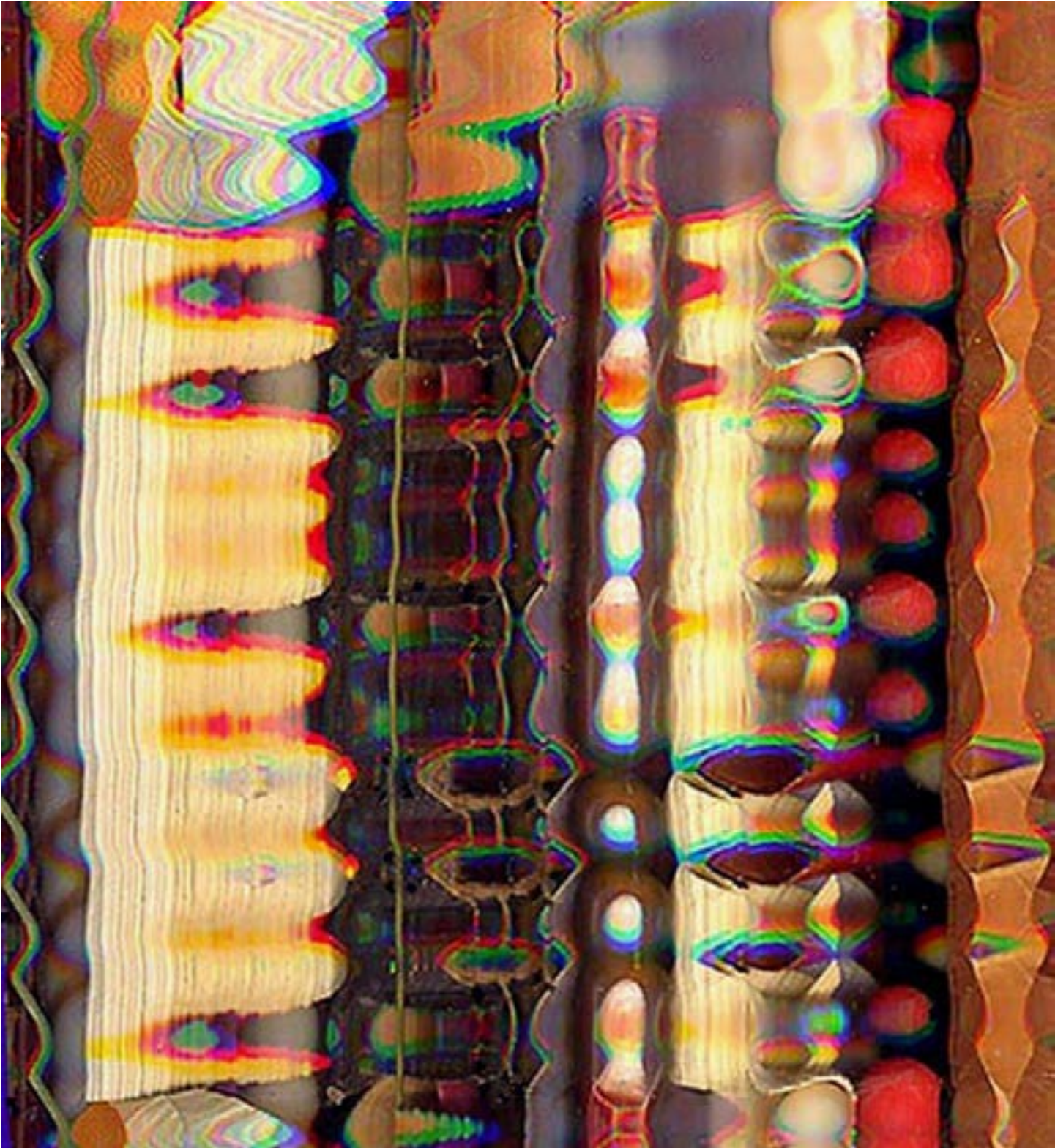
Peter

**Peter Wortsman’s** recent books include: a novel, *Cold Earth Wanderers* (Pelekinesis, 2014); a travel memoir, *Ghost Dance in Berlin* (Travelers Tales, 2013)—for which he won an Independent Publishers Book Award (IPPY); an anthology which he selected, translated and edited, *Tales of the German Imagination* (Penguin Classics, 2013); a book of short fiction, *Footprints in Wet Cement* (Pelekinesis, 2017), and a translation, *Konundrum, Selected Prose of Franz Kafka* (Archipelago Books, 2016). His translation is forthcoming of *Intimate Ties* by Robert Musil (Archipelago Books, 2018). He was a Holtzbrinck Fellow in 2010 at the American Academy in Berlin.

ROBERT BHARDA

Howl, 2017

Digital image from organic collage, 36 x 24 in



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