

老马识途



. . . perche Virgilio se ne vada,  
non pianger anco . . .

("because Virgil leaves thee, weep not":  
Beatrice to Dante, Purgatorio, Canto XXX)

Dear Friends,

After almost 29 years and 163,000 miles, the forest-green 1970 Chevy Impala sometimes known as Virgil was laid to rest in August 1998 at Bobby Riordan's Automotive (Port Jefferson, NY), after a long illness. Virgil's condition had been beyond repair since February, when a routine inspection at Urban Classics of Brooklyn left the mechanic there unable to explain how the car could continue to run at all in light of its many grave problems. But run Virgil did, without complaint, for seven months more until being driven--under his own power--to his final resting place.

It was Michel Serres--or Bruno Latour, or in any case some French theorist--who observed that every organism is a "sheaf of times," an observation inspired perhaps by the old Johnny Cash song about a car whose original components, as the years went by, were replaced by parts from other model-years. Or as Wordsworth wrote of "The Old Cumberland Beggar," we "in him / Behold a record which together binds / Past deeds . . . / Else unremembered." As the wake of Virgil's passing reverberates through the lives and times that converged in him, let us take a moment to recall some of his illustrious history.

Virgil's first owner was an old man who put 40,000 miles on the car between 1970 and 1988. The old man lived in Fargo, North Dakota, down the hall from my then-mother-in-law and above a funeral home. When he moved downstairs, she bought the car for me, from the old man's brother, for \$1000.

The story of how, shortly thereafter, Virgil got his familiar light-green-and-gray doors can be found on page 53 of my book, Arrow of Chaos. (This may be why a senior colleague of mine referred to the book as "a collection of fragments and personal anecdotes"--as if anything to do with this mythic vehicle could be reduced to a mere personal anecdote!) I won't rehearse the story here except to note that the friend mentioned in it is Judith Halberstam.

It was about a year later that my mother-in-law became my ex-mother-in-law, so I packed up Virgil and we moved from Minneapolis to San Francisco, "across the highways of America in tears," as Allen Ginsberg said in Howl, a tape of which (recorded in San Francisco in 1956, the year of my birth) I played obsessively during that journey. Nor did Virgil escape this traumatic time unscarred: on Interstate 80 in Utah, a big whirlwind came roaring up a side canyon, engulfing and shaking us and pummeling Virgil's flank with tumbleweeds. That was how Virgil got the long scratches on his passenger side, which he bore from that day forward.

It was also on this trip that Virgil got his name. Coming into San Francisco, over the Bay Bridge, we saw the city and the bridge-tops rising out of the mist, and I thought of the final words of the Inferno ("and we rose again to see the stars"), and it occurred to me that the car should be called Virgil: he can't take you to heaven, but he gets you through Hell. (Virgil was also known as the Green Machine, and a few people called him Vlad The Impala.)

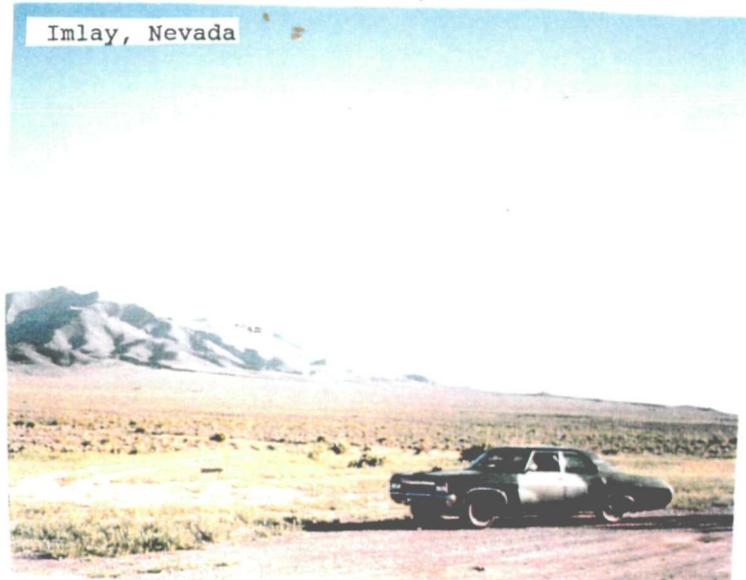
Virgil also had hard times of his own, being hit by a Haitian barber in a Honda and clipped by a garbage truck on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn, dropping his drive shaft on Mass Ave in Boston, and so on.

1990

somewhere in Wisconsin



Imlay, Nevada



Earth to Ira, come in please!



When the big quake hit San Francisco in 1989, I was just accelerating from a light on El Camino in Menlo Park; Virgil began to buck and sway. Suspecting a major transmission problem, I stopped immediately, in the middle of an intersection, but the car kept bucking and swaying, and I noticed that the light-poles all down the road were dancing like crazy and people were running out of buildings. A transmission problem of truly mythic proportions!

But Virgil also knew many joys. We passed with delight through the first snow of the year--a blizzard in the Rocky Mountains of Montana on Sept. 7, 1993--while driving to Oregon with Judith Halberstam. The next day, leaving a rest stop overlooking a gothic canyon intermittently lit by distant lightning, we were amazed by the sudden looming apparition of a huge buffalo, just a few feet from us, who looked up from his grazing, with mute approbation recognized in the great grizzled green machine a kindred spirit, and bowed his head again to the grass.

It was on November 27, 1993--75 miles north of Portland and exactly 24 hours before a total solar eclipse--that Virgil was reborn with 000,000 miles on the odometer.

The next summer, on Highway 50 in Nevada ("The World's Loneliest Highway"), Virgil received the cherished gift of some yellow desert flowers, picked from the roadside by Iona Man-cheong. He cherished this humble and priceless gift, bearing it--as he bore his scars--until his last days. The sun-baked flowers (which appear on the cover of this booklet) adorned Virgil's dashboard, alongside the green-and-

gold plastic crown given to him by his old friend Judith. Iona's daughter Lang contributed a plastic mezuzah for Virgil's doorpost, and Iona's son Nikki found the four-character Chinese proverb that was later stenciled in red above Virgil's front grill: lao ma shi tu: "the old horse knows the way" (this motto accounted for Virgil's ability to make fast friends in Chinatown). It was Iona's son Liam and his girlfriend Francesca who gave Virgil his proudest hour, entrusting their newborn twins Clio and Isabella to him for their first voyage into the world: from the hospital in Yonkers, through the Bronx, over the Throg's Neck Bridge, to grandmother's house on Long Island.

Yes, the gifts of his new-found family and his old friends alike were a great comfort to Virgil in his final years.

But the sheaf of times bound up in him reach back further--like geologic strata--and forward--into the mists of futurity. His comings and goings, like transits of an old bookbinder's needle, have stitched together "many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore," and it is with such a story that I wish to conclude this memorial.

The story begins in the summer of 1975. As yet unknown to me, Virgil was five years old and living a sedate life in Fargo with the old man.

I was 18 and had just taken a bus from Boston to Boulder to visit

The first night in Boulder I dreamed that a large, writhing, irregular form was looming over the foot of the bed, trying to speak but able only to groan. Gina woke me from my own writhings and groanings. (Years later I wrote a poem in which the looming form was a kind of ghost of my long-dead father.)

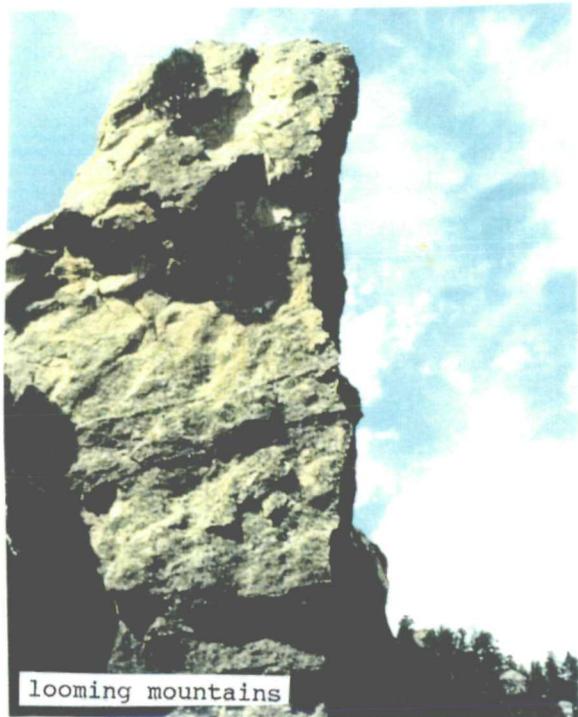
That evening, Gina, Teri and I went to hear Allen Ginsberg read Howl at the Naropa Institute, and the next day we drove up to Rocky Mountain National Park and ate some peyote. When I finished throwing up, we climbed a winding trail up the mountain. At one point, I stopped to rest, sprawling out on a large flat boulder by the side of the trail. Then we continued on to the top and walked around on a small glacier, so magically cool in the hot sun and so trippy I forgot how deathly ill I'd been feeling, and that the peyote hadn't yielded even the slightest hallucination. Coming back down the trail, we turned a corner and I saw, up ahead, the rock where I had stopped to rest--

--and saw, there on that rock--myself, still resting, as if waiting for myself to return!

I did return to Boulder, fourteen years later, in 1989, with Virgil, on the trip to San Francisco I've already mentioned. The

# 1975

## Boulder, Colorado



looming mountains



foothills the color of Virgil's upholstery



lost in space

that time not yet divorced from Iona's old roommate at Peking University. But these curious crossings were not yet marked on any map. Nor had I, on that misty morning, and submerged as I was in the haze of present tears, thought of the time I'd been to Boulder so many years before.

The sun was beginning to burn off the morning mist as Virgil and I drove through the foothills. Suddenly, as we turned a corner, there was Boulder sprawled out below in the sunshine, laid out flat at the feet of the looming mountains. I flashed on the dream I'd had that first night in Boulder fourteen years earlier, and understood it for the first time in that instant: the darkly twisted, ancient, looming mountains, trying to speak; the recumbent city, blithely modern and sunlit at their feet!

My own dream, as if it had been still resting there, waiting for me to return!

Imagine what mileage Wordsworth would have gotten out of this story, with its mountains and dreams and spots of time--enough for a whole book of his Prelude. But I got the mileage out of my Chevy.

Thank you, Virgil, whose cross-country shuttlings have woven together strands of lives and times that lack your imperturbable solidity, your dogged continuity. Goodbye, old friend, whose very stuff--grizzled metal and fraying fabric--seems but the shadow of the dreams that stuff is made of: a sprawling shadow of the setting sun flying across the desert grass.



View on a Nevada roadside, 1990)

