

## Paths

Paths—our journeys, the course of life decisions, the metaphoric routes we take from birth to this moment. Paths are defined by the experiences we have as we travel them—the places and people, the encounters, the discoveries. And, of course, our intermediate destinations and ensuing departures.

Regardless of where we wander, who we love or lose, embrace or fear—the profits and losses incurred along the way:

*All the paths we have taken—they lead to now.*

*A word about the language in this work.*

### **They Spoke with Filth and Beauty**

I tell this the way I remember—  
the events,  
the conversations,  
the epiphanies and doldrums  
of the path.

And the truth  
speaks sometimes  
crudely.

And the way  
can tell a harsh tale.

They spoke with filth and beauty,  
rage and laughter.  
I listened.  
And I tell you these poems  
and stories as they were.

The most angry of them  
were the most vile.  
The most humble  
were the most kind of word,  
kind of action.

I'll write it all.

## Part I

### The Travel Path

Sometimes it just seems like miles.

But then, as I read my notes and poems and thoughts from all these years and journeys, I realize this path of travel is miles, but, more so, it is people and nature and precious days—all upon the sacred subtlety of the highway of time ever-opening before me.

It seems I'm always writing about my travels. And now we put this book of gathered poems and essays roughly under the general heading of "Paths." It works. I'll start with some road words. *The Travel Path*, I call this. It's all a poem, all some allegorical attempt at saying what can only be felt in non-verbal heart shivers and visceral cringes.

And if we are not learning from the journeys, we're just ramblers going nowhere. It is not so much where we go as it is what we gain from the journey getting there.

I'll start with a trip I took in 1962 with my great friend Buddy French the summer after we graduated from high school. I was seventeen and thought it might be a good idea to get the travel bug out of my system before heading off to college that September.

Sure... some good miles, and I would be through with the road.

### If You Don't Go Anywhere, You Won't Know Anything

No denying, I'm ready for a road trip for most any reason. When I was a kid, just sixteen and with a new driver's license, I was always more than willing to make runs down the hill to the Handy Dandy Market for a gallon of milk, a newspaper, a pack of Viceroy cigarettes for Mom—an emergency trip to the TV tube tester at the 7/11 to replace a vacuum tube or two and rescue the evening's two-channel array of *Maverick*, *Bonanza*, *Andy Griffith et al.*

"Give me the keys, Dad. I'll go."

Between high school graduation and the commencement of my less than stellar sojourn at the University of Richmond, my friend Buddy French and I decided to take a hitchhiking journey through the South. We lived south of Washington, D. C. adjacent to U.S. Highway 1, the old artery connecting the upper region of Maine at the Canadian border clear down the East Coast to the most southern reach of Florida at Key West. For the first couple of months of summer we talked about taking a trip. Unlike several of my friends, recent graduates of the Gar-Field High School Class of '62, I was only seventeen and too young to get a temporary job with the Government in D.C. I just did odd jobs and began a lifelong process of avoiding real money that has served me well right up to the present. It was never intentional, just the way my destiny has played out. Buddy, in the same fix with an August 18th birthday, had a low-pay, long-hours job selling fireworks at a stand on the edge of Bill's Shell Station down on Route 1. I would finish up my menial tasks doing gardening or day-construction labor or just sitting down in the basement playing my guitar and waiting for the call of what I was certain would become a significant life. It was a couple-mile hike from my home to the fireworks stand, but mostly downhill and Buddy usually had a car and would give me a ride back.

This was a few years before Interstate 95 was built. In the summer of 1962 the Richmond/Jefferson Davis Highway was a main route for traffic up and down the Eastern Seaboard—at least until it dwindled a bit through the Carolinas. Buddy and I would sit there talking about philosophy, religion, sex, art, sex and often we would dream of travel to places we had never been—like Key West, Florida, the finite conclusion of the conceptual wonder and allure of our hometown highway.

By mid-August, Buddy had saved enough money for college expenses and quit his job peddling pyro-fizzle and under-the-counter cherry bombs. I didn't have a job to quit. I just went to my father and asked for some money so Buddy and I could make a quick trip down to the farthest reach of Highway 1.

When my father was seventeen in 1932, the summer following his high school graduation, he had made a similar request of his dad when his friend *Buddy* Martin and he had dreamed up a trip from Oak Hill, West Virginia, to Washington, D.C.

So, when my dad heard my plan, he knew just what to say—the same thing his dad had told him thirty years earlier to the month. He gave me a ten-dollar bill and said,

“Robert, my dad told me, ‘If you don’t go anywhere, you won’t know anything.’”

And, again, here’s the rationale I came up with to support taking such a ridiculous and dangerous journey:

*I’ll take this trip and get all the travel out of my system before heading off to the serious challenges of higher education.*

Right. As if the allegorical essence of the journey—this living metaphor of *the Path*—is a quantity to be expended.

No way. It turns out, trips are like Lay’s Potato Chips with me—*betcha can’t eat just one*.

And as to the specifics of the journey Buddy and I took—there were measurable elements of that trek down to the end of a highway like the size of the holes in my tennis shoes. And, of course, there were the “finite” mosquitoes that swarmed the dilapidated boathouse overhanging the backwaters of Key West where a barkeep lady had said we could sleep. The part of the journey that ended was a long run of pavement fraught and blessed with peril (some of those “good ol’ boys” really seemed to enjoy the sport of attempting to run over hitchhikers), laughter (the small-town Georgia speed traps), culture shock (racism as real as all the boasted tales of violent hatred of Blacks), a depth of exhaustion that tried flesh and friendship alike, and, of course, the end of an island and the commencement of the vast sea. What did not cease with our crossover from the southbound roadside to the north was this insatiable sense of wanderlust, the craving to travel on—the passion for each mile, for each boundless road dream, each day’s new ground and new truth.

Why?

Travel is a metaphor for life. It’s a path from where we are to someplace else, and... so go the epic and petty wonders that constitute the meaning to our days.