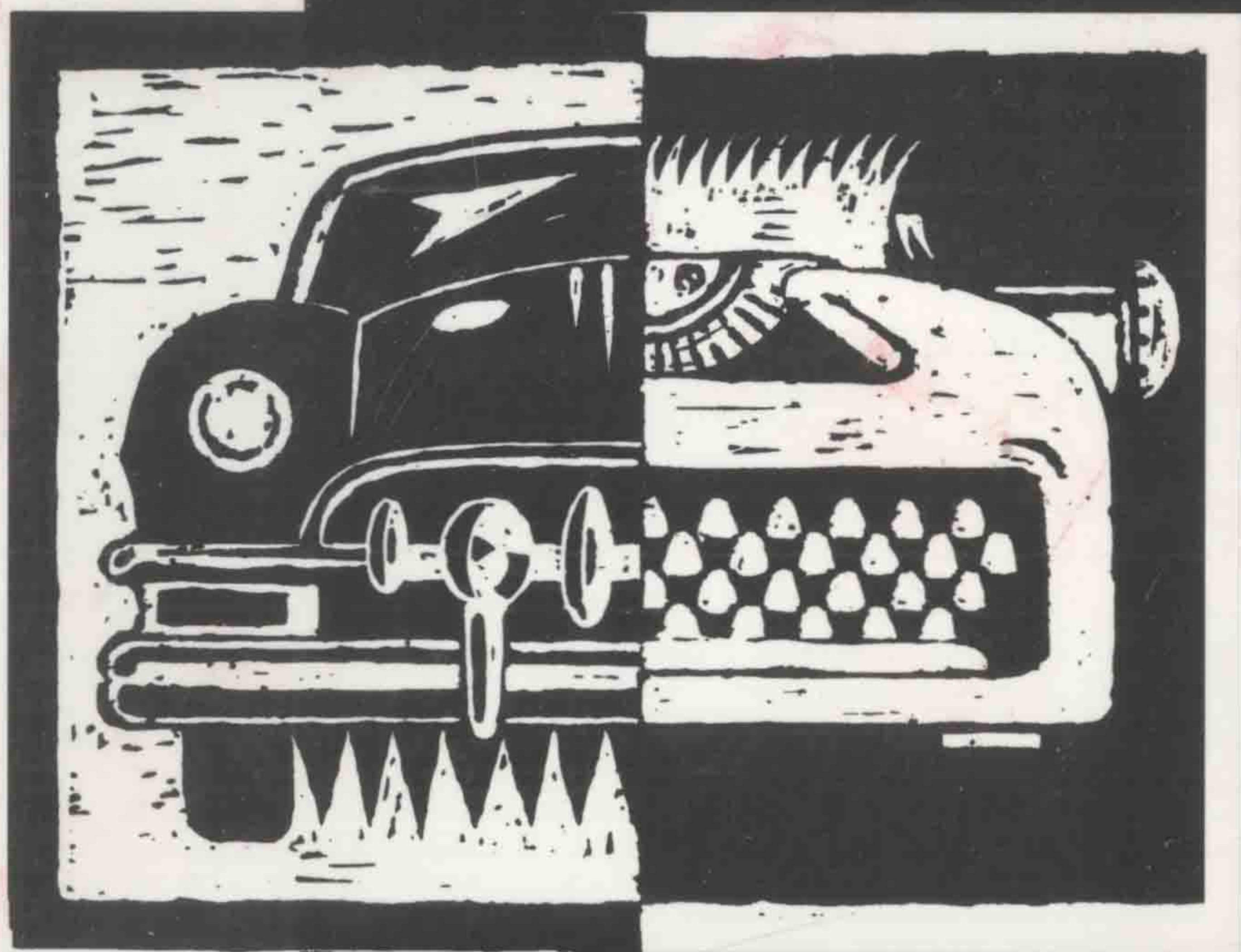


# TRAVEL / *Writing*

PHILIP HAMMIAL

ANIA WALWICZ



" An individual and talented collection  
with a punchy rhythm . . . "

THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD

# TRAVEL/WRITING

PHILLIP HAMMIAL/ANIA WALWICZ



*All characters in this book are  
entirely fictitious, and no reference  
is intended to any living person.*

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For Ralph Peckham, George Barbour, Noel Barbour, 'Crazy' Jack Sorwick, Norman 'Hog' Wallace, Harold 'Greasy' Bolton, Dave Trombley, Dick Grimshaw, Richard Ainsworth, Doug Byron, George Schlecht, 'Big' Roger Ingall and Jim Smith...

...and for Karen and Patricia.

We will never remember anything by sitting in one place waiting for the memories to come back to us of their own accord! Memories are scattered all over the world. We must travel if we want to find them and flush them from their hiding places!

Milan Kundera  
*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

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## The Owl

Always the youthful experimenter and already convinced that *true* poetry doesn't come from the *conscious* mind, I'm looking for ways to project myself into 'altered states of consciousness.' I have a brainstorm. Under a full moon I follow the railroad tracks out into the country. When I hear the whistle of an approaching freight train, I place my pen and notebook on the cinders and lie down on my stomach beside a rail, about six inches from it. Moments later the huge cars are roaring and shaking and screeching and thundering over me, around me, through me. My experiment is more than successful. I rise shakily to my feet and begin hooting, over and over at the top of my lungs. I've discovered my totem bird, the bird that will give me my poems.

## The Scapegoat

Working at the Wixom Ford factory, my worst job. Putting the right front doorhandles on Lincoln Continentals for six days a week, ten hours a day. It's Saturday afternoon, almost quitting time. Suddenly, in the distance, a great uproar, a bellowing and screeching that sounds like animals gone berserk in a zoo. What's going on? The sound comes closer, and closer. Now we know. There's a four-door gold-lacquered convertible coming down the line. It's already been hammered and kicked and gouged and scratched almost beyond recognition. It's a scapegoat made of steel, rubber and plastic. Eddy picks up a ball-peen hammer. Shorty puts a large bit in his air drill. I pull a Phillips screwdriver from my back pocket.



## The Alligator

A long story. Make it short.

Hitchhiking on the outskirts of Mobile, Alabama. Trying to get to Sarasota, Florida. A long ride with a man from Miami. About midnight, in the centre of Florida, a siren. We're pulled over. Cop very cautious. Spotlight on us, standing behind his car door, gun drawn, telling us through a megaphone to get out of the car and place our hands on the trunk lid. Comes up carefully and frisks us. Returns to his car and has a long conversation on a two-way radio; then comes, gun back in its holster, and tells us we're free to go. "What was that all about?" I ask the driver when we're back on the road. He explains that his best friend had knifed a man in a bar brawl in Miami, had managed in the car we're in to get to New Orleans before he was caught, is now being sent back to Miami for trial, had called his friend and asked him to come and get the car. A dangerous murderer. The Florida State Police knew the make and licence number but didn't know he'd been apprehended. But the story doesn't end here. There's a sequel. Patience.

Two a.m., I'm let out at an intersection, the road to Sarasota, and go into a diner for something to eat. Right away I know there's something wrong. Three people, a waitress standing on a chair behind the counter sobbing and whimpering and two very large and very drunk crackers roaring with laughter. It's either leave and maybe be pursued or play it very cool. I sit down at the counter and pick up a menu. Then I realise what the problem is. There's a three-foot long alligator scampering down the counter toward me. I lean back just enough to avoid the open mouth (big enough to take off a few fingers or even a hand) and go on reading the menu as though angry alligators on diner counters were an everyday occurrence. This is too much for the crackers. They come over and start a conversation. Now I see that their arms are covered with long bloody scratches. I learn that they've been out in a swamp catching alligators with their bare hands, one of the great sports in this part of the world. They take a liking to me. We become great buddies. I'm a good ole boy. Most damn Yankees are just plain chicken-shit, but I'm a real man. I'm so much of a real man that they want to give me something. You guessed it—the alligator. "I'm hitchhiking," I tell them, "I can't hitchhike with an alligator."



## The Ritual

The ritual must be followed carefully, religiously. One *must* use a hose to syphon some gas from a car. One *must*, we *must*, stand on the edge of town at nine p.m. on a cold winter night and hitchhike with a can of gasoline and a bundle of newspapers. One *must* ask the driver to be let out in the middle of nowhere. One *must* wade through two feet of snow to the deserted farmhouse and, once inside, one *must* kick out seven steprisers, pour gasoline on the staircase and start the fire at its base with newspapers.

Flames leaping from the peak of the roof and red-hot timbers crashing down on every side and we're still inside leaping through burning walls, shouting, laughing, out of our heads. Then we notice some approaching headlights. Maybe it's time to leave. By the time we get down to the highway another car is approaching. We decide, in the middle of nowhere on a cold winter night, to play it cool. The car slows to a stop and the driver asks: "Did you guys start that fire?" "Of course not," Bradley answers. The car drives off. Maybe he's going to call the police. Maybe we should think about hauling ass. We cross a field, leaving deep tracks, then three or four more and come out on a narrow road. We walk along the road for a few minutes before we see headlights approaching from both directions. We leap as far as possible off the road, go into a field and lie down on our stomachs behind a tree. But the cars are stopping; they've seen our tracks; car doors are opening and closing; flashlights are pointing in our direction; they're coming to get us. Seven or eight men led by a county sheriff. He's got his gun out but his hand is shaking. Maybe he doesn't use his gun very often; maybe he's just cold. But the sight of the shaking gun starts us laughing. Lying on our stomachs in the snow and laughing at a man with a gun. A couple of real crazies. They don't waste any time. They handcuff us and take us to one of the cars. They blow the siren, and we wait for twenty minutes. A deputy has been following our tracks. He gets in the car; he's shivering; his teeth are chattering. This too is very funny.

## The Arsenal

Eighth Grade Civics Class. The teacher asks Roger a question, and of course he doesn't know the answer. Right away, at the desk in front of us, up with his hand, glowing with knowledge: it's Little Mr Good again. He always has the answer. The teacher turns to write something on the blackboard. Roger nudges me. Out from his lunchbox comes his uncle's .45 Colt Automatic. Then a switchblade and a pair of brass knuckles. I contribute my switchblade and a German Luger. There on our desk in full view of the teacher if he should turn around is a fairly formidable arsenal. Roger taps Good on the shoulder. Good turns around and sees the weapons. Good turns white. Roger asks him if he's going to answer any more questions. "No," a silent no from speechless lips, and he keeps his promise for the rest of the semester.

## Ralph

Ralph the Human Battering Ram! Three of us go into a hotel and listen at doors until we find a room that's occupied by, hopefully, a couple in bed. With our arms we make a cradle for Ralph's legs and a support for his back. He puts his arms around our necks and holds his legs out stiff in front of him. If we start from the opposite side of the corridor we can usually get up enough momentum to burst the door open and land in a heap inside the room. Then we must pick ourselves up and run.



## Hotel Inspectors

Hotel inspectors! Two in the morning. A small fleabag on the second floor of a dilapidated building. We climb the stairs and tell the clerk that we're hotel inspectors. He appears not to understand. We carefully explain that we've been sent by the Department of Health to examine this hotel for health hazards. He still doesn't seem to understand. So we leave him in his fog of incomprehension and go into the first room. It's empty. All seven of us get up on the bed and start jumping up and down. It fails the test. Its legs snap like matchsticks. Now the clerk is up on his feet and protesting. Never mind. We move quickly down the corridor kicking doors in, tipping over spittoons, smashing lightbulbs, yanking fire extinguishers from walls. Now the clerk is chasing us with a weapon. As we flee down the back stairs we rip its railing out by the roots, an obstacle that stops the club-waving clerk in his tracks.

## Peyote

Patrick's bushel of peyote. Sent up from Texas on a Greyhound. Several buttons boiled down to a thick brown fluid and drunk like tequila—with salt, lemon and soda. Two hours later, late at night, we're walking on the grounds of Athens State Hospital, the local insane asylum that some in their idealistic ignorance would prefer to call a psychiatric hospital. We've been here before. We know how to get down into the basement (rooms that still have hooks on their walls to which, not so long ago, syphilitic patients were chained). And we know that the internal fire escapes will give us, through one-way locking doors, access to the wards. I suddenly have a marvellous plan that soon becomes an obsession. "Let's go up into one of the wards, take empty beds and be there when the doctor makes his morning call." "That," says Patrick, "is a truly wonderful idea, but how are we going to get back out?" It takes him a long time to convince me that this one slight drawback is worthy of serious consideration.



## The Head

David gets his tools (he calls them his burglar tools), and we go into Highgate Cemetery, the upper unkempt part, and down into an underground mausoleum. The chain on the barred door is easily clipped off and our flashlight investigates the interior—two coffins on either side, one up and one down. A screwdriver quickly pries open a lid, and my hand (it has a mind of its own) does not hesitate to explore the contents. I'm looking for something valuable, a gold watch, a ring. Nothing. What to do? A consolation prize. I take the head. David just happens to have a paper bag, just right for the head. By the time we get back to the van the girls are furious. We've been gone a long time. "Where in Christ's name have you been?" "We've been getting you some pastries," I answer, and hand them the bag. My joke is not appreciated. "You're not going to keep this *thing* in this car!" So David drives to a post office. We find a box and mail it, return address: Robin A. Graves, London, England, to a friend in San Francisco who makes found-art sculpture.

## The Float

Tomorrow is Homecoming Day, so we decide to make a float for the big parade. We borrow a wagon from my landlady's son. Search-out and bring-back missions are deployed. Inspiration is found in trash cans and in a pile of discarded timber. Soon the wagon is bristling with sticks, an eight-foot high porcupine on wheels; and on its quills we impale rotten oranges, apples, grapefruit, cucumbers, heads of lettuce and long slabs of rancid bacon. A rope is attached to the handle so that all four of us—one black, one Chicano, one long-haired beatnik and one wise-guy New York punk (this is heavy redneck country, Athens, Ohio, 1959)—can pull it. The next afternoon, via side streets, we manage to manoeuvre our contribution to school spirit in between one of the floats (two crepe paper footballers) and the sorority queen who follows it in a white Cadillac convertible. We become her float! And pull it (the others are all motorised) the entire length of the parade route. The fraternity boys watching from the sidewalks are dying to kick ass; they can hardly restrain themselves, and my art teacher gives me an A for the semester.



## The Loudspeaker

Bali, 1969. We're the only tourists in a quiet fishing village where everyone gets up at dawn and goes to bed at sunset. At the far end of the village the Indonesian army has set up a brothel for its officers, Javanese whores for Javanese gentlemen. All is well until the manager acquires a loudspeaker for the record-player. Then all hell breaks loose—film music all night at full volume. No one gets any sleep, but the fishermen aren't about to complain to their Javanese overlords. So it's Superyank to the rescue. When the music starts blasting at eight the next evening I put on my sarong and go over to the brothel. Elegant officers, fancy ladies, every table occupied. The manager is behind the bar. I politely explain the situation to him—that everyone in the village goes to bed at sunset, gets up at dawn, needs to sleep, etc.; but he isn't having any of it, an arrogant bastard with no time for Balinese fishermen or hippie tourists. I point to the blaring loudspeaker on the wall above the bar, "If you don't turn it down I'm going to rip the fucking thing off the wall!" But by now he's decided to ignore me and walks away. Conversation, temporarily halted by my bearded, long-haired, saronged intrusion, resumes, but only for a moment. Good for my word, I leap up on the bar, rip the speaker off the wall, out by the roots, and hurl it to the floor. No one moves as I walk calmly out into the silent night.



## Train Robbers

Robbing trains! Just like Jessie James! We're crouching behind a low hill, armed to the teeth. The freight train slows for the grade and we rise as one, guns blazing, Roger with his .45 Colt Automatic, Ralph with Roger's .38 "Lighting Model", Jim with a .22 rifle, me with a Luger. The engineer and foreman duck for cover. We empty our weapons into the locomotive and tender. Of course the train doesn't stop. We reload and return to the car, a 1940 Ford sedan. On an impulse I shoot into the trunk lid. It's my own car! Then everyone has to have a shot, then another. Nine hysterical bullet holes later we come to our senses and inspect the damage. Several pieces of lead in the back of the front seat. One has even penetrated the dashboard. The next night, late, I'm on my way home from Hastings Street ("two dollar round the corner white boy"). I hear a siren behind me. I wonder who they're after. I've forgotten the bullet holes. To make a long story short—I find myself standing before a desk sergeant trying to convince him that I've shot the holes in my own car. "Take this smart-ass punk away and lock him up!"

## Rip/Tide

Ripping sinks! For the first one we're extremely cautious. We park the car on a dark side street. We carefully inspect the getaway route, make sure we aren't going to trip over any trash cans or fire hydrants. Then one by one we go into the bar and sit on stools apart from one another. We order drinks and sip them slowly while we try to judge the bartender's running ability. He's too fat to catch us. Then one by one we go into the toilet. When we're all four inside we gather around the sink and grip it firmly. "On the count of three," says Grimshaw—1, 2, 3, RIP! We drop it on the floor, water gushing from two pipes, and run for our lives, screech away in the car.

For the next we park a hundred feet down from the bar, walk in together, drink up quickly, one by one, on the count of three—RIP! drop it, run out, not too fast.

For the next we park in front and walk, all four together, directly into the toilet—RIP! trot out.

For the next, and tonight's last, we screech to a stop directly in front, leave the motor running, run in—RIP! carry it out to the centre of the barroom floor and drop it—CLUNK! As we stroll casually out, Ralph tells the dumbfounded bartender that there's a leak in the toilet.



## Blood

Trombley and I are out driving around in his father's new Buick. He pulls off the side of the road; I get out and go into a deserted farmhouse. No sooner have I got the fire started than I become aware of some headlights rapidly approaching. I dive through an open window and land in a pile of glass. There's blood pouring from a gash in my left wrist. Up on my feet and into the car and we're off in a cloud of dust. Trombley doesn't give a shit about the now roaring fire or my wrist, but he's very concerned about the blood I'm getting on the seat and dashboard of his father's car.

## Panic

Six of us are out driving around looking for trouble, but Grimshaw and I are the only ones who have ever seriously found any. The others are all mouth. We pull into a field beside a deserted farmhouse and break open a case of beer. I nod to Grimshaw and we wander over and into the farmhouse. A few minutes later, flames leaping from the windows, we stroll back to the beer drinkers. They're in an absolute panic. They're shitting themselves. I've got the keys to the car and I take my time about leaving, Grimshaw and I as cool as cucumbers, the four fire-virgins yelling in unison, "Faster, faster!" I drive about two miles and pull off the side of the road. When the fire-engines pass I make a U-turn and follow them to the fire.