

Hold the Bridge

8.27.04

Near downtown Santa Rosa there is a footbridge over the freeway. Eight antiwar people assembled early in the morning and walked out with a couple of banners against the Conquest of Iraq. The bridge is surrounded on sides and top by heavy chain link fencing, so no one can fall off or toss anything down. The six lanes going below are very loud. The air of course isn't the best. It's a strange feeling to make this kind of protest. On the one hand it's perfect. This is a captive audience of thousands, a real cross-section of the working-people. And we're in a surprise role to them...their minds will be briefly wide open. But it's also cold and windy and noisy and you can't talk to your friends and you have to keep a strain on the banner. And you can't see people in the cars enough to know whether they are upset or in agreement. It's like being from another planet in a way. Hovering above these strange warlike folk as they roar along in antiquated machinery to their bondage slots.

This could really be anywhere in the USA, if you hold your gaze to the freeway. Endless traffic, concrete roads, overpasses in the distance, industrial zones along the frontage roads. Motels, Gas stations, Fast food. For a while it seems generic for the whole urban planet. Doesn't Buenos Aires look like this at seven AM? Shanghai? Frankfurt? Guadalajara?

All of us burning the gasoline & oil and rubber in huge quantities, every day, constantly. Oversized vehicles, big trucks, beat-up muscle cars...all with just one person inside. Capsules hurtling with coffee and favorite radio stations. I remember what Khrushchev said when he was taken across the Golden Gate Bridge in his famous Fifties visit. "Why is there just one person to each car?"

Now we look down as if having just arrived from 18th century Spain or ancient Mars. These folks are insane. They are heading off down the road to the Dead-End. The biggest Accident of all time about to happen and they can't avert it. From up here it's so obvious: you're going to burn up all that fuel someday soon. Then the first wave will hit the Wall.

When I was a Commuter I often thought of us as wildebeest. We're galloping along, slowing inexplicably, speeding back up in pulses, a vast herd that can't see its beginning nor its end. If a patrol swoops in on a car and pulls it over to the center divider, everyone slows down on both sides. To look...or to be cautious. I usually feel they are badly trained. Didn't their parents tell them? "Honey, when the lions take one of us, you mustn't slow down. Don't even look back, keep running. They will stop now to eat."

One of the signs reads "797 DEATHS: QUAGMIRE ACCOMPLISHED" Some drivers give a peace sign, some honk, once in a while the Finger from a big-wheeled truckie. Then the Highway Patrol cops come up on foot to hassle us. We know we have the right to do this, but they give it a whirl anyway. Eventually they radio back home and find out that we have to keep our signs moving. So we walk slowly back & forth, keeping the banner faced out.

I begin to realize one of our number is a street person. She has on a Santa hat, she is grinning insanely, dancing a cancan from time to time...and she has brought her own little signboard. It says JOY on one side & on the other in crayons, "THERE IS BIRTH OF MANY EGOS". She's about my age, and her traits give her away as one of the Acid communards. The motley of our crew suddenly has the feeling of 1965 for me. It's as if we had been Albigenian heretics forty years ago, and after the many retreats and houndings, we are living in freeway footbridges, penned-up behind link fencing, trying pitifully to tell the strange beings below us to PLEASE STOP THE KILLING. *Please don't remind us*, they reply.