

# TURTLE BLUES

By Richard Stuecker

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *The two most important lines in any short story or article are the first and last. If they're not both bang on it takes a lot more for a reader to like 'what's in between'. We don't think you could improve upon the 'first' and 'last' in 'Turtle Blues'—they are like...beyond. The story is a bittersweet reflection about the glory days of Woodstock Nation (1969) and throughout the memoir there are flawlessly written passages of great beauty. 'We didn't speak for a while. It was hot on the desert. We could see big cacti along the road like in the westerns and roadrunner cartoons.' And this resonating line of dialogue: 'Hard to tell. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. Maybe. Live hard, die hard, make a beautiful corpse.' You know what they say. If you remember the 60's you weren't there. And here at FOTD we luv all those writers who don't remember a thing!*

## Turtle Blues

We heard the news about Jim Morrison in the bone-dry southwest desert, somewhere near the Petrified Forest. We were heading toward LA on a cross country trip, eventually to Alaska to work on the pipeline. Jimi in September, Janis in October, now Jim Morrison in July. All that day DJ's played the Doors hits.

“Another one bites the dust.” John said.

“So much talent. I saw Hendrix, in Charlotte.”

“No way!” John took his eyes off the road and looked at me in disbelief. We heard the tires rub the sandy edge of the highway and he pulled the car straight again.

“Lizard Lenny asked me to drive so they could drop acid. The Coliseum, man, that was a funky place. Like, it looked like a butterfly. Packed with stone heads who smoked dope, dropped acid. I got high just sitting there with Lenny and his buds somewhere out in space. Hendrix was best when stoned, except for maybe *Super Session*. I got high just listening to that album straight. Anyway, after the concert, nobody moved. I mean, not only was everybody blown away by Jimi, but nobody knew where they were. Took us hours to move out, find the car and drive home.”

“*Super Session?*”

“Kooper, Stills, and Bloomfield.”

“Sounds like a law firm.” John leaned back and adjusted his body to relax and listen.

“I’m guessing the scene in Ohio wasn’t too hip to the drug rock scene,” I said.

“I don’t know. I was into the jock scene,” John said. “baseball, football, track. Scooping ice cream at Baskin-Robbins and delivering newspapers.”

“And homework.”

“Yeah, they piled it on.”

“Booze, plenty of booze,” I said, prompting him.

“One night I went over to my friend’s house and we drank so much I don’t remember how we ended up driving over the greens of the local golf club, but we made our way to my driveway where we fell asleep in front of my house. My sister knocked on the car window so I got the papers out.”

“You didn’t get caught?”

“Naw, and my mom didn’t ask about it. I think she was afraid to.”

“I didn’t drink in high school. Now it’s mostly with a pizza. Chemicals, that’s a different story. Joplin came to Duke. She had just formed ‘Kosmic Blues Band.’ I think it might have been one of their first gigs. Months later she was dead.”

“Heroin over dose,” said John.

“Yeah, can’t imagine using a needle.”

“Shit no.” My window was open. I looked out at the dry, brown landscape of the desert and rolling sage brush.

“I saw her at a party after the concert.”

“You lie,” John said, giving me a darting look.

“I do not lie,” I said firmly.

“I don’t believe you.”

“I don’t know how she got there. Lizard Lenny’s off-campus house in all its hippie glory. I mean there were India print cloths hanging on all the walls, beaded curtains in the doorways, and a hookah in the middle of the dining room table. Dayglow posters of Hendrix and Morrison hung just above tables that were sort of altars where he stood statues of Buddha and other Hindu gods and goddesses. Elephant headed Ganesha and Kali.

“Most of us had started dropping or smoking. I smoked a blunt with Lenny and lay back in a chair Lenny had gotten at the Goodwill. There was a noise at the door, the place was packed, suddenly the sea of people parted and four guys who looked like former Marines carried this tiny

girl holding a bottle of Southern Comfort. They lay her on Lennie's couch. It was Joplin. She drank all through the concert. She knocked me out with my favorite "Turtle Blues." I loved just listening to Joplin, especially if I was down. Hendrix was better for getting high, so was Morrison. Sometimes John Maclaughlin 'My Goal's Beyond.'

"So there she was, drunk, calling everybody loser muthafuckers, until she passed out. Then her body guards carried her out. She looked to me like she was dead.

We didn't speak for a while. It was hot on the desert. We could see big cacti along the road like in the westerns and road-runner cartoons.

"I think I've only been happy when I've been stoned the last four years."

"I see that. But isn't that just an escape, like a trip for fun but then you come back to reality?"

"I don't want to come back to reality." I said, "it fuckin' sucks."

"I've seen you down a lot."

"Hate who I am," I said. "Pretty good, but never good enough. That's how I feel. Good enough to ride the bench. Then there's the fear I'm not normal. Not like other guys. Not knowing what they know, feel. I mean, I could smack the ball out of the park. But I could field like shit. Could barely throw the ball to first. We won the Catholic Championship in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. But had to give the trophy back because the coach's son was two months too old to qualify. It's kinda like that. All the time, Like this brown desert. I'm missing Kentucky green, east coast mountains and seaside."

“I wanted to go to Columbia and play baseball,” John said. “I had the scores and grades and the coach said “see you next year.” Then the letter came. Rejection. That’s how I got here. To Duke.”

“Place is full of people who wanted the Ivy League but didn’t get in.”

“I’m not going back.”

“Where you going?”

“NYC..CCNY. It’s free.”

“Do you think they meant to overdose?” I asked.

“Hard to tell. Sex, drugs and rock and roll. Maybe. Live hard, die hard, make a beautiful corpse.”

“Or maybe they were just fucked up with all their talent and all the hangers-on. Morrison was beautiful. How come male rock stars tend to be androgynous?”

“We’ll have to ask them when we get to the other side.”

“You believe in the other side?” I asked.

“Maybe. I don’t know. I’m not Catholic or anything.”

“Sister Raymunda said we’d meet all our friends and relatives and everyone we know, only they’d be glowing, like perfect. I can think of a whole lot of people I’d like to avoid up there if that’s true.”

“Like those muthafuckers who beat the shit out of me,” he said. John was still pissed at some drunk football players who took turns holding him up and punching his gut.

“Dr. Boo gave me the *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. It says you see monsters but they’re guides. There are many levels and just when you think you’ve got there, it’s the ego, and we start to fall and come back and do it all again.”

“I think we just die. Like plants. Rot and turn to dust.”

“If I don’t swim out to sea until I can’t come back, I want my body burned and dropped off the coast of Scituate. I want it like I was never here at all. No mass, no funeral home, no gatherings. Unless my friends wanna get high and have a party, that’s another deal. But I want to be anonymous.”

“You’re fucking grim,” John said.

“Guess so. I mean there’s so many religions and so many different Jesuses. Judge Jesus who sends you to hell. What’s that about? Loving Jesus, does he send you to hell? And Buddhas and all those pagan gods, BC. I think you’re right.”

“Jim Morrison, American Dionysius. Dead.”

We turned on the radio. They must have played “Riders on the Storm” 500 times that day. “Into this world we’re born/Into this world we’re thrown.”

But where do we go?

LA, I guess.

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *“Turtle Blues” is part of a series of memoir essays that relate the adventures of my friend and I who, having been recently freed from the draft by receiving high draft numbers, take a cross country trip from Provincetown to the Pacific Coast Highway on our way to Alaska in 1971. Our ultimate goal was a job there promised by an ad we read in the underground newspaper Boston After Dark. It read “\$1,000 a Week in Alaska.” We never made it. But the trip changed our lives. These essays have given me the opportunity to look through the lens of time at that trip and our friendship that has lasted nearly 50 years. In this essay I attempt to examine both the freedom and lack of responsibility of that time in my life as well as its darker implications. It is my intention to both capture the spirit of the end of the Hippie Sixties and at the same time examine my personal and my friend’s life then as we began to grow into men, unsure of ourselves in many ways, and where we might be headed in the future. I suppose boys growing into men still wonder, dream and fear the future as we did then.*

**BIO:** *Richard Stuecker is a poet and writer who graduated from Duke University in 1970. A Pushcart Prize nominee, he is a student at the Bluegrass Writer’s Studio MFA program at Eastern Kentucky University. His poems have appeared in or been accepted by Tilde, Former People, Pegasus, Main Street Rag and District Lit; creative nonfiction in Hippocampus, Connotation Press, Brilliant Flash Fiction, Crambo, Louisville Magazine and Delmarva Review; book reviews in the Louisville Courier-Journal. A collection of essays on conscious aging, Vibrant Emeritus, was published in 2014 by John Hunt Publishing (London). 3107 Teal Avenue, Louisville, KY 40213. 502 749 7678 [asunbear123@gmail.com](mailto:asunbear123@gmail.com)*