

WALKING IN OUTER SPACE

By Michael McColly

Wherever I walk no traces are left,

And my senses are not fettered by rules of conduct.

—Hsiang-yen Chi-hsien

When the last iron door clanked behind me, my legs began to lighten. Exchanging my badge for my ID, I tried not to rush the guards, but once I got that first glimpse of the outside, my mind was already in my car, racing down the Indiana Toll Way back to Chicago. I sped through the decaying town of Michigan City, passing the shuttered stores and factories, the concrete cooling towers of the power plants, and then hit the expressway, grateful to be swallowed by the chaos of traffic. In a little over an hour I was back on the North Side of Chicago, lying spread-eagled on my bed, whiskey in hand, wondering why I'd ever thought it would be good for me to volunteer to sit with a *Zen sangha* of inmates in a maximum-security prison.

Though I'd had a long history as a pilgrim on the proverbial spiritual path—trying just about everything this side of Transcendental Meditation, I was not a bona fide Buddhist. But there I was, sitting cross-legged on the concrete floor of an old chapel, surrounded by a dozen inmates, a guard with a loaded shotgun on his lap, looking down at us from a chair on the altar.

I did little more than show up and go through the rituals as we followed an ailing professor of Eastern philosophy, who had begun the *sangha* a decade ago. Mostly though, it was the men who

guided me on the proper forms of practice. If I lost my place during our chants of the sutras, down came a tattooed knuckle to direct my eye to the right line of transliterated Korean. More than once, too, an inmate had to catch me from falling flat on my face, after getting up too fast from our meditations. “Whoa there, man, have to wait a few seconds ‘fore you can walk. Got to let the blood get down to your feet.”

We held our sessions on Fridays in an unheated, dimly lit chapel painted entirely in industrial grey—wooden pews, concrete floor, brick walls. The only colors came from the humiliating Kelly green sock caps the men were forced to wear, the American flag, and the golden Buddha. But for the inmates, worship of whatever faith was a welcome break from cramped cells and regimented lives. By the time the professor and the rest of the volunteers got there, the prisoners had pulled out a ceramic Buddha and set it on its cardboard storage box, arranged cushions for meditation and, with ceremonial pride, donned their robes. We prostrated one hundred and eight times before the Buddha, chanted the sutras, meditated, and then passed around a book of teachings of a Zen master, from which the inmates read word by word. Then we made tepid black tea from the bathroom tap, and awkwardly made small talk until the guards came to take them back to their cells.

Not surprisingly, the first couple of times I volunteered, the intensity of the experience and the Zen rituals immediately altered my mood and state of mind, which, honestly, was what I desperately needed. Once you walk through seven locked gates and feel the reality of where you are, a place of such visceral tension and ghastly history, your little psychodramas shrink to their proper proportion. My journalistic eye scanned every corner and face, fascinated and appalled all at once.

I was moved by the men and how the hours of practice altered them—the brightened faces, the lifted chins, the belting chants of the *Prajnaparamita*. I was changed, too; sitting with these damaged souls and walking behind them about the chapel often left me for brief moments freed from the need to measure and critique. The man beside me, the walls, the shotgun, the physical

world, my body—all became a formless fabric turning itself inside out before my mind. I didn't feel so much contentment as simply relief.

But as is the case for the subtle practices of the spirit, no matter of what sacred tribe or method, there is a common pattern: a rise and a fall, a hallelujah and the despairing dark night that follows. And sure enough, after those first few times, the spell of Zen's charms and my professional curiosity about life behind bars gave way to the bitter anger I couldn't help but feel as I observed the business of housing the damned and dark-complicated. No quietist round of chants and meditative walks could quell the echoing bark of the guards or sweeten the stench of a century and half of humiliated souls. Perhaps, it was where I had been and what I'd seen in my past, perhaps it was my own sense of feeling close to death because of my own illnesses, but I found myself at times not wondering at the smart psychologist that was the Buddha but at the bodies of the men themselves and the desperate cries for power and meaning etched in ink on the only thing not taken from them—the canvas of their own skin.

Zen Buddhism, they say, is the practice of the middle path, in which the adherent learns to keep the mind aware of its tendencies toward emotional extremes of either attachments or aversions. By meditating, one practices holding onto the middle, literally, by carefully observing and feeling the effects of the mind's habits as it spins thought into memory and emotion in response to a steady stream of agitation from the physical world.

My problem was that when I opened my eyes, the practiced observer wouldn't quite turn off, and what it saw—with the keen eye of the meditator—was a world more clearly visible, more starkly drawn, a world of extremes, both surrounding me as well as within my own mind. I would like to say that the practice of meditation made me a better person, more conscious, more compassionate, more at ease, but at that time in my life, it had the opposite effect: it made the anger inside me toward much of humanity just that much more real.

One winter Friday, our teacher had arranged for a special meal for the *sangha*. I can't remember now why we were celebrating. It might have been a Buddhist holy day or an inmate's taking his vows. But at the end of our practice, a few of the other volunteers went into town and brought back big platters from a Chinese take-out, and after the men set up some tables, we sat and did something we rarely did, socialize.

I mostly listened to their conversations, a bit self-conscious and nervous. But I liked listening to the men, because sometimes out of their stories of home and families, came the name of a town, a highway, a place name I knew from the map of my youth growing up in Indiana—*Kokomo, State Road 13, Clifty Falls*.

But when one of the inmates, Larry, began to talk about camping to the guy next to him on a river where I'd fished and camped myself, I broke my silence.

"It was on the Mississinewa, that campground, wasn't it?"

Larry leaned over his food to put his face as close to mine as he could. "The Mississinewa? You know that river?"

"I grew up on that river."

"You been to that campground over there by I-69?"

"There was an old trestle bridge, wasn't there?"

"Yeah."

"You took a gravel road."

"That's it."

"There was a bend in the river, nettles on the bank, cottonwood."

"You catch catfish?"

"Yeah, we did. My dad baited up trot lines, and we set them out."

“You use chicken livers?”

“Nope, a ball of night-crawlers on a hook.”

I hadn't thought of these landscapes of rural Indiana, not with the pleasure he'd made me feel for it, in a long time. I'd camped in the remote wilderness of Montana, hiked through the savannahs of West Africa, climbed into the Andes and walked along the great rivers of Europe. The farmlands and factory towns of my family had long ago lost their power to evoke wonder and natural beauty. But there it was in the air as we sat eating Chinese food in that old drafty Methodist Chapel: the trestle and the catfish, the nettles and hooks.

Then one snowy afternoon, after another long day of sitting and walking with the men, I found myself in my car, staring out at a line of oaks and cottonwoods behind the prison, as I tried to warm up my numb body and my poor car before starting back to Chicago. My vision seemed altered in some way, the intensity of the light had changed, objects and sounds appeared exaggerated in texture, as if the air was clearer, the sun brighter. For some reason, I had no desire to leave. I looked at the prison and it seemed to become a monument of rock, a castle, sinking into the sandy earth, its heavy brownstone walls, gates and turrets like a surreal dream dropped back to earth from 16th century Scotland. The forest behind the prison fixed my gaze, a wall of naked black trees, impenetrable and dense, protecting the tangle of forest and old sand dunes beyond from this factory of human misery.

Behind that stand of hardwoods, I could see just a hint of the oaks atop Mt. Baldy, the last of the great dunes left along Indiana's shore, saved from the bulldozers of industrial growth and sand mining of decades ago. Rising next to it like a giant child's top was the concrete cooling tower of what was once to have been a nuclear power station but had been reengineered for the coal burning furnaces of Northern Indiana's energy monopoly, NIPSCO. For the first time, it seemed, I

let myself try to simply feel where I was: the prison, the city, the heavy weight of human grief, the winds off the lake blowing through the trees.

I'd seen all of this before. But this worn and weary landscape of power plants and prison camps and the grim disappearing neighborhood around it appeared now newly minted, its colorless qualities sharpened in the snow and afternoon light. Something felt familiar and necessary in what was there for me to see and study.

Slowly, I drove through the town I was always so eager to leave, past its lakefront casino, by its outlet mall, crossing and re-crossing railroad lines, some abandoned, some still alive with commuters and cars of coal for the power plants. The buildings and houses were of another time, another generation— my generation—unchanged it seemed from the early seventies, when the steel industry and everything around it collapsed, and the locally owned shops and stores, the schools and the churches, emptied one by one. On a street by the prison, only a few old wooden houses now stood where there were once blocks of them, cheek by jowl.

I recognized these old, wood-frame two-stories, the tar-shingles, the latticework on the porch cornices, the garages leaning off their concrete foundations. These were the houses of my hometown, my neighborhood of forty years ago. These were the houses of my schoolmates whose parents worked at the glass factory, at General Tire, GM, and RCA. These were the houses of my grandparents and aunts and uncles—houses with tall ceilings and stone porch steps, bedrooms where I first tasted sex, kitchens where my parents argued late into the night, family rooms where we watched man land on the moon.

I headed southwest out of Michigan City on State Road 12, rolling through the dunes and marshes, past the empty roadside motels and old sand quarries. A sliver is all that is left of what was once one of the most unusual landscapes in North America, some of the largest fresh water dunes in the world, miles of them along the southern shore of the lake, created by the northerly winds that

swept across the long water, sculpting great mounds of sand and moving them, literally, inland, year by year.

I'd forgotten how the snow could recast the dunal landscape, diminishing the distant machines of man, the cold air sterilizing and defying the heat and clamor of commerce. I headed off into the snowdrifts making my own trail. I tramped upward, falling into hidden drifts unable to read the land, walking to walk, to move, which, as I walked, I realized was exactly what I needed to do.

I walked among the bones of black oaks long ago buried by the winds and sands, solemn sculptures, trunks and limbs sticking out of the snow, a grave-yard of wooden remains. There were pines, too, clusters on the dune ridges, some strongly rooted, others warped by the winds. In the sheltered swales and blowouts, a single cedar stood and under its protection chokecherry and other grasses grew, specific to these miniature valleys walled off from the winds of the lake. Even in winter and under the cover of snow, the unusual ecology of the dunes struck the eye. Next to the boreal pines and barberry down closer to the beach were the rugged dune grasses, and over the dunes, on the lee-ward side, were the hardwoods, where woodland ephemerals would pop up in spring, and across the road, the wetlands held tamaracks and ancient plants of the Ice Age. If I kicked about under the snow, I could find the poor prickly pear far from its southwestern home.

I traversed up into the wooded ridges along the lake, awaiting that first sight of it to appear through the trees, a sight that even if you live for years by the lake somehow still startles the eye. And there it was, the vast void of slate blue, churning with chunks of ice. From here, I could see all around the lake, my eye following what was once the trail of the Indians and, before that, creatures of the Ice Age—the lion-faced bear, the wolves, the sloths and saber-tooth tigers that I drew as a boy over and over again on the margins of my school papers, fantasizing a past that had long ago been buried by the needs of man.

To the north, rising out of the pines, was the great Mount Baldy, and from there, if I were standing on top and looking inland, I could see the prison not a mile to the east, with its old stone walls built by its first prisoners, Confederate soldiers captured and shipped north. And inside, there would be the rec yard and the infirmary, the graveyard and the chapel. All of this, I thought as my eyes scanned the scope of land and lake before me, the forests and marshes, the dunes and the vast waters of the lake, which can be clearly visible in space, and yet unseen by my *sangha* mates behind those old stone walls.

I'd initially dismissed the meditative potential of our walking meditation at the prison, as it seemed more like desperately needed exercise for the men than official Zazen. In fact, it often reminded me of following a gym teacher in my grammar school days in a game of follow-the-leader, as the professor led the men around the chapel, cutting down an aisle between pews, then whipping us back down the next, hardly the formal meditation practice I'd learned in Thailand. But over time, by doing nothing more than watching the tottering gait of the khaki trousers and white-stockings feet of the man before me, I would fall into our collective rhythm and for a while feel as if I were upon some path, a pilgrim on his long journey.

I walked on down the beach, content for once, for now, to watch my feet and listen to their weight as they made their mark in the snow.

After my winter walk into the dunes that day, I made a point to take my time on trips back to Chicago. I explored more of the dunes, places I'd seen on maps but assumed were too close to industrial wastelands. I took the highway rather than the expressway and discovered patches of wilderness and other odd wonders of the landscape that once had symbolized my anger and disgust. I looked now for the contrast, the foreground of nature and human survival against the backdrop of

dross and industrial baroque. The coal cars covered in graffiti rolling through the dunes, the beauty of oxidized iron girding among the grasses and goldenrod, the woman dragging her tank of oxygen down the beach as she searched for bits of colored glass.

It wasn't that I didn't feel the toxic ugliness and its effects on those who were surrounded by it, I did. But what was important now was to hold onto the suspended way of seeing that had begun back at the prison among my sangha, among men whose very sanity depended on seeing beyond the sorrow. The point was not to speed by but to practice simply seeing what was there.

And so it was through the fallen cities of East Chicago, too, a silence pervaded the scene as I drove around the refinery towers, the tanks and pipelines coming up and over the road, the gargantuan mills next to the casinos next to the power plants along the lake, the empty spaces, trains crossing under the highways, crossing over the city streets, the tire fix-it shops, the *taquerias*. I crossed the Calumet River and entered Chicago, drove along the super fund site left by US Steel's famed South Shore Works, and then the highway zig-zagged and turned into a south shore neighborhood of proud old brick black churches, crumbling two flats, and weeded lots, the lake peeking through as I wound my way back onto Lake Shore Drive. Here, among the foreclosed and forlorn, I felt the same heavy silence I'd felt in Gary, the same solemn weight of history, as the steel and glass empire of the city rose out of the evening spring light. I drove on feeling the silence in me, as tangible and as real as my thoughts, making me have to acknowledge that what we see and what we feel are who we are. The layers upon layers of life, fallen and fallen again, and rising up through the dead, was this city; was, for better or worse, who I was as well.

In the spring, my schedule changed and my trips to the prison became more difficult, and by the end of summer, my participation in the *sangha* came to an end. I'm ashamed to say I never told the men

goodbye, never properly bowed before them as one does before the Buddha upon entering a room where it rests. I'd meant to. I'd meant to tell them many things that I knew only they would understand, things about myself only they could help me feel.

But on the day I knew would be my last, I got a call from my friend who'd invited me into the *sangha* in the beginning, a woman I'd learned to listen to for how she navigated through her own lot in life. I was glad she'd called because I wanted to tell her of my plans. But before I could tell her she told me there had been trouble at the prison, a fight had broken out between rival gangs, and a man had been brutally stabbed to death, a young man, a member of our *sangha*.

In my mind, as she told me that the prison was under lockdown and we would not be meeting, I saw the young inmate, who'd joined the *sangha* as I had over the course of the last year; I could see him leaning against one of the pews, telling me of his love for science fiction, his eyes lifting to the grey wooden ceiling of the chapel, fantasizing himself into the wilderness of outer space.