

"I've been especially caught by the breadth of sentiment in the material. Really," I said, trying to impress him of my sincerity and my capacity for deeper appreciation — and to butter him up so he'd print another of my speculative rants that no one else would. "Your pieces, the articles by local writers, the reprints from small papers like yours are always engaging, the writing evocative and free. But the poetry and short stories, drawings and photographs, the letters and essays from children, really temper the politics. I mean, there's sentiment there, and a sense of history, not just for Astoria or the North Coast, but in you for yourself, your writing, and the publication. You rarely see this kind of literary sense anymore. I feel fortunate to have my work be a part of the newspaper. Seriously. But I wonder, now that I'm seeing you face to face, do you consider yourself more artist or activist?"

McCusker smiled. He took a sip from his glass and sobered. "A friend once called me a poet with a press card. I kind of feel like a soldier who's come home from war only to find more war in the streets. I think I'm mostly a journalist though. Literally. I keep a journal. Maybe that journal, more than the paper, is the thread of my life. The paper is merely the public version of my more personal writing."

"But you are a politico."

"Everything is politics," McCusker said gravely. "The way you walk, talk, comb your hair, wear your hat. Who you sleep with. Where you spend your money. Everything has a spin, a counterspin, and a politics!"

Bozo Bob suddenly leapt up on the bar wearing only his makeup, frizzy hair and the red latex nose where a condom might better serve. He began dancing in front of Rita in a rude and obscene manner. Cobain abruptly stood from his table. Without a moment's hesitation he leveled his shotgun, pumped both barrels into the naked clown, opened the breach, emptied the shells and sat down. Bozo Bob virtually disintegrated. Bozo Bill shouted at McCusker, "You can't kill me! We share the same birthday!" and ran out the door.

"I had to, Chesty," Cobain said. He reloaded the shotgun and put it back in his mouth.

McCusker shrugged and sipped from his wine glass, then continued speaking. "I was a naive kid who got educated in the Marines. I spent a year in Vietnam jumping into the jungle out of helicopters as a Marine combat correspondent. I saw the harsh collision of two radically different cultures up close and personal. All the bombing and killing boiled down to economics and politics. Harsh and cold."

"But doesn't something transcend politics? Even Jesus, you say, is political?"

"Everything is political!" bellowed McCusker. I stubbornly returned his glare. Slowly and deliberately I turned my eyes to where TJ's still remained.

"Everything?" I parried, looking back again to the formidable editor.

McCusker looked at the exotic dancers, then back to me. His face lengthened with a somber, jowly seriousness. He peered over the top of his glasses and glowered down at me. "Yes, Mr. Armstrong, especially..." The rest of what he said was drowned out by a mortar shell exploding in the rear of the room. "Thomas, get in the jeep!" McCusker yelled. "We've got to get out of this hellhole," he screamed just as another mortar rocked the lounge.

"Shouldn't we grab Jesus too?" I asked as Jefferson climbed into the passenger's side of the front seat.

"He's got to carry his own cross," said Jefferson. "We confused freedom of religion by inadvertently laying a Christian prejudice on the entire nation."

"Hang on jarheads!" called McCusker. He handed me his legal pad and pen and threw the jeep into reverse. The wheels spun furiously, then caught with a cracking of wood and flying splinters. The jeep pulled out of the bar and jolted to a stop. McCusker swallowed the last of his wine, hurled the glass against the wall, jammed the gearshift into first and slammed down on the accelerator.

"Where the hell we going?" I yelled hysterically from the back seat as McCusker pointed the beast straight at the hole in the lounge's east wall.

"Maybe we need a designated driver?" shrieked Jefferson as the jeep bounced out the hole in the wall and began a terrifying headlong, 8-story drop to the streets of downtown Astoria.

"Never fear, gents. This thing's got wings," cried McCusker over the whistling wind.

And sure enough two huge feathered wings extended from the sides of the jeep and pumped heavily at the air. The rig swept out of its dive and lifted us out over the serpentine curves of the Columbia, headed East.

"And exactly where are we off to, General?" I asked. "Washington, D.C. — July, 1886 — and the Supreme Court decision on *Santa Clara County vs. Southern Pacific Railroad*. I've got a little history lesson for President Jefferson."

"1886? Wouldn't that be a future lesson for Mr. Jefferson?"

"Future, past, present. They're all the same in this dream." And off we soared into the temporal spaces — to be suddenly and abruptly, illegally parked in the balcony of the Supreme Court in Washington, D.C., July 25, 1886.

"Check it out, Thomas," said McCusker as the Supreme Court Justice below stood to read the Court's decision.

Jefferson leaned forward trying to catch every word. I did the same.

"The Supreme Court of the United States hereby rules that the rights given to its citizens by the 14th Amendment must also extend to corporations, granting corporations the full Constitutional protection provided for individuals. No state shall deprive a corporation of life, liberty, or property without due process of law...."

Jefferson sat back in dismay. "He just granted business corporations the rights of an individual United States citizen. I don't get it. That doesn't make any sense. There is no history, logic or reason to support such a view. That gives a living being's inalienable rights to an abstract entity. That goes against the very principles Madison and I were trying to address, enabling the very forces we were trying to protect the citizenry from."

"Not to mention, TJ, there's no way to send a corporation to jail," I piped in. "The corporation has the rights of an individual without having to pay the criminal costs when that corporation breaks the law — which they do regularly trying to pinch another dollar here and another dollar there."

"And that's only the half of it," added McCusker. "Hold on to your knickers, Thomas. Next stop is just across town, but 27 years and 5 months into the future. The Halls of Congress, December 23, 1913."

The jeep lifted off with a beat of its feather wings blasted out a skylight and took a sweeping left bank over early 20th century Washington, D.C. on a snowy winter evening. We dropped low over streets dotted here and there with both Model-Ts and horse drawn carriages. In the distance I picked out a brand new Griffith Stadium (now demolished) where the immortal Walter Johnson steamed fastballs past one American League hitter after another. Then we swerved radically right and headed



PANCHO (LE MONDE)

the awkward looking bird straight for the dome of the Capitol building. Without hesitation, headstrong McCusker dropped us right through the dome and into the balcony of the House of Representatives. The House was almost entirely empty. Just a few purposed congressmen were hurriedly hammering out a new piece of legislation before Congress closed for the Christmas break.

"What are they doing?" asked the third President.

"They're pushing through the Federal Reserve Banking Act."

"What?"

"Another of those infamous corruptions of the balance of power, TJ. They're making a separate, non-government corporation to supervise U.S. banks. It will have the power to change interest rates, regulate money flows, and create money simply by writing checks from an empty account to the government treasury to be repaid at 6% interest. Many among the populace today believe this is one the strongest and most influential non-government agencies in our country — possibly the world. And whose interests do you think they best serve?"

Jefferson could only shake his head. "What's happening to our dream? It's being bullied about by Wall Street and big business interests. Hamilton has won."

"Exactly — and it gets worse. Let's pop ahead to the White House, July 12, 1953. Seems to me someone from the Federal Trade Commission is trying to introduce some legislation to limit the power of the U.S. oil companies and an increasingly powerful international oil cartel."

"Oil?"

"Yeah, TJ — heating oil and gasoline for automobiles. Petroleum is the biggest of the big businesses after World War 2."

"Automobiles? World Wars? Petroleum? Take me back to the 18th century!"

"After the trip, Thomas, we'll drop you off in Monticello, but not without a few details to think about."

"You're telling me. Might be necessary to write some stiff essays for future generations of lawmakers and politicians."

"Doubt it will do much good," moaned McCusker, landing our jeep in a flower bed just outside a window to President Truman's oval office. Inside Truman is seated at his desk with pen in hand, signing a piece of legislation. Secretary of State Charles Bohlen stands beside him. On the other side of the desk is General Omar Bradley.

"What's going on in there, Michael?" I asked.

"The Federal Trade Commission has just demanded that the American oil companies open their records to the U.S. Senate's Antitrust & Monopoly subcommittee — initiating what might be the most important action ever brought before the antitrust division. Subpoenas were served to 21 American oil companies and seven international corporations. It's a criminal suit charging collusion, regulation of the market, and silent agreements to disadvantage small independent oil companies from the market. The companies have objected by saying their papers are sensitive and must remain secret for reasons of national security. General Bradley there has just advised Truman that because of the worldwide threat of communism and the importance of oil to the war machine, the national security is indeed in jeopardy. What Truman is signing will reduce the suit from a criminal action to a civil case. Because of that, this action against the cartel will be pushed off center stage, gradually delayed and put off and watered-down until it is finally dismissed in 1968 without hardly a fine or firm word."

"All in the name of National Security?"

"Anticommunism, Dan. Which leads us to the next stop on our little trip. Back across town to the halls of Congress and another hearing in 1988."

"Does the name Ollie North fit in here?"

No sooner had I asked than there we were, parked in the

back rows of the Senate. Television cameras were everywhere. Hawaii Senator Daniel Inouye held court, and Colonel North stood at center stage, brazenly decked out in USMC uniform and medals.

"What's going on?" whispered Jefferson to McCusker. "Another daytime soap opera," I quipped.

"This is that crazy renegade intelligence community I was telling you about earlier, Mr. ex-President. Congress had declared four years earlier that the American public did not want and will not pay for another war in Latin America. These super patriots, as they call themselves — retired military men, CIA types and corporate power brokers, all intermingled with the administration of Ronald Reagan and George Walker Bush — have gotten together to sell weapons to Iran in order to finance a secret war in Nicaragua. It's really crazier than that — there's gun running and drug running and money laundering. Offshore bank accounts. And huge profits for the patriots. It's the privatization of foreign policy."

Jefferson lowered his head. Tears formed in the corners of his eyes. McCusker patted him on the shoulder. Jefferson lifted his head and spoke, trembling with emotion. "We need not go on. I see where this is headed. Money has won. The system could work, but instead corruption has infected it. The whole art of government consists of the art of being honest. But our dream has fallen prey to the economic system and the greatest weakness of the human character — greed. Business interest has supplanted public welfare. A military-industrial complex pulls the strings of government. Democracy will shade into fascism. A strongarm gangster state will rule. It will be little more than a global feudal system in another fifty years."

McCusker nodded. "The great experiment has run its course. Humanity must shed its skin once again."

"You mean, Marx was right?" I wondered aloud.

"Sort of, I guess," McCusker said. "It's just periodic class dynamics. Revolution must follow counter-revolution must follow revolution."

"You know, Michael," said the third President. "I think we even understood that back in Philadelphia. We had just won our revolution. And it was an historic one. But I think somewhere deep down we knew one day our system would be dismantled in counter-revolution. It's just disappointing they haven't learned to make it better as they go."

Jefferson's emotion spumed me. I was infuriated by the entire scene. It was too blatant. Too criminal. Not just the weapons scandal. But the way it was being swept under the rug. And it all came to a head for me in North. Particularly pompous, righteous North. I stood up in the back of the jeep and screamed at Inouye, "Ask about the cocaine!" All eyes turned to the nut in the jeep — me!

"Ask about the cocaine!" I shouted again. Then gritting McCusker's pen between my teeth and waving the yellow pad over my head, I jumped from the back of the jeep and made a mad rush at the Marine colonel determined to issue justice to this super patriot on nationwide TV. But before I could get within ten feet security guards were on top of me and a billy club pressed delicately across my throat.

I spat out the pen. "I think it's time we head back to the *Top of the Astor*," I said with devilish aplomb. "I need a drink." No sooner had the words been spoken than we were there. Or I was anyway. Waking to a puddle of beer in my face and a throbbing ache in my head. "What is this?" I asked lifting my head from the bar, a black *Rolling Writer* pen stuck to my cheek.

"It seems you needed a little nap, Mr. Armstrong," Rita said from behind the bar.

I removed the steel-tipped pen from my cheek. "What about the jeep? And the hole in the wall?" I squinted through blurry vision and looked around the lounge. All was neat and clean. No debris. No bodies. No hole in the wall. "What about the dancing girls?"

"How about some coffee?" Rita offered.

"I'll bet Thomas Jefferson wasn't here either?"

Rita laughed. "No. Closest thing we've got is McCusker."

I looked to my right. Yes, although all else was gone, McCusker was here, a wreath of thorns settling down low over one eye. He smiled and raised his glass of Red Death to me. "By the way," he said, "that's my pen."

I handed him the pen, stood from my stool and fell flat on the floor. From the prone position I saluted the literary vet, pushed myself up on my elbows and echoed his ever-present Thursday morning KMUN radio show qualifier: "The views expressed here in this lounge are my own, and only my own in all the world. So help me, God. Amen!"

Dan Armstrong's most recent article for the Times Eagle was *The Next Level* in the Marpri' 97 issue. He is indebted to R. Louis Richards for on-line research for this story.



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