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To The Headwaters Or Bust

9/23/15:

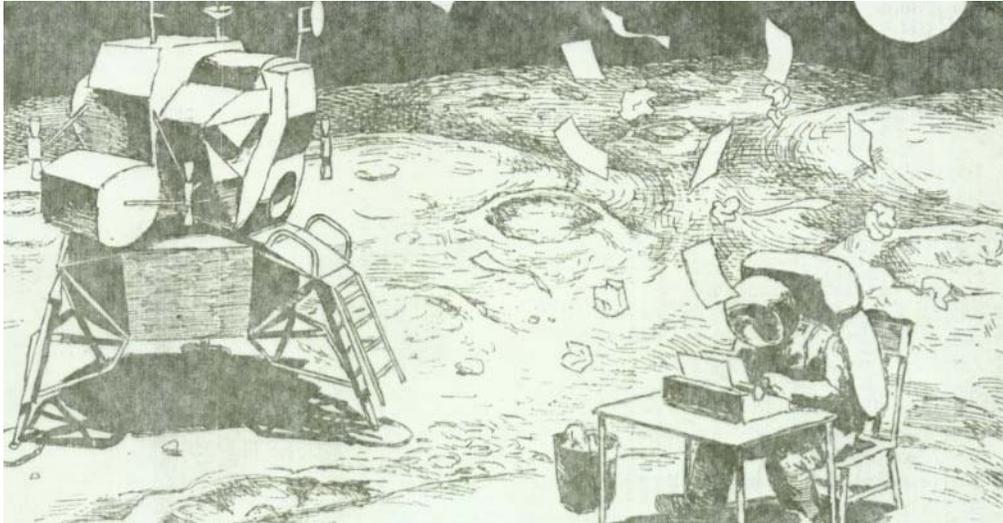
It may seem folly to seek counsel from that corn-stalk clutching “Father of Waters” statue seen in mute repose beneath a stained glass skylight at Mill City’s Courthouse just above on this, the Autumnal Equinox of 2015 when Day and Night warily shake hands with equal status, but I’ve been learning of late how to read lips (stone cold or otherwise) and what he had to say has shaken my complacency. Early this morning, not far from Point Clair, Louisiana, where we’d docked for minor repairs on our paddlewheel steamboat, I hiked out into Iberville Parish and came upon the Lone Oak Prisoner Cemetery where a frail elderly limping black man, ghostly pale, placed a folded paper prayer into a hollowed out crevice at the base of that sprawling squat solitaire tree, invoked the tribal title of some forgotten agrarian deity (whose name may have also once been his own) and inaudibly whispered how he long ago escaped from the nearby Indian Camp Plantation which once served as America’s National Leprosarium. I shook his two-fingered hand, shared a hot sip of thermos coffee and doughy bite of breakfast bagel, told him how I too had “missed the boat a long time ago”, then walked patiently with him back to the listing hull of our humble pirate station sternwheeler and brought him aboard.

Radio Free Japheth DJ “Dungeon Jeff” signing in here now on a sunny northwest passage from “The Big Easy” and paddling upstream toward Baton Rouge on the *SS Omushkos Theatre* with the “Pilot Episode” of a very different sort of American story to tell. We embarked from New Orleans at midnight with Bourbon Street jazz still ringing in our ears to begin a quest for the Mississippi River Headwaters and we don’t plan on turning back until we get there even if it takes all fall. They say some modern steamboats can make the whole trip up to Mill City’s “head of navigation” in less than three weeks but I suspect our course will be harder, longer and filled with much meandering so, as the (just) late Yogi Berra (R.I.P.) used to say, it won’t be “over till it’s over” but also, as Pope Francis (just) said at a White House gathering, “we know that things can change.”

As the preface for his 1896 *Life On The Mississippi*, Mark Twain quoted an editor’s column from the February 1863 Harper’s Magazine which began: “The basin of the Mississippi is the BODY OF THE NATION” and ended with “*As a dwelling place for civilized man it is by far the first upon our globe.*” We can forgive this italicized Donald Trump-like hyperbole based as it was on an ignorance of radio-carbon dating and archaeological evidence yet to come because, as Samuel Clemens begins in Chapter 1: “The Mississippi is well worth reading about. It is not a commonplace river, but on the contrary is in all ways remarkable.” So it is in that uncommon spirit of remarkability we extend in common friendship the high-tech energy-redundant eco-populist hand of Havrylak Kern’s *American Ecologue*, holding out his pluralistic multicolored ear of “Indian Corn” (ironically known now as “Argentine Popcorn”) to Pope Francis in peaceful proactive outreach. In honor of his catholic holiness (and probable fallibility) we now turntable a blue grassroots workingman’s folk tune from the classic Jerome Kern-Oscar Hammerstein musical *Showboat*, Paul Robeson’s immortal version of *Ol’ Man River* (1936) which sublimely bridges, like an honest confident handshake, with Dinah Washington’s ecstatic rocket-powered love song *Destination Moon* (1962) thanks to the

amazing grace of some immaculate intermission assistance from dear old “Cousin Jack” post-scripted by The Who’s *Underture* from their 1969 rock opera *Tommy*.

Left click on sketch of “L.E.M. & Lunar Author” below to download (or listen to) the first song-segue of Radio Free Japheth’s “Indian Summer Of Love”:



© NY Times

9/27/15:

Some Christian apocalypticists seem to be going apoplectic of late about this super blood moon lunar eclipse which arrives during my late night shift here at Radio Free Japheth on the *SS Omushkos Theatre* where, as DJ “Campfire Girl”, I’ll be ringing the whole thing in with our steamboat’s copper bell and perhaps some atmospheric melodrama from a local thunderstorm. If, at any point during the triple alignment, a brilliant red Islamic crescent is suddenly revealed courtesy of Mother Earth’s shielding of Father Sun, I may request a moment of silence and briefly bow to Mecca in honor of some 700 Hajj pilgrims who sadly perished in a stampede there earlier this week.

We docked our sternwheeler just upstream from the Isle of Capri riverboat casino along Silver Street early this morning after paddling around one meander too many since departing Point Clair, leaving Captain Jacques with a severe case of zig-zag vertigo all on account of this aquarian highway which, as Mark Twain wrote in Ch.1 of his *Life On The Mississippi*, “is also the crookedest river in the world.” That crookedness is created by the Lower Mississippi’s soft alluvial sediments and the fact that water flows faster at the outside of curves than on the inside thus eroding the outer bank while depositing sediments on the inner bank which eventually leads to ever more abrupt shapes until the meander itself becomes so extreme that it’s finally lynched by a “cut-off” which leaves hanging in turn, over time, a long chain-link topography of loosely noose-shaped oxbow lakes many of which eventually achieve earthly burial through a geological process of drainage and sedimentation alongside the great river’s ever-changing course.

While some of our theatre troupe and I ascended the sandy bluff up to Natchez this warm sunny morning and spent much of Sunday touring the larger area, Captain

Jacques confined himself solitarily to his pilot house and rain-danced the day away with an Ahab-like “unsunderable willfulness”, wearing “a crucifixion in his face” beneath the mounted head of “El Nine-O”, a 9 point Roosevelt elk felled by bow and arrow during an adventurous British Columbia youth, whose wise visage now stared sternly down at him from above his hand-carved mahogany steering wheel. “With a cavalry bugling of my power-animal’s lips,” Jacques was heard to chant upon our temporary exodus, “we will trumpet this supermoon’s tidal power into rhythmic peristalsis and quicken El Nino’s warm ocean precipitation northward to drought stricken California.”

We left him there nursing that ambitious dream, delusional or otherwise, hired an Uber driver with a Chevy Tahoe, then made pilgrimage to St. Mary’s Basilica for Sunday service after which we sightsaw some of the massive Greek Revivalist Antebellum mansions built by cotton and sugar cane plantation owners back in the mid-19th century, hiked into the “Grand Village of the Natchez”, an ancient Native American settlement whose indigenous residents were expelled by warfare from this area not long after Natchez was settled by French colonists in 1716 and built a city which served first as the capital of the Mississippi Territory then later the state of Mississippi until 1822.

Though Dean Martin’s 1953 hit single *That’s Amore*—who can be seen [here](#) performing it’s best version live, Big Band style, in 1956—joyfully crooned “When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amore”, after everything I’ve experienced today I’m developing an eerie feeling that happy expectation can sometimes belly up into traumatic disappointment and somewhere ahead something unavoidably awful is about to wash ashore. Maybe it’s only due to that tale we heard late today about the infamous Harpe Brothers who, after the southward swing of a turn-of-the-19th-century serial killing spree along the Natchez Trace from Tennessee to Mississippi, drank their fill at King’s Tavern on Jefferson Street. Or perhaps it started earlier on our ten mile drive up Highway 61 along the Natchez Trace Parkway to [Emerald Mound](#), an even older tribal settlement where America’s second largest Mississippian ceremonial mound now hunkers, a silent sorrowful hulk of some prehistoric mystery.

It was atop that mound we happened upon two new tag-alongs for our growing artistic project which is just what we’ve been looking for. A crew, we got. An audience? Not! Well not quite yet, anyway. There is the noble old “Lone Oak Leper” whose name we still haven’t learned and now this young pair of long-haired hitchhikers we picked up at the old Seltzerville site who’ve arrived calling themselves “Georgia Sam” and “Louie The King”. Sam even says he can even pick a little blues guitar and this could prove quite useful here on the *SS Omuskhos Theatre* where an extra musician might really be of help in rehearsing scenes of our embryonic musical while we paddle valiantly against the downstream current. Believe it or not, a Catskills show biz veteran on Lake George’s *Minne-Ha-Ha II*, where I tended boiler for an apprenticeship season, once told me that audience feedback donates an added value even if it comes from the hands and mouths of free riders (seems like a definite no-brainer to yours truly and btw *pssst*, some marketing advice for composer Havrylak Kern who is rumoured to be financing our potentially perilous expedition: “Ever pondered crowd-sourcing the whole shebang?”).

Radio Free Japheth DJ “Campfire Girl” keeping the female flame burning here with a pair of tunes sailor-made for this late-night shift. If any music can evoke the awe and strangeness of a blood red supermoon eclipse, it might be these two compositions of Bernard Herrmann and Angelo Badalamenti. First up is *Scene D’Amour* from the 1958

film score of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* followed by *Laura Palmer's Theme* from David Lynch's 1990-91 television series *Twin Peaks*. Left click on *Vertigo* poster below to download (or listen to) the second song-segue of Radio Free Japheth's "Indian Summer Of Love":



© Paramount Pictures and Saul Bass

10/2/15:

Radio Free Japheth DJ "Dungeon Jeff" beginning here where we left off last Sunday, peering down into a beckoning whirlpool of some distant past life. "Whirlpool" is what a nearby sign calls Grand Gulf which formed just upstream from "Point Of Rock", the region's highest loess bluff, whose headland diverted the Mississippi River's flow back upstream and to the east thus carving out over time the "gulf" for which this town was named. As I stood there earlier today, battling a brief spell of observation tower vertigo, I found myself thinking about America's second most deadly twister, the "Great Natchez Tornado" of May 7th, 1840 that killed 317 people, mostly river men working on flatboats who had no warning sirens to tell them of the writhing serpent headed their way.

Today Grand Gulf is a ghost town whose fate and history, like many former prosperous Mississippi settlements, was suddenly altered by a change in the great river's course. While it once thrived on the export profits of plantation cotton railed in from Clinton, today it's mostly the 400 acre site of Grand Gulf Military State Park within which lie the Civil War ruins of Fort Cobun whose field artillery atop "Point Of Rock" prevented the Union infantry's landing at Grand Gulf by firing back upon a naval bombardment from 7 ironclads under Rear Admiral David Porter in the "Battle of Grand

Gulf” on April 29, 1863. This conflict only temporarily slowed the southern spearhead of General Ulysses S. Grant’s larger Vicksburg Campaign however, whose 17,000 soldiers travelled further south the next day overland west of Porter’s naval blockade, crossed the three mile wide Mississippi at Bruinsburg on ships shielded by that same blockade, then marched on to Port Gibson, making it the largest amphibious operation in American military history until the Normandy Invasion planned by General Dwight D. Eisenhower.

There were no plans on docking until we reached Vicksburg, but we’ve been marooned here since Wednesday due to a political escapade pulled by one of our larger crew members, Chef “White Dwarf” (who could use a little turnbuckle tightening on the old “hogging chain” to streamline his hull if you know what I mean). Just north of the old Bruinsburg landing, proclaiming Grand Gulf Nuclear Generating Station’s “boiling water reactor” as that “headwaters I must bust”, he announced his intentions for a pre-emptive strike over the ship’s intercom, belly-flopped with a backpack into the river, then swam ashore and tramped up to the plant’s cooling tower which he proceeded to paint with various inflammatory slogans in bright yellow and black until his arrest for trespassing.

“Operation Overlord!” he exulted, hoisting his emptied aerosol cans skyward as a security guard approached with gun drawn, shouting “Hands Up!”

While the financier of this expedition negotiated for his release from the Port Gibson jail, we held a day long picnic atop the Grand Gulf bluff and took turns improvising off one of Shakespeare’s more befitting scenes as our sobriety receded:

“The higher Nilus swells, the more it promises,” Marc Antony said to Caesar Octavius (later Emperor Augustus) aboard Sextus Pompey’s sea-going galley in Act II Scene VII of *Antony And Cleopatra*. The whole scene is set at a wine drinking party attended by the most powerful men in the Mediterranean world and was being held to celebrate what would become that broken short-lived 39 BC “Pact of Misenum” peace agreement the Roman Triumvirate negotiated with renegade General Pompey after he’d gone rogue, engaged in a reckless campaign of sea piracy as part of the Sicilian revolt and then commandeered a naval blockade in the Straits of Messina.

As it turns out, great rivers can not only swell with promise, they may also betray and take away as late 19th century residents of Grand Gulf learned when they were denied shoreline access due to a riparian corridor “cut-off” of Coffee’s Point which led to their own town’s demise. And yet, as fate would have it, the screw has turned once more since way back when with another great “swelling” and today the “ghost town” of Grand Gulf again borders the Mississippi where this afternoon’s readings from *Antony And Cleopatra* were more of a lark than Shakespeare in the park though our troupe’s performances *are* starting to shape up as is the demo-architecture of Havrylak Kern’s song-cycle *4Q521*. Here, from 1980, these “BiPolar Blues” lyrics are one potential candidate for his (and our) evolving musical theater project:

Grass Roots Do Be Do

I’ve got this hemispheric problem and it’s been drivin’ me to drink

One day I'm flowin' like a river then the next day I'm on the blink
When my right brain is woke up I can dance in the street
The Old Rock rolls itself away when the left side's asleep
Here's lookin' at you
I'm Green then I'm Blue
And there ain't nothin' that I can do be do

Good Doctor finally broke the bad news after my 39th fit
Come Christmas I'm billin' Santa for a geiger counter kit
It's a cryin' shame when there's no one to blame for makin' me tick
I'm just a consumer
I never asked for a tumor
God knows it ain't fair
Oh it feels like some kind of thorny crown or somethin' Lord I just don' know

I'm for the nuclear family but this is goin' too far
So I gave my wife and kids the keys to my BIG AMERICAN CAR
They drove right down to a Mexican town
Where they'll hang around
Until I come clean
From this quarantine
I may be attractive
But if I'm reactive
Everybody stays away from me
Oh just because I can glow in the dark doesn't mean
I'm the light of the party if you know what I mean, alright...

I'm so in love with you woman that it's making me mean
You know I'd hold my breath for you till my face turns aquamarine
Sometimes I'm a hunter
Sometimes I plant seed
But you know my sweetsour flowerpower darlin' I got one real special need
We may be mammalian
Oh let's try something alien
Ahhh it's good for the genes
C'mon let's tangle some double-helix behind those laboratory doors
What d'ya say now my little five-carbon sugar, C'MON!

I've got those Radio-Active Carcinogenic BlueGreens yes I do
"RADIO-ACTIVE?" (Oh that's half right!)
"CARCINOGENIC?" (Ahh you got it!)
"WE DO?" (No doubt about it, my friend)
Ambidextrous Fool
I'm half-hot and half-cool and I'm stubborn as a mule about it
Oh but maybe someday I can make both of me be just like one, that'd be nice, yep

You might think you're a joker for pullin' a fast one on this clown
 But it won't be so funny, BIG MONEY, when I start to melt down
 There's wind and there's water here
 There's food for everyone
 There's a shipload of energy streamin' from that ultraviolet sun
 SURF'S UP!
 It's ours for the askin'
 Just take off your mask and begin with yourself
 C'mon let's start cleanin' up this Godawful Mess we've made of things, alright?
 With some Grass Roots Do Be Do
 You and Me and Me and You
 GRASSROOTS DO BE DO!

Composed in the nuclear wake of Three Mile Island and its prescient cinematic counterpart, *The China Syndrome*, this song seems more relevant today with respect to the nearby Grand Gulf Nuclear Generating Station which, though deemed to be safely south of the Madrid Fault earthquake damage range, could nevertheless conceivably become a future “Fukushima” for the Mississippi River (or at least that’s what I pray weighed so heavily on the personal conscience of Chef “White Dwarf”). With its eerie intro from a British television series called *The Prisoner* (whose protagonist, #6, says in [this 1967 episode](#), “I’d like to be the first man on the moon”), our recording of *Grass Roots Do Be Do* was captured from a decades old ham radio short-wave broadcast.

Captain Jacques—who would like to apologize to America’s east coast for the “piss poor aim” of his Sunday rain dance, “bull moose in a china shop, I guess” and “but hey, water on Mars...who da thunk it?”—informed me when we docked at Grand Gulf that he’d sensed a strange rotating turbulence upriver just before Chef “White Dwarf” jumped in, a “gravity vortex we may have to slowly slingshot our sternwheeler around”, reciting verbatim then from Edgar Allen Poe’s *A Descent Into The Maelstrom*:

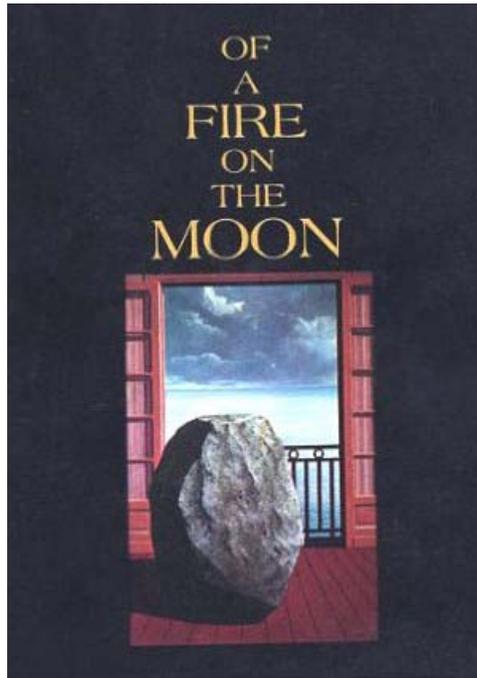
“ ‘This *can* be nothing less than the great whirlpool of the Maelstrom.’ ”

“Or perhaps the Well of Democritus at whose bottom the Goddess Veritas dwells,” replied I, who has been keeping a keen eye on DJ “Campfire Girl” ever since we left Natchez as that super blood moon eclipse seems to have have sent her spiralling down into some kind of “gothic” funk. Here’s hoping the first tune of today’s song-segue, a romantic 1957 Perry Como tune named *Round And Round*, might cheer her up.

In conclusion I must confess that it was Norman Mailer’s *Of A Fire On The Moon* which Sunday night’s super blood moon made me recall. Written when the “Age of Aquarius” was just beginning, it’s author burdened with a melancholy sense that the 20th century had somehow ended with the Summer of 1969, Mailer’s non-fiction classic begins with his lament for Hemingway’s shotgun suicide in 1962—“the greatest living romantic was dead”, “dread was loose” and “something awful was in the air”—followed six weeks later by President Kennedy’s declaration of putting a man on the moon before the decade had ended apparently giving Mailer’s narrator, formerly known as Norman, “the liberty to christen himself Aquarius” because, as he surmised, space age technology

had arisen to fill the vacuum left by all the dreadful assassinations and warfare yet to follow and “it was the perfect name for a man who would begin the study of rockets.”

So think of “Moon Rockets” and Grand Gulf’s “Point Of Rock” then left click on the cover of Norman Mailer’s 1970 *Of A Fire On The Moon* below (featuring Rene Magritte’s 1954 painting “Le Monde Invisible” or “Invisible World”) to download (or listen to) the third song-segure of Radio Free Japheth’s “Indian Summer Of Love”:



© Little, Brown

10/8/15:

On obtaining the belated release of Chef “White Dwarf” from Port Gibson’s jailhouse, we embarked northward late Wednesday only to be suddenly struck by an electromagnetic pulse that zapped the onboard computer and turned our sternwheeler into a rudderless spinning derelict as we tried to circumnavigate that “Gravity Vortex” just beyond “Point Of Rock” which Captain Jacques forewarned us of. If there is any poetry or justice at all in poetic justice then it may please some eastern seaboarders to know that our rain-dancing skipper with the “piss poor aim” has also met his Leviathan. Last seen on the hurricane deck thrusting a trident-shaped lightning rod skyward screaming “To the San Joaquin or Bust!”, he was suddenly sucked up into a shimmering moonlit waterspout encircled by a murder of crows and whirlwinded to a greenhorn’s trail of aurora borealii.

The bad news is that we’ve now run aground on a sand-duned “towhead” at the northern tip of Middle Ground Island and seem, for the lack of a passing tugboat or an extremely large driftwood lever, to be temporarily stuck.

The good news is it that our yet-to-begin search for a new steamboat pilot has come quickly to an end like some second-story thief climbing a high-voltage fence.

He emerged on the run all tattered and torn from an interior island bayou at sunrise with tousled hair, hint of moustache, a bad sunburn and the tail feather of an ivory-billed woodpecker stuck between his teeth like a long-stemmed rose. Beaming a crooked boatsman smile with tie-dyed duffel bag slung over one shoulder, he waded into the Mississippi shallows and stepped confidently aboard the steamboat, bucket by bucket upon our unhinged paddlewheel, singing *Freres Jacques* before heading straight to the now uninhabited pilot house where he clanged its copper bell, recited a stanza of some latin matins liturgy, then collapsed into a shivering puddle of beefcake boullion from a case of what I, for the lack of more precise diagnostic tools, am calling “swamp fever”.

“I may be travelling incognito but you can call me Ozawindib,” he confided in sick bay later this morning after returning to semi-consciousness, confessing with occasional clarity that he and his kayak had mysteriously submarined down into a bubbling river whirlpool during the freak disturbance only to resurface *sans* water craft within a Middle Ground Island bayou as if lifted there by some benevolent protector.

After removing the torn remains of a denim work shirt to stethoscope his hairless chest, I asked him to turn over and found myself gazing at an amazingly detailed 19th century painting of the Mississippi River Basin. Tattooed in blue upon his entire back, it was branded “Body of the Nation” and my immediate 21st century reaction was that such a navigational chart would seem to be completely useless unless he’d previously served as a steamboat “cub-pilot” or “cabin boy” in some bygone age. I then told him all about our prior captain’s premonition of the “strange rotating turbulence” upstream from “Point Of Rock” and he plucked out a first edition copy of Edgar Allen Poe’s short stories from his duffel bag, flipped it open to a page referring to that ‘Traveller from the Spirit Land’ in *A Descent Into The Maelstrom* and read aloud as if Jacques himself had dog-eared it:

“ ‘I became possessed with keenest curiosity about the whirl itself. I positively felt a wish to explore its depths, even at the sacrifice I was going to make; and my principal grief was that I should never be able to tell my old companions on shore about the mysteries I should see.’ ”

Well now we’ve given “Ozawindib” a chance to do just that and with child-like gratitude he reached once more into his harlequin sack to retrieve a cellophane-wrapped mint condition copy of the original 1972 *Swamp Thing* comic book which he presently gauged could be bartered for a “Ulysses S. Grant or two” on eBay:



© DC Comics and Bernie Wrightson

He promised to “godspeed our progress” and guide us faithfully upstream to that “Truth Head at the Geographical Ground Zero of North America” which we, even with all our fancy computerized school craft, cannot accurately locate without him. Then he deliriously sang, in the rhyme of some ancient mariner to a hovering albatross, those dreampower charged melodies of a soul eternally burdened with delivering, whenever it becomes necessary, the “Measures Of A New World Age”.

But his pilot’s pledge comes with this troubling promissory hitch:

“The fragility of any new beginning concerns old scores to settle and former debts to pay followed by a solemn prayer for the future,” he said. “So, before we can explore that life we’ll share ahead, I must first lead you to the Land of the Dead.”

Oops, almost forgot. As the *SS Omushkos Theatre’s* doctor-without-border in case of medical emergency, I’m also known around here as Radio Free Japheth DJ “Campfire Girl” and it’s my duty to upload a new song-segue for our late-shift audience tonight so first in line is Kate Bush’s 1978 *The Man With Child In His Eyes* followed by *Prologue And Main Title* from the soundtrack to David Lynch’s 1984 *Dune* as performed by the rock band Toto (who, just guessing, named themselves after Dorothy’s dog in *The Wizard Of Oz?*) and consummated by Nat King Cole’s 1948 version of *Nature Boy*.

The epic science fiction novel *Dune* was published in 1965 and dedicated by its author, San Francisco newspaperman Frank Herbert, to the “dry land ecologists”. If it seems prophetic with respect to the Persian Gulf wars (Shaddam and Arrakis anyone?) it may be most applicable to the great California drought now well into its fourth year and which El Nino, even if it fully manifests, will only be able to do so much to alleviate. So here’s hoping California politicians will consider a proactive policy of constructing an

infrastructure which might help reap the bounty of that extra moisture to replenish aquifers in the fertile central valley, one of our planet's greatest agricultural wonders.

In addition, if all he said earlier proves to be true, dozing cherub-faced Ozawindib here could learn a thing or two via this perceptive Princess Irulan quote lifted from her 'Collected Sayings of Muad 'Dib' in *Dune*: "The person who experiences greatness must have a feeling for the myth that he is in. He must reflect what is projected upon him. And he must have a strong sense of the sardonic. This is what uncouples him from belief in his own pretensions. The sardonic is all that permits him to move within himself. Without this quality even occasional greatness will destroy a man."

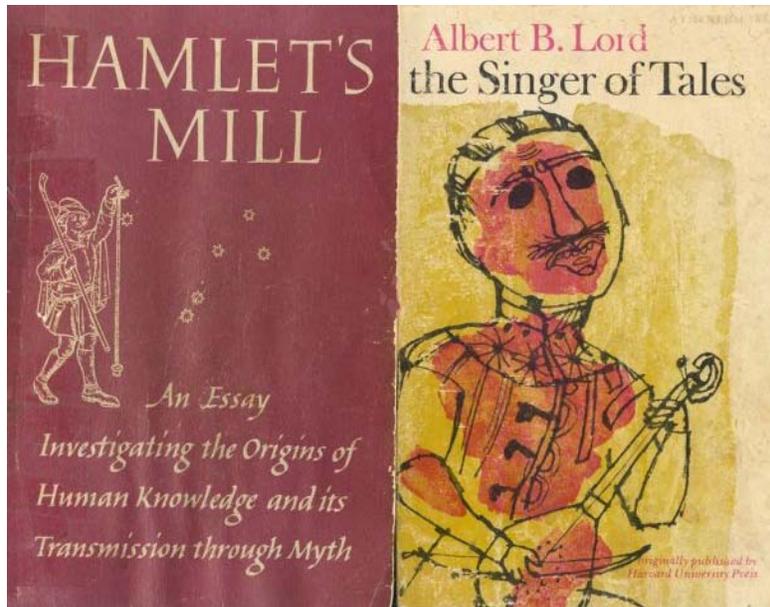
Wishing him the best of what he can make of a good night's sleep, I sedated our new captain into dreamland then crept deck-by-deck to the pilot house for a one-on-one with "El Nine-O" where I found high on a shelf just beneath his mounted head a pair of non-fiction classics that Captain Jacques kept: one on the rigorous disciplined mnemonic methodology of ancient bardic singers and a second on the archaeoastronomical origins of mythology, both of which had a few bookmarks and china-penciled passages.

Here, for what it's worth, my first impression gloss:

Near the end of his 1960 *The Singer Of Tales*, scholar Albert B. Lord concludes: "The traditional oral epic singer is not an artist; he is a seer. The patterns of thought that he has inherited came into being to serve not *art* but religion in its most basic sense."

And then this, paraphrasing from the 1977 Introduction and Chapter 1 of *Hamlet's Mill*: his "personal drama was that he had to be a hero, but still try to avoid the role Destiny assigned him" so "it was a surprise to find behind the mask an ancient and all-embracing cosmic power—the original master of the dreamed of first age of the world." Feigning insanity like youthful shepherd David to ensure his own safety while bearing that tragicomic duality of "melancholy and high intellect", he was really a kind of "Sherlock Holmes in disguise", "an ambivalent power dispensing good and evil" who "must not be conceived as a heroic misfit but as a distributor of justice". First, last and foremost he is "a son dedicated to avenge his father, a speaker of cryptic but inescapable truths, an elusive carrier of fate who must yield once his mission is accomplished and sink once more into concealment in the depths of time to which he belongs: Lord of the Golden Age, the Once and Future King."

Left click on the original paperback book covers of *Hamlet's Mill* and *The Singer Of Tales* below to download (or listen to) the fourth song-segue of Radio Free Japheth's "Indian Summer Of Love":



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[ps: our computer just inexplicably rebooted making this upload possible and I've been advised to tell you that "Higher Ups" have enlisted an unnamed "Back Door Editor" who has been polishing our posts after they pass—a poetic cleaning up of our syntactic and grammatical messes along with perfunctory fact-checking I guess—which means that occasional re-reads (and re-listens) of the whole sequence may have some merit for the closer-reading perusers of this steamboat blog. That's right, it gets retroactively better (hopefully) as we all sail northward for the Sacred Headwaters of Old Man River.]

11/2/15:

I stood with our steamboat crew for a short while that stormy Sunday on Walnut Hills Bluff, just uphill from business route Highway 61, an impromptu congregation led there by Ozawindib near the southern rim of the Mississippi Delta to gaze over a rolling hallowed terrain, umbrella'd by evergreens, where nearly 18,000 Union soldiers sleep in blue perpetuity. More than Fredericksburg. More than Chattanooga. More than Antietam, Gettysburg and Arlington combined. Durably chiseled into nearly three-quarters of these stark white Civil War headstones, most of which rise above men re-interred from other southern battlefields, reads one word: UNKNOWN

Vicksburg National Cemetery is America's largest tomb of the unknown soldier.

Mark Twain called it the "most beautiful of all the national cemeteries" in "Vicksburg During The Trouble", chapter 35 of his *Life On The Mississippi*, and then went on to praise federal labor in words that few in our own time would so liberally use: "Everything about this cemetery suggests the hand of the national government. The government's work is always conspicuous for excellence, solidity, thoroughness, neatness. The government does its work well in the first place, and then takes care of it."

This burial ground that Washington built is in the much larger [Vicksburg National Military Park](#)'s northwestern corner, a terraced promontory of serene consolation perched

high above “De Soto Point”: the northern tip of a narrow “phantom” peninsula that Old Man River once skidded a bootleg turn around and which remains Louisiana state property though it presently rests two miles inland from the Mississippi’s eastern bank.

Enshrined by a white tent-like shroud pitched over the reconstructed USS Cairo, an ironclad of the Union’s “Brown Water” Navy sunk by a Confederate torpedo in 1862 and winched from the Yazoo River Diversion Canal in 1964, this 120 acre National Cemetery crowns a vast wooded and well-groomed sanctuary containing over 1300 individual monuments for those tens of thousands of troops from 28 states—some of which sent combatants to both sides—who fought for possession of this fortified stronghold above the Mississippi River. When Twain re-visited Vicksburg by steamboat in the late 19th century, Old Man River no longer kept company with the “Gibraltar of the Confederacy” for an 1876 flood had pierced through the long narrow meander around De Soto Peninsula leaving the once prosperous settlement high and dry. “We used to plow past the lofty hill-city, Vicksburg, downstream,” he wrote, “but we cannot do that now. A cut-off has made a country town of it.” And a country town it remained, bypassed by commercial consideration until 1903 when the fickle Father of Waters shifted course once again making it possible for Vicksburg to become the largest inland port in the U.S.

“There are more war dead up here than these gravestones can mark. The fallen of tribal battles unrecorded by historians. Natchez and Choctaw fought for possession of the Chickasaw and Yazoo Bluffs long before French colonists arrived to build Fort St. Pierre just north of here in 1719. Where are their graves now? The land of the dead is an invisible and undiscovered country.”

Those were the only words of Ozawindib’s prayer I heard when he guided us through the national cemetery a few days after our crippled sternwheeler had been tugged from Middle Ground Island to await repair or replacement of a damaged paddlewheel flange whose cast-iron axle apparently cracked while whirling through that unexplained “Gravity Vortex” which ambushed our passage at Grand Gulf. Historian Shelby Foote, in Ken Burns’ 1990 PBS series *The Civil War*, remarked that one northerner described the “rebel yell” as “a peculiar corkscrew sensation that goes up your spine”—similar perhaps to those terrifying Celtic war whoops described by Julius Caesar in *The Conquest of Gaul*—and for what it’s worth I felt a vibration quite like that when we went past “Point Of Rock” and entered some remnant storm of Grand Gulf’s once legendary “Whirlpool”.

‘When the indians danced on the prairie it had been here, this field,’ wrote Ray Bradbury in an eerie short story from his *The October Country* collection, *The Scythe*, about a man who inherits a weapon such as the world has never seen before, inscribed with this foreboding epitaph: ‘WHO WIELDS ME—WIELDS THE WORLD!’ *The Scythe* was just one of the stories in my possession as I departed the group that morning wearing a backpack stuffed with picnic munchables, a thermos full of scalding water, four tea bags, and a few books borrowed from the *SS Omushkos* library, intent on “marching” around the jagged fifteen mile trail of state monuments which grace the lawns and woods within this military park’s sickle-shaped boundary. Like Holgrave the daguerrotypist in Hawthorne’s *The House Of The Seven Gables*, I pledged to transfigure the essence of each one, wielding but the swift blade of my Canon A720 camera shutter which has an uncanny knack for harvesting pictures from sunshine. Walking up to Fort

Hill, I looked down at the river's old horseshoe bend for good luck and then cut down across the grass to Confederate Avenue at a standard army walking speed of three mph, heading east past the Tennessee Circle monument whose state-shaped block of quarried stone is "Dedicated To The Tennessee Confederate Soldiers Who Served In Defense Of Vicksburg". It was a bit past there that the park road began to run parallel with a civilian street named Lovers Lane, an ironic counterpoint for what is buried just north of both byways as I soon discovered upon arriving at the headstone of "Old Douglas", camel mascot of the 43rd Mississippi Infantry, killed by a Union sharpshooter at some point during this fearsome conflict and entombed in the Soldier's Rest section of Cedar Hill Cemetery where 5000 former Confederate combatants now consecrate a separate (though far less advertised) burial ground, nearly a fifth of them also christened "unknown".

"Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends," said Jesus in John's Gospel and these men surely died to defend their friends too, many of them fighting for a way of life they were perhaps too young then to fully grasp. After all, the average age of our Civil War's 620,000 casualties—94% of whom were white and two-thirds of whom died from causes other than combat—was just 26. It must have been a curse to be born into this world an American boy from the mid 1830s to early 1840s for so many of that generation were doomed to die in a pitiless bloodbath inflicted upon each other. The Blue and the Gray both wielded a bloody scythe during the long battle and siege over Vicksburg—yielding nearly 5000 Union and just over 3000 Confederate killed, missing or wounded—making it even more fitting that Confederate and Union Avenues equally share the circuitous length of this park's perimeter, twisting past the many earthworks of rectangular redoubts, v-shaped redans and half-moon lunettes.

We remember Vicksburg still, Twain wrote, because it "held out longer than any other important river town and saw warfare in all it's phases, both land and water—the siege, the mine, the assault, the repulse, the bombardment, sickness, captivity, famine" and the Union's "Western Campaign" for control of the Mississippi River began to focus on Vicksburg in May 1862 with a naval bombardment by Admiral Farragut's advance flotilla after their capture of New Orleans. But those ships were unable even to make a landing, much less force the city's surrender, and had to retreat back to New Orleans when the lower river levels of late July arrived. It was during this summer incursion that civilian digging of those many yellow clay caves may have begun, leading some Union soldiers to later dub their beloved "Hill City", "Prairie Dog Village", as the bluff-side dugouts, some actually staffed by slaves, came to be furnished with rugs, furniture and family pictures for non-combatants during the renewed shelling from Rear Admiral's Porter's fleet that started in the spring of 1863.

"Vicksburg is the key," President Lincoln telegraphed General Grant and "the war can never be brought to a close until that key is in our pocket". Thus what began in April 1861, with a three day Confederate bombardment of Charleston's Fort Sumter and the secession of South Carolina and Mississippi, was geo-historically bookended by the three month Union bombardment of Vicksburg. Jefferson Davis, newly elected President of the Confederates States, whose gaunt cragged face looks so similar to Lincoln's in some portraits, called Vicksburg the "nail head that holds the South's two halves together" knowing that if the North could pry out that nail and cut off Arkansas, Louisiana and Texas from the rest of the Confederacy, it would ensure success of the Union's larger stranglehold strategy named the "Anaconda Plan". Grant's strategic two

year campaign of coiling his army toward Vicksburg like some constricting snake around a trapped and cornered mouse led to two failed assaults in late May costing 4000 Union lives but it was followed by a wiser tactic of “outcamp[ing] the enemy” for a brutal 47 day seige that finally ended with the city’s July 4, 1863 surrender. Just days later, an unarmed Union ship sailed safely from St. Louis to New Orleans free from provocation and Lincoln realized that this “key” to the larger war was now in their pocket giving him enough respite from his increasing melancholy to cheerfully proclaim: “Thank God...the Father of Waters again goes unvexed to the sea.” The surrender came only one day after Confederate General Robert E. Lee’s forces were defeated at Gettysburg and with these two Union victories in two days, that last tipping point of the Civil War had spilled over. “The fate of the Confederacy,” as Grant later wrote, “was sealed at Vicksburg.”

It took several days of hiking around Vicksburg’s National Military Park for me to understand why this necropolis will long bleed into my memory just as it did into Twain’s for each daily reconnaissance here led me deeper into particulars of the past. They say that dead men tell no tales but as I walked past the high end of Thayer’s Approach just beyond Soldier’s Rest that rainy Sunday I heard a muffled voice moaning for his mother in a Scots-Irish brogue so thick I couldn’t make out her name. From a far hollow came the rattling creak of wagon wheels over a corduroy road. On another morning outing it seemed like one of the wooded northern thickets, teeming anew with wildlife, had grown darker and more impenetrable. I smelled venison cooking and saw flickering campfires between a ring of teepees pitched within a faraway clearing that decamped its secession quicker from me the faster I approached, camera ready to click.

The state monuments are this undulating topography’s real “photo-bombers” though and rightly so. A right turn southward at the junction of Old Graveyard Road brought me to Missouri’s dark bronze sculpture of an angel-winged woman, representing the “Spirit of the Republic”, standing before an omega-arched monolith. She held a stick of dynamite(?) in her left hand and raised an olive branch of peace in her right hand, balancing like a figurehead upon a cannonball which sat in turn over a ship’s bow while, sculptured within two bronze panels flanked beneath her feet, soldiers from both sides aimed muskets at each other. Arkansas arrived as a tall black cruciform-shaped sword plunging earthward between two tall grey-white monoliths behind which and to each side were engraved stone panels of fighting soldiers and a river-borne ironclad. An inscription at the monument’s base read: “To The Arkansas Confederate Soldiers and Sailors/A Part Of The Nation Divided By The Sword And Reunited At The Altar Of Faith”. Louisiana chose the simplicity of a single Doric column with a brood of pelicans nesting at its base and topped by the granite carving of an “eternal flame”. It was planted not far from the Great Redoubt and Third Louisiana Redan, also known by it’s dark sobriquet “the slaughterer’s pen”, a Confederate earthwork tunneled under and then cratered by a huge gunpowder explosion into whose dusty chaos rushed Union soldiers only to clash and die in close combat before finally being repulsed. Home state Mississippi has raised a tall Washington Monument type obelisk with four bronze eagles at it’s base which stands upon a Greek columned pediment and larger square base where a bronze statue of Clio, the Muse of History, sits above bronze-sculptured panels of battle scenes fastened to three sides. They say the stone tower was struck by lightning in 1951.

I marched onward against the wind past Pemberton Circle, a bronze statue of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and the once half-moon shaped Second Texas Lunette earthwork, wishing I'd brought a rain poncho along, when the unexpected and surprisingly populous Anshe Chesed "Hebrew Cemetery" appeared to my right where a group of mourners had gathered to lay a Star of David wreath upon someone's headstone. I paid them brief heed though and hurried by the Visitor Center, thoroughly soaked with rain, wondering just how water repellant my rucksack was. Respectfully nodding to the Memorial Arch as if expecting a nod (or at least an eyebrow wink) in return, I exited, stage right, off park property and returned to my tourist nest at Motel 6. The rain and wind continued and there were several days ahead for exploring the park's many mysteries, so I broke my pledge to witness all in one day and camped cross-legged in front of my laptop to study Civil War history as an NFL football broadcast concussed the wall from the room next door with a violent clash of young men's helmets and the screaming white noise static of thousands of fans.

On Monday morning I toured the park's lower loop south of Clay Street where most of its military earthworks now reside. Across from Railroad Redoubt rise eleven red granite steps, one for each state in the Confederacy, leading upward to a cowboy rifleman standing on a cannon cantilevered from the prickly foliage of a yucca plant, all of it fronting a four-pillared pediment engraved by the lone star of Texas. Alabama's dramatic memorial centers on the bronze sculpture of a flag-waving woman (representing the state) encircled in protection by seven men with rifles pointing outward, athletically poised on a grey granite base. Kentucky's confederate memorial comes next, a tripartite structure made from white granite consisting of a grey monolith draped at the top by a bronze sculptured flag. The monolith sits upon two rectangular blocks the upper one of which has a dark polished granite face on which a long narrative of Kentucky's role in the larger Vicksburg Campaign is engraved. A second more palatial Kentucky memorial stands nearby, dedicated to both sides of the conflict and positioned halfway between Confederate and Union Avenues. It features bronze statues of native Kentuckians Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis, top hats in hands, face to face as if in earnest discussion. There are short biographies of the two men engraved on a semi-circular base and this 1888 quote from Davis caught my eye: "The past is dead. Let it bury it's dead." which concluded with his wish for "A reunited country". Georgia has erected a simple 20 foot tall monolith atop two rectangular slabs with a terse inscription for the Georgia Confederate Soldiers: "We Sleep Here In Obedience To Law/When Duty Called, We Came/When Country Called, We Died". At the bottom end of the park, where Confederate Avenue turns into Union Avenue, stands the statue of Indiana's bearded Governor Oliver Perry Morton along with this inscription: "In Honor Of The Indiana Soldiers Who Engaged In The Vicksburg Operations". Iowa's much larger memorial is the last one on the lower loop and its starring attraction is the bronze statue of a man on horseback. He raises the Union flag in front of a columned portico behind which stands a curving structure of white granite supported by Doric columns bearing six bronze relief panels that portray specific engagements by Iowa soldiers during their two-year long struggle to capture Vicksburg.

On Tuesday I explored the Union Avenue route north back to the National Cemetery, stopping first for Minnesota's memorial obelisk which, at milepost 0.6, is apparently the first state monument on the park's official tour. A 90' Washington

Monument type obelisk jenga'd of large white granite blocks hovered over the bronze statue of a woman representing "Peace" who sat at the tower's base, grasping a shield and sword given to her by each side of the conflict. Before leaving I saw some white paper sticking out from an eroded crevice between two of the quarried slabs just barely within tiptoe reach and I yanked out a stiff 3x5 notecard folded and stuck there like a prayer, I could only guess, by some European tourist or recent immigrant, for upon it was written a verse from Rilke's *Sonnets to Orpheus* (#29, Part II) which I photographed and put back:

*Und wenn dich das Irdische vergass,
Zu der stillen Erde sag: Iche rinne.
Zu dem raschen Wasser sprich: Ich bin.*

Equidistant between the Minnesota and Michigan monuments is where Confederate General John Pemberton, pressured by his own soldiers who despaired of choosing between starvation or desertion, avoided that reckless leadership and profligate savagery seen at so many of the eastern battlefields and saved many lives on July 4th after the long impasse by surrendering himself and 30,000 men. They were paroled by Grant on conditional terms insisted on by Pemberton, a Pennsylvanian who chose to serve for the south, and many of those foot soldiers then re-enrolled in the Confederate fight elsewhere. An armistice was signed next to an old oak tree shredded by months of explosions and Grant later wrote with a hint of religious sarcasm that fragments of this oak were taken for "trophies" and were multitudinous as those from the "true cross"

I thought of that final scene from *Antony and Cleopatra*'s Act II which we acted out at the Grand Gulf Military Park a few weeks back after which I went on to read Act III, barely one page long, which portrays Roman General Ventidius, in the aftermath of his slaying of Parthian Prince Pacorus, worrying that his pursuit of the Parthian retreat for a "quick accumulation of renown" might rouse Antony's enmity and lose him any chance for military advancement: "Who does in the wars more than his captain can becomes his captain's captain: and ambition, the soldier's virtue, rather makes choice of loss than gain which darkens him." So Ventidius, a protégé of felled Julius Caesar now serving under Marc Antony, chooses, Pemberton and Grant-like, to "humbly signify what in his name, that magical word of war, we have effected" and declines to embellish the slaughter.

I walked on to Michigan's memorial, a 40' obelisk of white granite featuring the stone sculpture of a woman standing on a cylinder at its base and representing the "Spirit of Michigan" which is where I opened a dog-eared copy of Hemingway's *A Farewell To Arms* and started skimming through it's folded corners as I marched onward to the bright white and strikingly beautiful Illinois Memorial. Modeled on Rome's Temple of Minerva Medica and the Pantheon, it is largest of all the state memorials—for most of the Union dead here came from Lincoln's home state—and it stands right in front of the Third Louisiana Redan where so many Illinois soldiers died in a failed assault. There is one granite step for each day of the seige and its grand staircase leads up to a large marble portico supported by Greek columns upon whose pediment a golden eagle looks ready to take wing. The portico provides a shielded entrance into the large cylindrical observatory style dome whose interior walls are lined with 60 bronze tablets naming each of the 36,000 men who soldiered in the Vicksburg Campaign. I studied its curving wall in awe

of that youthful sacrifice undertaken near here and then walked back out, slumped down, and wetted with tears this highlighted paraphrase from Hemingway's novel:

“If people bring so much courage to this world the world has to kill them to break them, so of course it kills them. [*snip*] It kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially. If you are none of these you can be sure it will kill you too but there will be no special hurry.”

This passage rained painfully within me as I passed by Ransom's Gun Path through a river-like loop in the road and arrived at Wisconsin's Memorial where four tiers of white granite steps led up to a large Doric column topped by the bronze statue of "Old Abe", war eagle mascot of the Wisconsin infantry, who perched high above with turned head, a guardian of the peace. There was a bronze tablet at the column's base portraying Union and Confederate soldier shaking hands in honor of that peace between the states and bronze tablets bore the names of those 9000 Wisconsin soldiers who participated in the Vicksburg Campaign. A two-wheeled cannon representing the infantry and a small bronze statue of the regiment's commander, Major Goodspeed, served as West Virginia's Memorial just south of the Stockade Redan Attack near where the eastern end of Old Graveyard Road meets Union Avenue. I walked past it up to Grant Avenue where the curious Kansas Memorial stood, an abstract metal sculpture ascending from a polished granite base. Three metal circles had been welded atop each other with the middle circle's circumference left incomplete so as to represent the Civil War period when America's union was broken. It was flanked by vertical poles and vined by three intertwining metal rods that hooked together over the top circle to form an abstract eagle. There was also an African-American Monument placed near here by the state of Mississippi. Realistic, compelling and very down to earth, it portrayed two black soldiers with their arms around a wounded third soldier who limped between them. Near Grant's Circle, a bronze infantryman from Rhode Island stood on a stone base holding high a torn and tattered Union flag. Then came New York's turn with a 40' white granite obelisk standing on a stone tomb-shaped base paneled by two bronze inscription tablets. The state of Massachusetts erected the park's first memorial here in 1903 and it stands within Grant's Circle: the bronze statue of an infantryman with a rifle over his shoulder standing upon a 15 ton boulder shipped all the way from his own home state. New Hampshire's memorial also resides in Grant's Circle, a grey weathered 20' rough granite column topped by a cannonball and standing on a square base engraved with a list of those regiments who served. Pennsylvania's Memorial stands here too, consisting of a granite block placed at the back of an elliptical platform bearing five bronze cameo-shaped sculptures of the Pennsylvania unit commanders faces. Then I saw that bronze sculptured face of the man from Galena himself, riding on horseback amidst this northeastern stronghold of abolitionist passion which served to galvanize both the nation and its president through the bloody ebb and flow of our Civil War's long violent course.

Hiking Grant Avenue back to Union Avenue, I passed by Sherman's Circle and found a small grey-white conical shaped "omphalos" dedicated to Ohio's 53rd Infantry. Ohio opted for the bird shot approach and dropped 39 separate smaller monuments all over the grounds here, one for each unit that fought in the Vicksburg Campaign. Soon I was threading through a long wooded passage at this northern end of the park, passing by

the bottom path of Thayer's Approach whose top end I saw earlier from Confederate Avenue, and headed the Navy Memorial Obelisk, Battery Selfridge, the USS Cairo Museum and the National Cemetery itself, finally completing this Military Park's long course that I began on Sunday, a large map of which can be seen [here](#).

There is one last state memorial within official park boundaries, Connecticut's, which I could not see for it is located near Grant's aborted canal on the former De Soto Peninsula (making me wonder if this is where the Mississippi River had cut Vicksburg off from its source of commercial wealth before Twain revisited in the late 19th century). The monuments from Florida, North and South Carolina, Maryland and Virginia are all located at various places within Vicksburg's city limits but outside the military park's boundary and I did not see any of these either but if you would like to view National Park Service photos of them and all the other state memorials mentioned above, click [here](#).

So, there you have it. My journalistic description rendered with a minimum of commentary as I felt it best to let these memorials speak for themselves. I revisited many of them over the next few days, taking dozens of digital photos, but no matter how many impromptu forays into this park I made, it remained impossible to wrap my imagination around all that took place here from April to July 1863. Unlike the Bull Run, Antietam or Gettysburg battlefields, there was no Matthew Brady to photograph the ghastly aftermath. Vicksburg was just another classic American "City on a Hill" before the war began. Not so different from Boston's "Beacon Hill" where President-Elect Kennedy addressed the Massachusetts State Legislature eleven days before his 1961 inauguration by invoking those words John Winthrop used to address his shipmates on the flagship *Arabella*: "We must always consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us" for they "faced the task of building a new government on a new and perilous frontier". Though he predicted "the turbulent sixties" more than once on the campaign trail who could have guessed then, before his "New Frontier" decade came to an end, that rocket-powered projectiles from something called the "Apollo Program" would ferry astronauts up to the deadly lunar surface and then bring them back alive?

Whether or not I approached the number of entry attempts into that "Land of the Dead" by either Ulysses of yore, I'm certain that I failed at least as often as they did before coming to believe I would never truly conquer it. I've learned through daily trial and error that this park embodies an historical testament to earth-moving and siege tactics and perhaps even provides some kind of terrible prophetic preview—with its airborne cannonades, underground detonations and extensive trench warfare—of horrors like Passchendaele in World War I. One could even make the case that America's Civil War created a vast industry of lethal armaments which is still with us today, at both the local and military-industrial level, which President Eisenhower once warned us about, allied now for over a half century with American foreign policy and the profits of Big Oil (much of which have long since gone international). An industrious undertaker could re-enter these Blue and Gray burial grounds nearly once and half over with civilians who'll die from gun violence in 2015. At the current pace of 90 per day, that would come to 32,850 for the year. And most of them too will remain an unknown cipher but for a caring few. It is neither self-righteous nor prudish to suggest that those who "celebrate" blood and gore on Halloween night as if it were all just innocent fun have strayed far from this holy day's ghostly origins in the Celtic Samhain when souls were allowed to

“pass over” from the other side bearing profound ontological lessons which they annually expressed through spiritual stories generously told for the benefit of we, the living.

DJ “Boston Jack Barleycorn” reporting for Radio Free Japheth’s “Indian Summer of Love” after two weeks holed up in a Motel 6 not far from the Vicksburg National Military Park’s “Memorial Arch” where I nursed a daily flask of Jack Daniels and wrestled with my six-string guitar, fighting off godawful nightmares in search of some secret chord sequence whose tonal clash might express the deeper truth of what happened here in 1863. Duty called daily, but though I tried and tried, I’ve come to doubt that any musician could compose an adequate epitaph for this troubling place. Ship bunk-mate “Georgia Sam”, in a far more sanguine mood than I even though his Emerald Mound pal “Louie the King” has apparently gone AWOL after a downtown fistfight that left Sam with a purple nose, cheerfully suggested I should write a blues tune called “Blood Moon” in honor of “this blood-soaked battleground where so many young men were ground through the plantation economy’s millstone of war”. Try as I might, however, I met with failure after failure so I decided in the end to draw on the 1973 anti-Vietnam War tune by a band called Marten Harbor which I first uploaded to Havrylak Kern’s Twitter site last July. The recording itself was transferred from eight-track to cassette to mp3 over a 30 year period so there will be no apologies for its minor league “production values” other than to suggest that wearing headphones will greatly enhance your listening experience. *Hold That Line* is another Kern composition being considered for inclusion in his *4Q521* song-cycle and which, though not a lyrical masterpiece by any stretch, is perhaps the only song of his, with its suspended minor chord dirge-like progression and searing intensity, that can provide a musical sense of what it might have felt like to endure the Siege of Vicksburg. Here, its first verse and chorus:

Went into the south over a hundred years ago
To stop the threat, free the slaves
Should have been freed, ohh so long long long ago
As we walk the grounds where are their graves?

“Hold that line”, the man said
Hold that line until we’re dead

I pulled down a paperback of Norman Mailer’s *The Armies Of The Night* from the steamboat’s library shelf and found that page near the end when Mailer quoted from a Jimmy Breslin newspaper column: “The mob on the grass in front of the soldiers began chanting ‘Hold that line. Hold that line’.” The draft had not yet been instituted in October 1967, working and middle class American boys were pitted across the battle lines from each other by accident of birth, and a theatrical attempt to “exorcise” and “levitate” the Pentagon by a mystical “army with a thousand costumes”, who’d marched there from an official demonstration at the Lincoln Memorial, led to an all-night seige between raucous civilian protestors and government troops armed with rifles and bayonets, simultaneously launching the nationwide anti-war movement and prefiguring that fatal confrontation at Kent State three years later.

“O brothers, where art thou?” I sang out, pouring the last of my bourbon into a bubbling glass of Coca Cola first carbonated as a fountain drink here by local confectioner Joseph Biedenharn in 1894 after being invented eight years earlier by an Atlanta pharmacist who shared the same name as Vicksburg’s surrendering general. We could have used that mystical army to levitate the *SS Omushkos Theatre* out of the Grand Gulf “whirlpool” a month ago and been much further upstream by now. At this glacial pace, it hardly seems possible that we’ll make it to the Mississippi Headwaters by Indian Summer’s end though that is our new captain’s promise. But our long stay in this “City on a Hill” may have pierced the shiny armour of our steamboat trip’s unknown benefactor and that shiv was delivered through the youthful voice of a blind bone-thin multi-ethnic stranger of indeterminate gender, wearing old fashioned shades and tracing engraved headstone inscriptions in the old Hebrew Cemetery with the tip of a cane like an index finger over braille. I was hiking back down to the river on Saturday, our second to last day here, and wouldn’t have noticed him at all but for a speckled fawn that darted suddenly past me in her direction as I walked hurriedly by with head hung down, checking my cell phone for text messages. When he shouted she was searching for the grave of one “Jacob Kern” my ears perked up and I asked if I might be of help. With a quick scan of nearby Jewish headstones, I found it leaning northward not far away.

“*Hallelujah Freres Jacques!*” she bilingually cried. “Hello Cousin Jack!” He then introduced herself as “Ty-RESE” and lifted a pair of lines from T. S. Eliot’s *The Wasteland* to assure me that “ ‘the river tent may be broken’ but ‘I know how to bring the sailor home from sea’ ”. “Hurri,” he whispered into one ear. “Cane,” she sighed into the other. They then rotated an adroit about-face and walked briskly away, tricking nearly everyone around us into believing they were anything *but* sightless for, as Mark Twain once said, *fooling* people is far easier than persuading them that they’ve *been* fooled.

After returning to the *Omushkos*, I did a little online digging and it turns out one need only look a little south of Vicksburg to find the larger reason behind that city’s epic seige. “Hurricane” was indeed it’s name and whatever ruins may be left of it now lie on a mostly abandoned island which we passed on the upriver tow northward last month. After our close encounter with that electromagnetic anomaly at Grand Gulf, we spent a week marooned on Middle Ground Island playing pirates and indians with paint guns, daily exploring its interior bayou until we got the go-ahead to repair our riverboat theater from a mysterious super PAC donor I’ve come to call “U. N. Owen”, borrowing Agatha Christie’s quaint pseudonym, and who, for all I know, may be as inept as those generals who failed Lincoln before Ulysses Grant surprised them all. Some of us, you see, are haunted by the fate of our former skipper who peeps up like a pale ghost from the back of our minds at night to ask: “Who here really knows what happened to Captain Jacques?”

O captain, my captain, rise up and hear your steamboat’s copper bell

If our delayed sojourn at Middle Ground Island was some kind of test we had to pass in order to confront that much larger conundrum at Vicksburg, perhaps there is a lesson to be learned in this “Land of the Dead” scene from Vergil’s *Aeneid* where the late Anchises tells his son: “the stain of sin is cleansed for some of us in the trough of a huge

whirlpool; or with fire burned out of us—each one of us suffer the afterworld we deserve”; cleansing all of corruption until left with just a “spark of primal fire” and “want the body on again.”

Well we put our “body on again” in the shape of a moving ship with some help from a tugboat winch, soon passing what had been the 5000 acre “Hurricane Plantation” of Joseph Davis, maintained by hundreds of black slaves on a large peninsula that once jutted out from the Mississippi’s eastern shore. It occurred to me then that, along with the cotton gin and trains, the advent of steamboats on the Mississippi River must have made America’s mid-19th century “Market Revolution” possible. A steamboat’s ability to carry great amounts of freight downriver for international export meant that cotton plantations could become one of the most profitable sectors of the American economy up through the Civil War, transforming subsistence agriculture into a rural plutocracy which, based on the extremely frugal pyramid base of black slave labor, could quickly make large land owners very rich. In perhaps an argument that “Old Man River” did indeed care that “the land ain’t free”, some years after the Civil War ended, Hurricane Plantation was uprooted from its home state by another great river cut-off—ironically made possible by a man-made flood control canal, dug no doubt by you know who—which transferred it’s earthen domain over to the Louisiana side of the river where it’s now known as Davis Island and remains mostly Mississippi state territory. Joseph was the much older brother of Mississippi’s democratic senator who also served as Secretary of War under President Franklin Pierce. West Point graduate Jefferson Finis Davis, who spent parts of his boyhood at Joseph’s plantation and later received a subdivision of it named Brierwood, was very “grieved” (his wife later wrote) at being named provisional executive of the southern states by a constitutional convention held in February 1861 less than a month after he’d resigned from the U.S. Senate. Nevertheless, he chose to serve the dictate of his seceding state rather than his country, and a grand reception at Vicksburg was held for him before he departed on a train to Montgomery, Alabama and took the fateful oath of a seriously rebellious new national office: President of the Confederate States of America.

Later, from the Richmond, Virginia “White House” where he’d been officially inaugurated in February 1862, Davis quickly learned how difficult it was to preside over a “States Rights” constituency whose whole economy was wagered over an agrarian production system of cotton exports built upon the backs of black slaves. When President Davis called for a draft of confederate state men with an exemption for anyone who owned 20 or more slaves, the “southern strategy” was revealed for many a young soldier who might have served, realizing that wealthy landowners were asking poor men to fight and die for a rich man’s war they’d concocted to preserve and maintain their own prestige and power. 2/5ths of the Confederate Army deserted after this presidential edict and at some point Davis must have realized the folly of this exemption for he began to pardon many of these deserters. His talent for outrageous rhetorical hyperbole re-emerged however on hearing Lincoln’s 1863 announcement of the “Emancipation Proclamation”, calling it “the most wicked thing the dark side of humankind had come up with.”

As Vicksburg’s seige came to an end and Union troops controlled the larger territory along the Mississippi, Brierwood became infamous for the plantation house which Jefferson Davis had built there, photos of which circulated in national newspapers with this byline: “The House That Jeff Built”. Based on a well known nursery rhyme, “The House That Jack Built”, it was also the title of an [1863 etching](#) by a Boston printer named

David Claypoole Johnston which circulated in newspapers just prior to the Vicksburg surrender wherein Johnston drew a series of cumulative vignettes to show why “Jeff’s infamous house is doom’d to come down”. I can only add that it hasn’t come *all* the way down yet, for I’m told that one tall brick chimney and several cement monoliths of “Brierwood” still stand near a small airstrip on the now nearly uninhabited Davis Island, though it was impossible to see them from the river as we chugged past.

Ever get the feeling you’re being followed by either a humongous catfish or a miniature submarine? Well I had that sensation after we passed the Le Tourneau Oil Rig operation just north of Davis Island two weeks ago and have been wondering if it will return when we embark. Remembering what happened to the USS Cairo and unable to come up with a less conspiratorial hypothesis, I googled this “postulate for paranoia” search engine sequence that might spin your beanie and could even curdle your noodle: [Bush + Le Tourneau + Zapata + JFK + Russ Baker](#)

Everyone returned to the *Omushkos* late Saturday afternoon, some wetter than others after running in costume for Vicksburg’s annual 5K “Spooky Sprint”, and then changed into drier ensembles for a Halloween party up on the hurricane deck. It seems all debts have been paid and old scores are now settled as word came down from the pilot house that Captain Ozawindib was aching to put the pedal to the metal and, you know, “find out what she’s really made of”. Some silly talk about retro-engineering a pair of “sidewinder” wheels to “double our velocity” proved to be a snag in the negotiations until our benefactor chose the “premium soup up” option with “added modifications” thereby turning our sternwheeler into the “fastest hunk of millennial junk on the Mississippi”.

I found myself singing Fats Domino in the shower: “I’m goin’ to [Kansas City](#), Kansas City here I come”, awaiting the start of World Series game four and mourning for Maureen O’Hara. So when DJ “Campfire Girl” came to the party in flaming auburn hair as the “Queen of Technicolor” and I appeared wearing cowboy hat and boots as “George Washington McLintock” well... was my bad luck about to change? It damn well might’ve too but while we celebrated our new birth of freedom with some police siren screaming of slide whistles and a jovial bombardment of July 4th firecrackers, the rumor circulated that some young woman had washed ashore below Highway 61 with a bullet through her heart, wrapped in one of those black and orange jack o’lantern pumpkin leaf-bags. As the Neil Young song says, “this much madness is too much sorrow”, and the news sent “Campfire Girl” staggering back down to the engine-room where she binged on vinyl record replays of [Down By The River](#) long into early morning. I guess that means it’s doubtful she’ll be dragging any man “over the rainbow” anytime soon then.

I thought the first two lines of Donne’s *Holy Sonnet X*: “Death be not proud, though some have called thee mighty and dreadful, for, thou are not so” might serve as a good sendoff but I found this German-English translation of Rilke’s 29th *Sonnet* online matching my Tuesday photo at the Minnesota Memorial that seems a much better fit for our river departure: “And if the earthly has forgotten you/Say to the still earth: I flow/To the rapid water speak: I am”. All of us feel a sense of gratitude and relief on being freed from this tragic place that “Hell on Earth” once visited, so as we desert October country’s “Land of the Dead” on a warm almost rapturous “Day Of All Souls”—for either the dead have many names or they have none at all—we thankfully ring the copper bell, having successfully navigated this dark path to the other side and back through a lunar cycle’s

changing phases, scythe to crescent scythe, and now steer ourselves for a metaphysical yet very real frontier that, to we the crew at least, still remains invisible and unknown.

Put on your headphones if you please, listen to [Hold That Line](#), then hear our first triple song-segue of the series: *Gunsmoke* (for the life of me I couldn't figure out who recorded this moving guitar and orchestral version of the 1960s tv theme), Bob Dylan's *Highway 61 Revisited* (1965) and Leonard Cohen's *Hallelujah* (1985). Just left click on the Library of Congress photo of Vicksburg National Cemetery below to download (or listen to) this, the fifth song-segue of Radio Free Japheth's "Indian Summer Of Love":



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