

Richard's Living Room

He once said to me,
I've never considered myself
a man without a home.
The world is my living room.

And that would be true
through most of the nearly
24 thousand days of his life.

True, those battleship gray days
when he served aboard the Tijuana Taxi,
crossed the equator on his way
to the South China Sea
and returned a shellback.

True, those red light shore leave days
when he took his liberties with the ladies
in the nightclubs of Taipei
and the brothels of Wan Chai.

True, those yellow roman candle days
when he read the rolling scroll
of the adventures of Sal Paradise,
then traveled cross-country
toward Geary and Fillmore,
and I didn't see him again
for another seven years.

True those turquoise Dunagan boat days
in Christiansted Harbor,
when he went to work blending
Gray's Lake whitecaps
and frothy tales
from behind the bar
at the Bilge in St. Croix.

And truth be told, some of those days
turned the color of legend sometime during
his dead reckoning years on the road.

He was a reader of books,
drinking in page after page,
chapter after chapter
like a barfly on a binge.
In his dictionary "authority"
came right after "asshole"

because in his mind
the two were synonymous.
Kevin once told me
Richard had a map
of the United States,
and those states where the authorities
had warrants on him
were blacked out with a magic marker.

But that never stopped our 12-volt man
from starting his day filling his bowl
with a breakfast of champions
then firing it up,
then stalking his trails,
walking the cobblestones
of St. Augustine,
hitchhiking the highways
through Mexico,
living off the land
in Guatemala,
living on the lam
in Panama City,
raising hell with the Hells Angels
before being banished for life from Yellowstone,

or taking his mild mescaline
during those evening desert days
all lit up in psychedelic streaks
of orange, purples and reds,
and colors that only coyotes can hear
when howling under a huge balloon
of a magical moon hanging low
over the Superstition Mountains.

And it never stopped him
from cruising the LA freeways and bars,
or betting on the quarter horses
at Hollywood Park with Bukowski,
or playing his spoons,
from Whidbey island
to Rock Island, to any island
that would allow him entry,
or climbing the apple trees
in the September orchards
near the Wenatchee River,
and every so often going hometown
to Des Moines for quick refills
at the Filling Station
and the Greenwood Lounge.

In his final days
his world grew exceedingly small,
and the map became increasingly black
until the only color that remained
was a drab hospice bed
in a room in southern Iowa.

But there's no need to end this poem
with sad lines because
the last time I saw that beautiful
blue-eyed hobo
with the handlebar moustache
was a late January day.

It was cold, and there were snowflakes
falling on my shoulders.
He was wearing his Florida flip flops,
white Riviera pants, a Hawaiian shirt
and a Panama Bulldog
with palm trees on the hat band.

Oh, and did I mention?
He was with an old friend
from his childhood days who said,
You ready, Gate?

Then he raised his hand
and gave me that familiar
"hang loose" wave
before he and Kip disappeared
down a road
lined with lights
that led to a living room
big enough to hold
stars and galaxies.

--Bill Herring