

The Voice Inside My Helmet

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Abstract

The Voice inside my motorcycle helmet had been asserting itself since the 1980's. It is my wisecracking other, the balance when I flame too hot or ride too fast. It is my philosopher-pal and stealth observer of myself and the myriad of riders and drivers that inhabit our world. The movement preceding and resulting in the birth of the *International Journal of Motorcycle Studies* catalyzed the Voice; no longer willing to be my unknown partner the Voice demanded airtime in my presentations. "You cannot keep taking credit for everything, we are partners," chided the Voice. Choosing not to be the subject of the next harangue, I conceded to the Voice as I almost always have.

As a rider, researcher, and depth psychologist, I have spent many years wondering about the motivation for and meaning of the motorcycle ride.^[1] I met the Voice inside my helmet during this quest. The Voice has added a new dimension to my rides and elucidated the psychology and meaning of my journeying. My understanding of the Voice has evolved since my first awareness of this Other. In this paper I condense various encounters with the Voice, observing the deeper levels of consciousness that emerge while riding.^[2]

In his classic *The Hero's Journey* (1990), Joseph Campbell identified a pattern underlying human narration of the soul's search for meaning.^[3] This mythic journey describes the seduction, adventures, and fulfillments of a hero-traveler. Drawing from his description of the trajectory that we are engaged in, I understand my own hermetic - psychological road narrative as "the Voice Inside My Helmet." The Voice speaks of the archetypal underpinnings of the hero's journey while providing a balancing Other. The balancing function of the Voice causes its narration to complement my own changes. The Voice oversees a continuum of time, from past to present, and back again, bringing awarenesses to me. It monitors the magnitude of the journey and my progress on the path. At certain moments, the Voice mitigates the insistence of my self-righteous impulses with a view of the whole that serves to counter personal-psychological concerns with collective awareness.

Sometimes the Voice draws me into a dialogue of introspective truths, and at others it reminds me to pay attention to the task at hand. The Voice keeps me on the road and reminds me of the larger saga: the journey, a story unfolding in a sequence of moments. The Voice centers me in this progression, making me one with the motorcycle, the road, and my own story.

Part I

In Part I the reader meets the Voice as I did and learns to appreciate its wisdom.

After the helmet law was passed in California and went into effect in 1992, I quickly collected a few head-shaped, bowling-ball-like protective devices, which did nothing to make me feel safer or inspire me to wear them. They

were cumbersome, unwieldy and compromised my peripheral vision. The situation was grim, until I met an ingenious fabricator who produced fiberglass lids in his apartment bathtub. I was not his first customer. Without much ado, he created a new, light, reasonably fashionable hat which looked like a helmet and, with the addition of a DOT facsimile sticker, avoided law enforcement scrutiny. This hat became my cool, wearable helmet for many years. It now sits at home, as part of my motorcycle memorabilia collection.

My dermatologist convinced me that I must accept responsibility for my pale skin and, by default, my head, and so I bought a full-face contraption. The state of the art of helmets had progressed since my first foray into the world of legal helmets, a mere ten years earlier. I selected a Shoei for no particular reason. A friend, who tests new motorcycles and writes about them for a living, wears a Shoei and looks acceptable in it, so it became my choice.

Although too hot in the summer and hard on the neck muscles in any wind, my Shoei has been a fine acquisition, creating a screen on which the passing landscape is viewed at speed. With its cushy interior, the immediacy of the wind, grit, bugs, and passing world are muffled. What was once in my face is now something occurring “out there.” This distancing has had a significant consequence: the world is screened on the visor much like on a television monitor. The ride has become something I am both doing *and* observing. Riding has been split into the embodied experience of watching and describing. Hence, I have become aware of a road narrative, of the constantly unfolding story of a traveler occurring inside my helmet.

The slight buffer from the vicissitudes of bugs, wind, and the roar of the passing world has allowed the traveler’s narrative to appear earlier in the ride. This story is present in every human psyche, but the unique gift of the motorcycle focuses the narrative and intensifies its unfolding. My helmet tells a traveler’s tale. The Voice seems to have found its way to the surface of consciousness from the split between being and observing. The helmet has accentuated this split, as though the call to act and the observance of the need have been bifurcated by the plastic face shield, revealing a gap in time that opens to another level of awareness.

At first, awareness of the Voice was disquieting. Noticing myself dip into a continuous narrative, reflecting events on the road but feeling older and more enduring startled me. I wondered if I wasn’t losing it entirely. Perhaps one too many readings of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* had finally sent me over the edge into psychosis?^[4] It is an iffy place, but I was not willing to succumb to this diagnosis easily, so I began to listen.

The Voice can be heard soon after donning the helmet. I have become a decisive and judgmental rider, condemning those of lesser skills, unconscious movements, and poor driving. During the transition between the urban congestion around my home and the relative freedom of the freeway that initiates the journey, the Voice vies for my attention with the usual aggression required to fend off the challenge of traffic. “Concerns for survival, real or imagined begin each and every journey,” the Voice warns, as though I need a reminder.

Despite the discipline of wheeling the bike out of the garage and putting it on the road, no two rides begin in the same way or in the same frame of mind. Although the beginning of the journey retraces familiar territory, each departure is different. Sometimes the ordinary enters the tale. Stopping for gas at the usual station, located on a reclaimed street in the center of Hollywood, now hosting hipsters and those who live to be cool, reminds me that I am quickly approaching unknown territory.

As I negotiate the traffic approaching the freeway, I notice the splitting of experience: me-them, friend-foe, good drivers-bad drivers. Perhaps the peripheral awareness of my front tire slicing down the city street is

dissecting my experience? By the time I hit the freeway, an attitude has set in. My riding skills reassert themselves, allowing the fluidity of the body to take over to negotiate the traffic, weather, and teleological concerns. As I confirm my abilities, my confidence returns. The compass, orienting me toward a deeper journey, guides the way. I slip into the story easily, as the reminder blends with the demands, rewards, and the scenery of the road.

With its web-like connections titillating the traveler to venture to places unknown and known, the freeway excites the senses and emboldens the Voice. "I am on the road," it declares. The journey is underway. The inner journey is mirrored by the passing landscape. The wilderness has become a place to explore and test my riding skills. Curiosity sets in as the ego-mind moves into the background and the lure of adventure pulls.

The helmet facilitates this immersion and identification in yet another way. Once I don my black Shoei, long ago stripped of its brand identification, I become anonymous. My face and hair cease to identify me. My sunglasses shield others from the rigor of my passing glance while shielding me from their attempts to peer into my soul. I am an anonymous rider shrouded in black. I am no longer a specific self. I am a passing traveler.

The internal story and the responsive rider are separated, only to come together in an altered configuration with a different understanding. The person who left home is now any traveler participating in their own odyssey. This trip is one of participation in the road story, during which the self meets the Self in a transformative moment.

Here, on the open road, the Voice hits its stride. "I remember myself bifurcating experience," it recalls. The front tire is the edge of the division: right-left, forward-back, stop-go. As I fathom this, I become aware of another plane of motion: the gyroscopic trajectory of the vectors of my body leaning into a curve. I project my shoulder into the forward motion of the bike to change the axis of a larger arc, allowing me to ride on another level of embodied physics. The Voice catches up, describing this movement as, "the wheel of fate," or, perhaps, a Buddhist prayer wheel. I have become its hub. Now I am in the place.

Life radiates out around me, and I am in a moving stasis. The story emanates from me, even as I join it. There, polarities unite, predator and prey give up the hunt and time ceases its linear progression. Leaving and arriving are revealed in their in-between, a transformative worm hole. "It is this, this place which is both destination and source," the Voice says, confoundingly. I wonder, is this a scientific given or a deep internal state; allowing awareness to transform experience? Perhaps I cannot know.

Being the traveler while simultaneously shifting in reaction to the road is poetry in motion, a koan-like experience. My mind's inability to "make sense of" this paradox facilitates a transformative change, which is the essence and gift of motorcycle riding. Logic has lost its hold and something more profound occurs. "Scary but interesting business," comments the Voice.

Now that I have reached this place within myself, the traveler's tale becomes one of meeting the landscape and its inhabitants. The subtle but necessary rebalancing of the wheel that is myself in response to the challenges of the road allows me to understand my place in the changing dynamic around me. My mind's limitation and inability to find logic in the transformation allows my heart and senses to dominate experience and interpretation. I extend my senses to facilitate this new way of being.

The Voice reminds me that my mind is no longer at the center of the forces churning through me. My thoughts relax, unable to contend with the power of this awareness. Bifurcation has ceased. I am both one with and

separate from the evolving scenery and the unfolding story. The bike has led me to this space like a magical steed. The Voice praises its animate character. I listen to the raspy chug of its fire-breathing heart. The story has become our story; that of a lone rider on its trusty steed.

This is when the song begins. In Wagner's epic *The Ring Cycle*, the hero Siegfried was given a magical, interruptive power after slaying a fearsome dragon.^[5] During the knockdown, drag-out battle, Siegfried was spattered with the blood of the beast, allowing him to understand bird song. This ride and my encounter with the road have allowed me, too, to find songs inside my helmet. Often the tune is culled from the recent week's musical selections. I listen to the tune, searching the lyrics for messages about the journey. They are always there, thinly veiled. I hum the melody in the back of my throat, savoring the lyric's wisdom.

Sometimes I have been carrying this song for a month, at other times just a week. The song stays with me, waiting for the right moment to spring forth and announce its truth. I listen to and learn from what has been awaiting my attention. The lyric is rarely an instruction, but rather an acknowledgement. "This is what is happening," it confides. My soul had been holding the information until I was ready to listen and reflect. I cherish the song, allowing its resonance to move through my vocal chords and harmonize with the hum of the bike, becoming one with the undulating vibrations. In that moment, I am in harmony with myself and my story.

The Voice reminds me of my gratitude to the motorcycle-steed and its introduction to life on the road. I have met myself many times and in many ways while on the journey. I have come to understand the vagaries of fear and become adept at distinguishing physical from psychological fear. The profound and confusing paradox between independence and dependence has provided many chapters to my road story, while the mystery of strangers' kindness and the brotherhood of travelers has beguiled my heart and poet-self. With its consequent self-awareness, the motorcycle is the ideal vehicle to facilitate this pilgrimage.

Those who are drawn to riding feel the pull of the road and are seduced by the life and story of the traveler. The solo motorcyclist is a contemporary manifestation of the archetypal traveler. In Ed Tick's book on healing through dream, he observes, "[w]e may identify with a mythic tradition to such a degree that we undertake a journey that replicates the mythic hero's journey as recorded in ancient sources... We go beyond association into a living identification."^[6]

The rider's road unfurls, revealing unfamiliar vistas and demanding unknown or unpracticed talents. The self is always expanded to cope with the vicissitudes and uncertainty of the road in uncharted territory. Here in unknown realms, on a familiar but foreign journey, the self meets the Self. The motorcycle is the steed of choice, and in my helmet the Voice provides the narrative, limiting sight but enhancing vision.

Part II

In Part II the Voice takes on a personal tragedy, providing inscrutable insight and comfort. This journey is one of loss and recovery.

The dry-toned, slightly sardonic Voice speaks to me while I ride, as if its observations are self-evident. Its interjections can be startling, causing me to refocus my attention from introspective musings to a crisp road awareness with the frantic insistence of a safety monitor. The now familiar Voice comments on the internal and external territory traversed, like a Hermetic reporter, both enlightening and grounding me.

Sometimes the Voice explores barely conscious material or ponders long overdue thoughts lingering in the periphery of my consciousness, waiting for a relatively uneventful stretch of road to begin its monologue. These deeper thoughts are periodically interrupted by observations about car drivers, other motorcyclists, and the local scenery.

I understand this Voice to be an animated existential expression of “being on the bike” with the incumbent need to narrate the journey. On the oft-traveled commute between Los Angeles and Ventura, the Voice is a constant companion. The Voice emerges soon after donning my helmet, emboldened by my immersion into relative anonymity.

My black full-face Shoei helmet turns me into a black, leather-clad, faceless rider. I become a generic motorcyclist-traveler, no longer obligated to perform perfunctory social interactions. The demands of prying eyes and social niceties cease to exist. I am not required to respond to anything other than the road and the Voice. I am here to ride and survive; that is my priority.

The anonymity focuses my attention inward. I am aware that the life lived on the surface results from others’ knowing views and expectations. Now these descriptions of my existence cease to have relevance or clout. The inner world has expanded and the outer one has become the road. Within this rarefied environment, the Voice begins its commentary.

The Voice seems to sashay from the depths of the preconsciousness to note that nearly every female driver of white mini vans is eating while driving. “That’s Ventura County,” it comments, while I nod my head in acceptance. The Voice brings messages from the other side of awareness and returns with the details of incarnate existence.

The coastal ride from Los Angeles to Ventura is a beautiful one, lauded in song and verse. I, however, take the inland route, passing through the backside of Malibu Canyon, Thousand Oaks, over the grade and into the strawberry fields of Camarillo and Oxnard. This journey has its landmarks without sporting the spectacular beauty of the Pacific Coast. It is more congested, more efficient, and requires better riding.

During the summer I had to split lanes nearly the entire 70 miles of the route.^[7] The Voice keeps up with the demand, predicting bad drivers and swearing at those who do not give way when I approach. The Voice usually tires of its aggression, when the need for precision becomes the focus. On the most congested days, the deeper layers of consciousness are rarely heard, with the exception of a grateful “Hallelujah!” as the cool mist of Ventura enters the helmet’s air vents.

One recent year-long experience was particularly challenging for the Voice. My mother committed suicide in May of 2009. After that, the Voice was busy bridging the gap between the necessary awareness of a competent rider and a profound confusion. The Voice took my mother’s death as a challenge, a problem that with enough shuttle diplomacy between the poles of its claimed territory could be solved.

My conscious mind had come to a state of fortified acceptance, based on my mother’s endless reminders that she was in control of her life and intended to finish herself off when she was done with this nasty business of living. Her life had certainly become a lot less glamorous and rewarding during the last few years. Physical limitations had started to rear their ugly heads, something she could not endure. I saw her death coming, so logically, I thought, I should accept the act. The Voice, however, was not so easily convinced that severing a life, especially of one’s own mother, would become a tolerable memory without some careful processing. Thus, a

year of the dialogue within my helmet was defined by mother's death.

Normally, the Voice ricochets between observations of sociological oddities that comprise the driving populous and meditations on what it is to ride, to be a motorcycle-traveler and where we are in the journey. On that day, thoughts were replaced with very personal questions about the Eros, which keeps us alive, and how anyone, a mother, my mother, could choose to curtail their life without apparent concern for those left behind. I, on the other hand, am far too versed in the vicissitudes of suicide to not understand that at a certain point nothing else matters but wanting the whole mess called life to go away.

Oddly, I think to myself during the ride, as a psychologist, I have dedicated my life to helping people find good reasons to stay alive. The Voice mocks me: "I wonder why."

"Yes, yes," I mutter to myself. "We really don't have to go much further than Mother to discover my motivation."

"Whoa, pay attention," the Voice comes back. "That one was surely texting."

"I thought we had a law against that," I reply.

"She could kill someone." "Hmm," I respond, hoping the Voice will not hear.

"Is splitting lanes at 60 mph suicidal or are these drivers homicidal?," the Voice and I wonder together. The wind through the eastern end of Malibu Canyon and into Thousand Oaks can get pretty gusty. Today it is driving me into the right side of the lane, causing me to lean diagonally into the late Spring gusts.

"Better watch that strong updraft going down the grade," the Voice reminds me. I will obey because I have learned that the Voice is nearly always right.

My face shield has become a flickering TV screen; looking ahead I see the familiar uneven pavement. "I know the Mafia built this road," the Voice interjects. It is true: there is something amiss about this section of the 101 through Thousand Oaks. On the bike, it is a real kidney banger. The Voice has turned to bitching now. Perhaps looking at my own challenges to being alive is just a little too much, or maybe it is windy and uneven enough to garner all my attention.

The eastern end of Malibu canyon quickly becomes the community of Westlake village, built in the rolling, golden hills of Northern Los Angeles County. It is a rich suburb, with its own man-made lake. People own large houses and drive expensive cars. Some have expensive motorcycles. I see one of the expensive choppers off to my right, on the side of the road. The owner is using his cell phone, to call for help, I presume. The Voice observes, "being pretty does not make you functional."

Damn, I am reminded of my mother again.

When her beauty faded, she lost the will to live. "She was never very functional," the Voice reports in a matter-of-fact way. This is something which I have always known but never admitted: she was smart, talented, beautiful, but an emotional wreck. I am nearing the top of the grade, readying to drop into Ventura County. There is something immensely satisfying about moving faster than any car or truck on the road going uphill. Haunted by my mother's vulnerability, I speed up.

Cresting the hill, I see the strawberry and broccoli fields fanning out over the flat expanse of Camarillo and Oxnard. In the distance I see the assaultive march of development. An enormous outlet mall juts into the green landscape. I have been to this miracle of capitalism. "What a depressing place," the Voice reminds me. I liked the fields the way they were. It was such a picturesque and welcome relief from the crowds of Los Angeles. The descent off the crest can be tricky; in addition to the wind there are several curves that I cannot see around. I descend the hill slowly.

"My mother hated change," I muse. She retreated to a well-defended fantasy of a youth she never had. Over the course of her life she had managed to recreate and lovingly save many of the artifacts that should have populated her imagined youth. Now they are mine. The fragility and age of many of these objects makes them unusable.

"Well, nonfunctional," the Voice volunteers.

"Yes," I acknowledge. "I suppose so."

The traffic begins to slow and act erratically as the off-ramp to the outlet mall is announced by signage. The Voice swears as I yell into my helmet at a particularly bad driver. "The lure to consume seems to short-circuit normal thought processes," the Voice observes. Forging the on-ramp from the outlet mall, I continue. The Voice has fallen silent. The Harley Davidson dealership where I bought the bike I am riding is to my right, so I wave as I go by.

As I near my destination I begin to think about fish tacos. The gnawing feeling of seeking an answer to the challenge of my mother's death seems a little more tolerable, just now. Physical hunger has subverted the quest. The Voice has shown me something I did not want to see. I found her in me. It is no longer possible to change her actions or make her different, so the piece of me that is her will need to find acceptance in my being. I have to face the formidable truth that my mother is a part of me. "Yeah, so?," the Voice volunteers, attempting to minimize my distress.

The Voice has a way of providing this balancing function. No matter what the situation or the realm of concern, from the most esoteric to the most practical, the Voice is the balancing Other. When I am raging, the Voice confirms my irritation and reminds me to pay attention. Today, the insistence of my questing mind is met with unavoidable truth, and my battered heart has an ally.

Perhaps it is the nature of the motorcycle itself, with its gyroscopic forward motion, which creates the balancing function in me and my helmet. Or perhaps it is the geography of human consciousness and unconsciousness that causes the Voice to traverse the space between the poles of my incarnate experience. I have come to think of the Voice as a friend with an occasional flash of brilliance. As the ride winds to an end, it is good to know that I am not really alone. The Voice is always there.

Part III

In Part III, the Voice flits between personal, collective, and transcendent insights while I am street racing. The consequence: a dissociative episode, which is handily negotiated by the Voice.

The Pacific Coast Highway is a parking lot. The hot summer weekends bring the inland empire to the coast to

inch along the beach for a cooling drive. Some may have a destination, but for the car-bound majority the “crawl” along the beach is enough. For the motorcyclist, these weekends provide an opportunity to split lanes and practice other risky behaviors in a halting attempt to get somewhere.

I had a date to meet my fiancé at the county line. There, what was once a beach shack has become a decent fish purveyor, frequented by bikers and surfers alike. I should have predicted the gridlock, but optimistically had not. Threading through the endless traffic, my attention is divided. The Voice inside my helmet is narrating a somewhat helpful tale about the closely packed cars, comparing them to the challenge of Scylla and Charybdis.^[8] In an attempt to be polite, I am moving out of the way of the faster moving sport bikers who use the early afternoon walls of cars to hone and show off their skills to the trapped beachgoers.

My rearward gaze has to contend with a droopy left-hand rear-view mirror. The frustration of frequently repositioning the sagging reflector, trying to see the alley of steel behind me and anticipate the more rapidly moving biker traffic, adds to my growing desire to escape.

Not so long ago I took the bike to a highly recommended mechanic. The well-muscled, outlaw-wrencher listened to my complaint, muttering something about “those stupid, new Harley mirrors.” He suggested I superglue the offending accessory into place. Apparently he had seen the problem before, as he had a tube of glue readily sitting on his toolbox. Thinking his advice sage, I did as directed. The solution worked pretty well, except for the mess on the back of the mirror and the usual loss of skin that occurs whenever I use the space-age adhesive. The resulting rigid seal eventually broke after I knocked the mirror in a tight parking spot. It was clearly time for me to reglue the critical piece of glass.

I heard the Voice inside my helmet early in the ride. As the traffic began to congest nearing the beach, the usual bitching and complaining began. I reminded the Voice we had left a little late, but it was not buying my practical excuse. It was impatient to hit the open road, which was not what we were doing. As I repositioned the sagging mirror again, the Voice wondered about my insistent need to see what was behind me. I pondered the comment, and admitted that I had become more interested in the images in the rear-view mirrors since my mother’s death. This unsettling thought did not require a response. I didn’t want to admit that the past and the recently passed had become a subject of intense interest.

The heat radiating from the steel of the cars made the slow-going deadly. I charged to the front of every line, eagerly waiting for the light to change to get a little wind before entering another parking lot of slowly moving cars.

“Dog!,” the Voice brayed as we passed an open-windowed vehicle with a large dog watching me interestedly. Fortunately, this canine did not attempt to leap up and bite as some do. Other bikes were weaving through the traffic with me, working their way to the open road and the arteries taking them up to Mulholland Highway, which winds along the spine of the Santa Monica Mountains.

I take pride in my lane-splitting skills; along with the usual competitive biker playfulness it causes me to get drawn into situations where I probably should not be. This day, a kid on a new Sportster, who had no lane-splitting skills but pulled off the line well, challenged my saner self. The Voice had a lot to say about the kid’s pretty obvious attempt to look like an outlaw. The Voice was feeding my desire to prove something and distract me from the newly obsessive preoccupation with my mirrors.

We had dragged on for miles along Zuma beach. The traffic finally started to thin and Neptune's Net, my destination, was only a few miles to the North. We pulled to the line, exchanged head bows and took off. The relative lack of cars and a cool breeze was thrilling after dawdling along in the reflected heat of the cars' bodies. My head felt like it had begun to swell and even the Voice was sounding cooked. The Voice whispered, "He doesn't know who he's dealing with." I passed the kid who seemed to be slowing, doing a mere 75 mph.

Compulsively, I checked my mirror to see why the kid had dropped back.

The red and blue flashing lights looming large in the four-by-six square of glass, spoke for themselves.

"Well look at that," said the Voice as my heart sunk.

"Stop your irony," I retorted. The kid and I were busted.

A profound download of recent memories regarding other people's traffic tickets flashed across the screen of my mind. I melted off the bike as the large, nice officer-sir took the kid on first. I sat on the curb and began to disassociate as I realized I had forgotten to load my insurance card into my summer jean jacket.

The Voice confirmed I was going down, and my mind began to focus on something other than the uncomfortable potential of the next few minutes. My gaze wandered to the white and weirdly clean cop bike. It was a new BMW, which now fascinated me. That morning I had received a very funny e-mail from erudite friends who were attending a BMW rally in Oregon. Both the male and female were required to wear ties to get into the event. For lunch, I had been told, they were served slightly dry crepes. They had also extolled the virtues of the new BMW 1000 RR. The Voice had taken to lyrically recalling these details to distract me from the large, pock-marked-faced cop who turned in my direction.

I found myself strangely giddy. Mentally, I was capitulating. I was guilty as charged, I had no insurance card on me and no reasonable defense. The kid had been processed. Looking miserable, he took off while the cop had me all to himself.

"Where are you going so fast?," he charged.

The Voice wanted to know why it mattered. I shushed the Voice, responding "Ummm, to meet my fiancé at Neptune's."

"I'm late," I added.

"Let me see your license, registration, and insurance card." My heart sank again. The registration and insurance card were both in my leather jacket, which I was not wearing.

Although I had removed the helmet, the Voice was screaming at me from its hanging position on the handlebars: "You forgot your registration too?," it assaulted.

"Adversity from two fronts is unnecessary," I murmured.

I was officially fucked. I knew that. In an attempt to counter the self-reproach—it had been an unduly warm

summer Saturday afternoon just a few minutes earlier—I began to babble about my latest news from the BMW rally.

The fearsome officer was entering my incomplete information on his computer and watched me in a creepy, interested way. I had divulged my tragic story of changing jackets because of the heat and leaving my registration and insurance card in the leathers. This was interspersed with my recall of the dry crepes and the superior ride on the BMW 1000 RR.

“The speed limit on this stretch of road is 55 mph,” he stated blandly. I groaned, I heard the Voice harmonize but I did not think the cop noticed. “You were at least 20 mph over the limit.” Now, I just wanted him to get it over with and mete out my punishment. He was writing the ticket. Moving closer he said, “Every weekend I let two people off with a warning. You are one of them. I am writing you up for not having your insurance card.” He then began to explain what I needed to do to remedy the ticket.

The Voice whistled while I tried to manage the jumble of chemicals and emotions that were pounding through my body. “Why are you getting married, anyway?,” he grinned at me.

From the isolated helmet, the Voice intoned, “Yuck.”

Befuddled, I countered something about companionship. “Well, you look real good on that motorcycle,” he said, placing the ticket in my palm.

“Thank you,” I compulsively beamed.

He returned to his machine and I tried to remember all the steps needed to put my helmet on and start my engine before pulling off. The Voice immediately chimed in. “Wow, you were lucky.” I felt like I had just been pardoned for a capital crime. “Stockholm syndrome,” the Voice diagnosed. As I pulled off the margin and made my way toward the seafood venue, I gazed in the rear-view mirror and wondered what would appear next.

I check the rear-view mirrors more frequently since this incident. I have successfully reglued the left-hand mirror into position. The Voice has noticed my somewhat obsessive peering into the shiny objects, suggesting that with the intensity of my gaze I had been trying to see where I was going rather than where I had been. The Voice had hit upon another uncomfortable truth.

Since the death of my mother I have been looking backward with both longing and curiosity. I search for her and a bridge to the future. The Voice chimes in: “You watch for Death.” Unable to respond to this charge, I hurtle, with the Voice, into a constant now that a second ago was the future. The present is always passing into the past. The encounter with the cop reminded me that you never know when something that has recently been passed, unobserved, will come back to rock the present.

I had a beer when I got to Neptune’s. Seeing the kid who had gotten a real ticket pulled in, I felt guilty. He seemed unconcerned, as though it was just another tale of life on the road. “I guess,” I thought.

The Voice did not comment.

Part IV

The Landscape: Another Ride with the Voice Inside My Helmet.

Each ride brings reminders of what has and what was passed. Faces, runes, signs, vestiges of life lived, what was, and miles ridden. Their stories are rarely complete, patterns in the fabric of time with their own logic, time, and place. The crossroads, intersections, and chunks of asphalt carry their share of history.

Today, I am taking the ride that should have been. It is an attempt to redress the past. "It is a good conclusion," offers the Voice inside my helmet. "These things are never concluded," I reluctantly reply. "The story just keeps morphing and becomes a little less compelling." The Voice does not respond, leaving me with the uncomfortable feeling that it does not agree.

Even as I pull out of the driveway, my memory is in high gear. How many times has the bike sat in front of this address? How many times has the engine roar reverberated off the neighbors' homes announcing my arrival or departure?

"Do you remember the time you lost your gear-shift lever coming back from Laughlin?," the Voice quizzes, recalling its own subset of memories attached to this landscape. I do remember that afternoon, leaving the bike at my mother's home because it was where I could get to in third gear. "She probably heard us a mile away," observes the Voice. I doubt it, but say nothing, knowing that it is useless to contradict the Voice. I own the house now, she being another memory residing in the earth of this piece of a Hollywood hill.

Pulling out from the curb and charging down the street heading for the Holly Drive tunnel that passes under the Hollywood freeway, the Voice does not speak, knowing that the sound in the tunnel drowns out all other experience. I put the bike in low gear to take full advantage of the resonating chamber that is the tunnel. The engine sounds really aggressive bouncing off the tunnel walls and passing through my body, somehow neutralizing any anger that may have been lying in wait in my preconscious. I suspect the sound of my Harley scares me on some deep level. It is something I rarely think about. "I love that," I acknowledge to the Voice when we clear the tunnel. "I do too," the Voice shoots back. We rarely agree on anything; our accord is a pleasure.

The stop for gas is routine. I sense something easy about this day, as though the need to enjoy and reflect is our only mission. Making a mental note to check the pressure in my tires the next time I stop here, I pull onto Cahuenga and head for the freeway. It is a warm but not hot day, ideal riding weather in Southern California.

This freeway on-ramp is well known to me, having passed over it perhaps thousands of times. Even the uneven asphalt, predictable potholes, and heat warpage hold the memory of the first time I discovered their presence or attempted an uncomfortably fast stop lured by the urge to let the bike find its way. "I don't think that is ever really safe," chides the Voice, which generally is the more cautious of us. "Yes, yes, balance," I mutter not really being in the mood for its Zen lessons.

The traffic light governing the on-ramp is off on Saturdays. I scoot down the entry to the Hollywood freeway, twisting the throttle. The motorcycle accelerating up the hill, roaring past the chugging cars through the Cahuenga pass is supremely satisfying. Darting onto the freeway and ending up in the fast lane before anyone else appears to know how I got there is a thrill. Today it is easy; traffic and fate seem to conspire to provide a way. "You are enjoying this," volunteers the Voice. "It is why we are here," I concede. Moving to the right, I anticipate being issued onto the 101 with its Saturday afternoon traffic as we attempt to make it through the interchange of the 405 and the 101 and onto Topanga Canyon.

Traffic is moving smoothly. Scanning the four-lane artery, I calculate where to position myself to maximize speed and minimize slowing. The curve of the road arching up leads to Laurel Canyon and points beyond. Today the memories rise quickly from the hot asphalt: faces in the Rorschach of the pitted tarmac. Some of these memories are predictably buried in the landscape. "It happened here," reminds the Voice, as the asphalt spits images from my life at me in fast-motion. "Yeah, I remember that day," I answer back, allowing the train of associations to carry me as I move stealthily from fast lane to the second lane from the right, which on this leg of the road eventually empties itself onto the 405, mysteriously moving more quickly than the other lanes. Other faces arise unexpectedly, without conscious memory to be traced until the unbidden and largely forgotten figure leaps out of the black tar, oil, and gravel.

I am moving toward the intersection of the 405 and 101, where everything slows, colluding to collide. The Voice reminds me not to be cocky. "It happens every time," advises the Voice. "I know it does," I respond just as it happens, again. A rider on a large touring bike in very clean leathers passes me, moving far faster than I can image being capable of. I make a feeble attempt to stay in his wake. The cars part and then move together again, making room for him. He creates the portal and I follow. I am vacuumed along for an eighth of a mile. "They call it lane sharing," the Voice reminds me ironically. "Yeah, it is more like lane slitting," I shoot back. "He was going really fast: good confidence and expertise," I think to no one, as I drop behind his impressive display.

I am trying to get around an extended Ford pickup, with extra wide wheel-wells designed to accommodate two sets of tires in the front and back. Finally, a small clearing appears and I snap the throttle. As I surge past the cab of the truck, I look in, intending to make a face at the rude, unaware and thoughtless driver. Ensnared at the wheel is a very big woman, with a super-sized bag of chips wedged neatly between her breast and the steering wheel. She has created a perfect fit for the bag, probably with lots of practice. The bottom chips might be slightly crushed but she will eat them anyway. She seems oblivious of me, in her zone, munching and presumably driving.

Immediately the Voice holds the line of political correctness. I do and say nothing. The Voice squelched anything that might have been verbal before I had a chance to hear it, repeat it, or remember it. I am left with a visual impression and a memory that will permanently adhere to this stretch, no matter how demanding the ride.

This is how memories etch into the landscape. Sometimes it is the scent of a place. So much has been made of scent and taste, but what operates here is a magnetic record, reinforced by the metal of the machine, the tar of the asphalt, the acceleration, centrifugal force, and the trajectory. "You are going off the deep end," interjects the Voice. "Thank you," I parry. "Perhaps magnetic north plays a part," I introduce just to irritate the Voice. "Okay," answers the Voice. "Now you are just being a brat." "Maybe," I think. The Voice can always be counted on to counter me when my thoughts edge toward the extreme.

We have passed the worst of the congestion and I am in the fast lane looking for Topanga canyon. Topanga leads to Mullholland and the winding, largely empty route to the Rock Store. It is here that I learned to ride 25 years ago. Super bikes would practice their paces, rushing past me as I tentatively took the curves, leaning in and forgetting my ego. Today I am faster; only one bike passes me. Memories are everywhere.

"It was here," notices the Voice, "that the bee got caught in his shirt." "I remember that," I reply, although I remember very little of the man, visualizing the mad maneuver to pull to the side of the road and remove shirt and helmet in one gesture. "I was behind him," I remind the Voice, wondering why a bee has never given me that biker initiation.

I have gotten lost on these roads and am thinking about doing so again. Each junction seems to hold a marker of the way I last passed. I have no conscious anticipation of the question, but the juncture and the memory tell me to go this way. I follow the traces. "Wandering is not part of today's plan," instructs the Voice. I obey by accelerating, the speed bringing the present into focus, leaving the ghosts who would cling by the road.

The Rock Store will appear on the left. "Nostalgia is part of its charm," notes the Voice. "Personal memory and collective memory aplenty," I answer. A former outpost in the coastal plane, it was a gas station and store for travelers heading to and from the coast. Built all of river rock, the establishment became a stopping place for hungry and thirsty bikers as they made their way to the sea, along Mulholland.

Less than a half mile after the Rock Store, the road begins to wind and climb. Two lanes become one, with gravel along both sides. We are climbing up a precipitous side of the canyon; the curves are so tight nothing but onlookers from above can see around them. "Do you remember the Angel?," inserts the Voice, just as I am making a particularly ungraceful turn around a sharp corner. The pavement has marks of bikes going down, replete with oil, tranny fluid, and scrapes. This is where the super bikes play, taking off from the rim of the canyon and pushing their limits.

Not long ago, I was cautiously taking this hill when a young Hell's Angel in colors was challenging the super bikes on his modified Harley. He was incredibly agile, aggressive, and fast. "That is one I cannot forget," I think as though it is self-evident. "I have not seen him for a while," I respond, wondering if he survived his bravado. Cresting the rim, I swing left and head down Malibu canyon, to the beach.

It is a perfect day. The anticipated chill from the ocean is non-existent: the sea beckons. The road widens to two lanes in either direction with expansive views on both sides. On one sweep of this road with a spectacular vista, I am reminded of an early ride, now embarrassing. I see the back of bikes moving away from me as I attempt to keep up with my ex-husband and a tolerant group of riders. "I wonder how slow I was going?" I confide to the Voice. "He was patient," admits the Voice. This is a wholesome thought amid a jumble of unresolved memory. "Yes, I think he was kind when it came to teaching me to ride," I acknowledge. Banking across the landscape is joyful now, no longer fraught with the fears of a neophyte rider.

I could go faster and am tempted to do so, but the vista is worth savoring; the present and past collide as I hurtle into the next moment, memories are subsumed and transformed in this experience. Descending the coastal side of the hills, I can see the Pacific Coast Highway, which is moving nicely, much to my surprise. "Perhaps they thought it was gonna be foggy," suggests the Voice. "Yeah," that is what I think. Reaching the Highway, I split lanes, not because the speed of the traffic but because I can. The lure of the unfettered beyond draws me on.

Cruising past Topanga, I admit, "there are memories I would prefer to avoid," as though swerving to miss a pot hole would leave the reminder of the tequila headache and a woefully strange night where I had it. "I am not sure this is the way to do it," offers the Voice dizzily, slightly miffed by my quick maneuver. Nearing the intersection of Sunset Boulevard, the traffic becomes dense. I make the left onto Sunset to avoid the coastal congestion. The curving arcs of the Boulevard are a rider's dream, even though the pavement is dicey and car drivers can be a problem. This is Gloria Swanson's Boulevard... and mine.

Images emerge as I scoot up the Palisades side of Sunset, past the Self-Realization Center with its extensive waterlily collection and manicured grounds. "You were a flower girl there," recalls the Voice, regurgitating one of many memories attached to that piece of Earth. "I was many things there," I respond, returning my attention to

the slithery road.

Sunset Boulevard is a memory minefield. Faces with their backstories appear like totem poles by the side of the road. As we pass Westwood and the northernmost end of UCLA, the Voice announces proudly, "You went there." Not impressed by the statement, I parry, "so did my mother." This is how the landscape spews its memory at passers-by who have been there before.

Soon we will pass the iconic pink Beverly Hills Hotel and venture onto Sunset Strip. "It is hard to even think about all that has happened here," I tell the Voice. Traces of reminiscences give way to feelings. "The Strip was always a bit of a chase," offers the Voice. "That's true. The fun moved around a lot," I answer back, realizing I prefer passing through over lingering. "I am pretty happy right now," I admit to the Voice. "The past has its own place," the Voice quips enigmatically.

Part V

This section is about imprinting; and the soundtrack of leaving and returning.

I sold my dead husband's motorcycle to a friend for a pittance. I threw in the owner's manual and a few rousing stories about the hard-riden, Harley Dyna Glide for good measure. It seemed like the right thing to do. I had been thinking about selling the bike for six months. The Voice inside my helmet had urged me to donate it. "It isn't running, and hasn't run in two years," reminded the Voice. "The Jazz station will take it and you won't have to do anything, except write it off." "True, true," I nodded in agreement.

That had been the plan, until it wasn't anymore, and I impulsively offered the bike to my friend. "He rides a lot and will know how to start it," I reasoned. The bike had become a source of painful memories. I wasn't sure my friend even wanted it. He would, later, call to confirm it was a generous offer, and he "would take me up on it." The Voice in my helmet surmised that he would rent a trailer and tow the bike home to work on it until it could be started. The impulsivity of the sale was matched by my friend's announcement that he was flying into LAX and would ride the bike back to his home, 300 or more miles away. Admittedly he had been able to start the bike in my garage on first encounter, but "it hasn't been ridden in two years!," whined the Voice. "What about the fluids?"

Complicating things, at least in my mind, was the fact I had just spent a considerable sum getting my own bike started and replacing, "those fluids," the Voice whined, again. "I don't know, I don't know," was all I could say. I don't know much these days and haven't since my husband, Bruce, was diagnosed with cancer. "Life is a giant mystery," surmises the Voice.

The sensation of my chest cracking in two while my stomach dropped precipitously had precursors. "It's longing," declares the Voice succinctly. "It's the call of the wild," I counter.

My first memory of this sensation was of sitting on the patio of a Middle-Eastern restaurant in the mildly hip Fairfax district. It was a warm night, the crowds were sparse. Danny, my bad-boy, motorcycling first husband, at the time boyfriend, and I were having dinner. My back was to the street, a sexy rumble was approaching. The resonance, akin to tribal drums, echoed along the boulevard. My spine registered the vibration. I turned to observe four Harleys passing. "It's cool you know the sound of a Harley," remarked Danny. "Hard to miss," I thought. But, love was in the air, "and the rumble said it all," concludes the Voice.

Danny's '47 Indian Chief had been in the shop, being worked on or something, for a very long time. "It was probably money," reminds the Voice. "Almost certainly money," I agree. The bad-boy biker was not riding. I was waiting for the day he would ransom his motorcycle and be a legitimate biker again. "You wanted it for him and yourself," mutters the Voice. "Bikers are sexy," I quip, immediately wanting to cite the many exceptions but leaving it alone. "You were young and naive," observes the Voice. "Stop," I tell it.

The day finally came; the small motorcycle shop in an industrial park, next to a bar in the inland empire, called to say the bike was restored, it was running well and ready. Pickup was scheduled for a Thursday afternoon. I was working and would have to wait for the much-anticipated moment of seeing and hearing my soon-to-be husband on his motorcycle.

My ground-floor office, where I dutifully saw clients by the hour, abutted an alley. I asked Danny to ride through the alley on his way home on the resurrected bike. "You knew you would be thrilled," remembers the Voice. I awaited in muted anticipation. "Well, after all, you were working," adds the Voice. The sound of the approaching Indian shook the alley, ridded it of rodents and sent me into delirium. My office quaked, my body tingled, and the client sat looking confused and annoyed because I was perceptibly distracted.

"You were captured," observes the Voice. "I had no defense," I tell the Voice. Danny made two laps around the street and alley, leaving me debilitated, like a long night of sex. It was, "a call to the wild", concludes the Voice. The roar was guttural, and I was going down, "to meet your shadow," suggests the Voice. And so it was.

The decent was inevitable. "I had been good for too long," I tell the Voice. "And we are happy for it," confirms the Voice," referring to the profound physical, emotional, and psychic experience that life with Danny demanded. "Chased by lust and love," I add. X marks the spot and the crossroads. All things meet here in the demanding sound of the transported loved one.

I was thrilled and imprinted thrice at that moment. "Huh?," queries the Voice. The sound of the v-twin was a resonance that echoed from my past, becoming a call to adventure. The first imprinting was in high school with the sound of Art Starbuck on his Harley. "That is not his real name," challenges the Voice. "Don't interrupt," I say, "but, yes, it was his name and it is a true story." "Riding away on his Harley," I continue, "from a friend's house." It was the 1960s or 1970s and, he was beautiful and, to my adolescent body, sexy as all heck. The second imprinting was the cinematic classic *Easy Rider*, as the dashing duo of Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper chased across the highways of New Mexico on their Harleys, headed for Texas and trouble, rumbling all the way.^[9]

And finally, Danny, now my ex, pulling through the small residential alley behind my office building screaming (metaphorically), "Other." "Oh that was wonderful," confirms the Voice. The polarization of my sedate job, rattled to its core by the beast of the Indian and its rider roaring past, reminding me of a much more embodied life. I succumbed to the journey, the descent, and the love.

"Decent suggests ascent," offers the Voice, hopefully. "Well, as we have learned, the polarities exist in every dimension," I respond vaguely. The truth was that Danny and I had a ten-year marriage, in which his alcoholism and drug addiction became a problem for both of us. His eventual sobriety heralded a new phase in our relationship. I went off to school and he worked at being sober. "I was there, I was there," reminds the Voice.

Our not so abrupt separation was followed by a period of re-exploring the territory of my life and Self. I finished my dissertation, and in so doing found my own motorcycle spirit and events. Sometime during the dark days, I

became aware of a fellow student who announced gleefully to me that he had just bought a Harley. “Still depressed and less than impressed,” reminds the Voice. I fancied myself a hardcore biker with club connections, he was a nice guy, from a good family, who was getting a PhD in psychology. “Sounds like you,” inserts the Voice. “Ugh, you are annoying,” I spit back.

Two years after my divorce the student and I met at the Glendale Harley Love Ride and our journey together began. “Ah isn’t that sweet,” chides the Voice. “Prosaic, but true,” I remind the Voice, “after all, you were there too.”

Bruce, the student, had a newish Dyna Glide. He had ridden a small Japanese bike before moving to the big v-twin. It had a fine set of pipes that produced a fat-throaty note. The bike had been tuned so the hum of the engine perfectly supported but did not interfere with the beefy blurps from the pipes. As the bike accelerated, the sound grew in intensity, producing a Wagnerian crescendo. This grew to be music to my ears as it accompanied another burgeoning romance.

He had been a surfer/teacher/bureaucratic grunt until he became a student again. As students, our romantic trysts and commutes were always accompanied by the sound of the bikes, coming and going. I lived in Hollywood and Bruce lived in Santa Barbara, something like a hundred miles of surf-side roads lay between me and my sweetheart. We had our weekends together. The sweetness of our love had a definitive end; near 2 pm on Sundays if it was Winter and 4 pm if it was Summer. “The object of desire is always most beloved as they are moving away,” paraphrases the Voice. Maybe Proust was right; the sound of the bike was so associated with my heart’s desire that there was no distinction.

A relationship that grew to be a marriage was a two-way affair over the 101 from Hollywood to the beach and back, or vice versa. Cars were rarely involved, there was so much to do on the motorcycle. There were club events most months, weekend get-aways, and meeting friends at one of the local biker destinations. “That all sounds very much the same,” observes the Voice. “You should be a connoisseur by now,” I retaliate.

Showing up and leaving are crucial parts of biker events. The egress and the ingress are meant to both impress and express. How you come and how you leave are rituals. Skill, speed, style, and cool are all assessed as the parade moves through. The blapping of the Harley pipes accompanies these transitions. “It is thrilling seeing the object of your desire pull up on a motorcycle,” the Voice admits. “It seems like the object of my desire has to pull up on a motorcycle.” I conclude. So it is and was. Eros, love, desire, and excitement have a soundtrack: the sound of a big v-twin.

“You’re like Joe,” remembers the Voice. “Oh, not quite,” I parry. Joe was my motorcycle mechanic. He was a life-long rider, enthusiast, and a Hell’s Angel. Long before he was in the club, he and some friends tattooed “Oil” with an arrow in the crux of Joe’s arm, above the elbow pointing to the blood-draw vein. “You knew what made him go,” surmises the Voice. “The sound of the motorcycle is like that for me. It is an integral part of my psychic circulatory system,” I acknowledge. “I need that juice.”

Bruce was diagnosed with cancer and the juice dried up. “The wheels of fate, spun death,” groans the Voice. Bruce’s bike sat and mine sat right next to it. When he was well enough, he would rouse himself off the couch, and amble out to the garage. There he would start the bike up, in theory to keep the battery charged. He would recount the choice of parts for the bike or a favorite ride as he listened to the engine warm. He sat side saddle as the bike came to life, absorbing the power of the languishing engine.

"You know why he did it," decides the Voice. "It was the sound and a reminder of a stronger life." He liked to hear the engine as the Harley sputtered, blapped, choked, bleated, and finally roared until it smoothed out and shook the garage. It was almost like being reborn. "It was an infusion," declares the Voice.

Like most things during that period, his energy was erratic and the bike was often left unattended, draining its precious charge. During a later phase of the illness there was no acknowledgment of the bike. He no longer went to sit on the disgruntled beast; best not to feel the loss. "But the bike survived, and Bruce didn't," observes the Voice pragmatically.

I fretted about the two v-twins sitting in the garage. I saw them every day, wondering and reminiscing. "It was painful," observes the Voice. "So painful," I answer. I would strategically attempt to ignore the bikes turning my head, rather than be reminded of the crazy joy, fun, happiness, challenges, and vigorous life we had lived. The bikes sat like tombstones. Death hovered.

Bruce and I were both dying. I more slowly than he was, but I was living the process. "The end is real," concludes the Voice. "Yup, big and tingly," I parry. "The amplitude of my life experience has broadened," I like to think, but the juice was gone. "To slow down that much and have the strength not to go over the edge into the gravitational pull of death, takes strength," I boast to the Voice. "Yup," gulps the Voice. "It's a different kind of strength."

"Do you think you have some control over death?," queries the Voice. "My version of hope requires me to believe so," I admit. "The all-beneficent God isn't doing it for you today," the Voice concludes. "I suppose it's scary to look random fate in the face and still think there is much of a point going on," I acknowledge.

"Those pipes," offers the Voice, stopping the decent into a philosophical conundrum that neither of us can resolve, ultimately denying the moment. "You were imprinted, by that spinal rumble," observes the Voice. "Coming and going; transitions on every level and now between worlds." "Oh the motorcycle across the river Styx," I think.

My friend arrived from LAX airport in an Uber, officiously brushing past me going into the house. The excision was critical and required concentration. It was a whirlwind four hours. My friend arrived ready to leave. We went for an early lunch. I had no appetite and felt dry inside. Conversation was stilted and trivial. The Voice was watching warily, anticipating the final shock. "You left your body on the walk home," recalls the Voice. The last roll down the narrow, echoing driveway was wrenching.

The bike was leaving.

I suppose any transaction removing the bike from my life would have hurt. It was difficult to separate the event from the doer. I was attached to that bike, its former rider, and its sound. But I needed the bike gone.

When the bike and rider took off, the familiar and evocative splat of the engine surpassed logic and went straight to my heart. "It was a heart attack," decides the Voice. Flying down the tunnels of time, every cell was torn between the past and present. My stomach dropped, and darkness fell. Thankfully I regained consciousness before hitting the pavement.

References

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5. *Siegfried* (1852–71) is the third part of the *Ring Cycle*, written and composed by Richard Wagner. See Porter, Andrew. Trans. *Siegfried*. New York: Riverrun Press. 1984.
6. Tick, Edward. *The Practice of Dream Healing*. Wheaton, IL: Quest Books. 2001. p. 39.
7. Splitting lanes refers to riding a motorcycle between lanes of stationary or slow-moving traffic in the same direction of travel. It is legal in some countries, in the UK for example, but not in others, such as Spain. In the US the legality of lane splitting differs from state to state.
8. Idiom deriving from Greek mythology, associated with the proverbial “to choose the lesser of two evils.”
9. *Easy Rider*. Film. 1 hr. 35 min. Prod. Peter Fonda, Dir. Dennis Hopper. Columbia Pictures. 1969.