

have a place where you can make pictures for a quarter. Allen took off his glasses and looked sinister. Neal made a profile shot and looked coyly around. I took a straight picture that made me look, as Lucien said, like a 30 year old Italian who'd kill anybody who said anything against his mother. This picture Allen and Neal neatly cut down the middle with a razor and saved a half each in their wallets. I saw those halves later on. Neal was wearing a real western business suit for his big trip back to Denver; he'd finished his first fling in New York. I say fling but he only worked like a dog in parkinglots, the most fantastic parkinglot attendant in the world, he can back a car forty miles an hour into a tight squeeze and stop on a dime at the brickwall, and jump out, snake his way out of close fenders, leap into another car, circle it fifty miles an hour in a narrow space, shift, and back again into a tight spot with a few inches each side and come to a bouncing stop the same moment he's jamming in the emergency brake; then run clear to the ticket shack like a track star, hand a ticket, leap into a newly arrived car before the owner is hardly out, leap literally under him as he steps out, start the car with the door flapping and roar off to the next available parking spot: working like that without pause eight hours a night, evening rush hours and after theater rush hours, in greasy wino pants with a frayed furlined jacket and beat shoes that flap. Now he'd bought a new suit to go back home in; blue with pencil stripes, vest and all, with a watch and watch chain, and a portable typewriter with which he was going to start writing in a Denver rooming-house as soon as he got a job there. We had a farewell meal of franks and beans in a 7th avenue Riker's^o and then Neal got on the bus that said Chicago on it and roared off into the night. I promised myself to go the same way when Spring really bloomed and opened up the land. There went our wrangler.^o And this was really the way that my whole road experience began and the things that were to come are too fantastic not to tell. I've only spoken of Neal in a preliminary way because I didn't know any more than this about him then. His relation with Allen I'm not in on and as it turned out later, Neal got tired of that, specifically of queerness and reverted to his natural ways, but that's no matter. In the month of July, 1947, having finished a good half of my novel and having saved about fifty dollars from old veteran benefits I got ready to go to the West Coast. My friend Henri Cru had written me a letter from San Francisco saying I should come out there and ship out with him on an around the world liner. He swore he could get me into the engine room. I wrote back and said I'd be satisfied with

Riker's: now-defunct chain of cafeterias, with no connection to the jail
 wrangler: cowboy; one who quarrels or brawls

any old freighter so long as I could take a few long Pacific trips and come back with enough money to support myself in my mother's house while I finished my book. He said he had a shack in Marin City and I would have all the time in the world to write there while we went through the rigmarole of getting a ship. He was living with a girl called Diane, he said she was a marvellous cook and everything would jump. Henri was an old prep school friend, a Frenchman brought up in Paris and France and a really mad guy—I never knew how mad and so mad at this time. So he expected me to arrive in ten days. I wrote and confirmed this. . . . in innocence of how much I'd get involved on the road. My mother was all in accord with my trip to the west, she said it would do me good, I'd been working so hard all winter and staying in too much; she even didn't say too much when I told her I'd have to hitch hike some, ordinarily it frightened her, she thought this would do me good. All she wanted was for me to come back in one piece. So leaving my big half-manuscript sitting on top of my desk, and folding back my comfortable home sheets for the last time one morning, I left with my canvas bag in which a few fundamental things were packed, left a note to my mother, who was at work, and took off for the Pacific Ocean like a veritable Ishmael with fifty dollars in my pocket. What a hang up I got into at once! As I look back on it it's incredible that I could have been so damned dumb. I'd been poring over maps of the U. S. in Ozone Park for months, even reading books about the pioneers and savoring names like Platte and Cimarron and so on, and on the road-map was one long red line called Route Six that led from the tip of Cape Cod clear to Ely Nevada and there dipped down to Los Angeles. "I'll just stay on six all the way to Ely," I said to myself and confidently started. To get to six I had to go up to Bear Mtn. New York. Filled with dreams of what I'd do in Chicago, in Denver, and then finally in San Fran, I took the 7th avenue subway to the end of the line at 242nd street, right near Horace Mann the prep school where I had actually met Henri Cru who I was going to see, and there took a trolley into Yonkers; downtown Yonkers I transferred on an outgoing trolley and went to the city limits on the east bank of the Hudson river. If you drop a rose in the Hudson river at its mysterious mouth up near Saratoga think of all the places it journeys by as it goes out to sea forever. . . . think of that wonderful Hudson valley. I started hitching up the thing. Five scattered shot rides took me to the desired Bear Mtn. bridge where Route 6 arched in from New England. I had visions of it, I never dreamed it would look like it did. In the first place it began to rain in torrents when I was left off there. It was mountainous. Six came from the wilderness, wound around a traffic circle (after crossing the bridge that is) and disappeared again into the wilderness. Not only was there

no traffic but the rain came down in buckets and I had no shelter. I had to run under some pines to take cover; this did no good; I began crying and swearing and socking myself on the head for being such a damn fool. I was forty miles North of New York, all the way up I'd been worried about the fact that on this, my big opening day, I was only moving north instead of the desired, the so-longed for west. Now I was stuck on my northernmost hangup. I ran a quarter mile to an abandoned cute English style filling station and stood under the dripping eaves. High up over my head the great hairy Bear Mtn. sent down thunderclaps that put the fear of God in me. All I could see were smoky trees and dismal wilderness rising to the skies. "What the hell am I doing up here?" I cursed I cried for Chicago . . . "Even now they're all having a big time, they're doing things, I'm not there, when will I get there!" and so on. . . . Finally a car stopped at the empty filling station, the man and the two women in it wanted to study a map. I stepped right up and gestured in the rain; they consulted; I looked like a maniac of course with my hair all wet my shoes sopping . . . my shoes, damn fool that I am, were Mexican huaraches that, as a fellow later said to me in Wyoming, would certainly grow something if you planted them—plantlike sieves not fit for the rainy night of America and the whole raw road night. But they let me in, and rode me back to Newburgh which I accepted as a better alternative than being trapped in the Bear Mtn wilderness all night. "Besides said the man there's no traffic passes through six . . . if you want to go to Chicago you'd do better going across the Holland tunnel in NY and head for Pittsburgh" and I knew he was right. It was my dream that screwed up, the stupid hearthside idea that it would be wonderful to follow one great red line across America instead of trying various roads and routes. That's my tragic route Six—more to come of it, too. In Newburgh it had stopped raining, I walked down to the river, and among all things I had to ride back to NY in a bus with a delegation of schoolteachers coming back from a weekend in the Mtns.—chatter chatter blah-blah and me swearing for all the time and the money I'd wasted, and telling myself "I wanted to go west and here I've been all day and into the night going up and down, north and south, like something that can't get started." And I swore I'd be in Chicago tomorrow; and made sure of that, taking a bus to Chicago, spending most of my money, and didn't give a damn, just as long as I'd be in that damned Chicago tomorrow. The bus left at 2 o'clock in the morning from the 34 St. bus station sixteen hours after I'd more or less passed it on my way up to Route Six. Sheepishly my foolish ass was carried west. But at least I was headed there at last. I won't describe the trip to Chicago, it was an ordinary bus trip with crying babies and sometimes hot sun and countryfolk getting on

at one Penn town after another, and so on, till we got on the plain of Ohio and really rolled, up by Ashtabula and straight across Indiana in the night for Chicago. I arrived in Chicago quite early in the morning, got a room in the Y and went to bed with a very few dollars in my pocket as a consequence of my foolishness. I dug Chicago after a good day's sleep. The wind from Lake Michigan, the beans, bop at the Loop, long walks around So. Halsted and No. Clark and one long walk after midnight into the jungles where a cruising car followed me as a suspicious character. At this time, 1947, bop was going like mad all over America, but it hadn't developed to what it is now. The fellows at the Loop blew, but with a tired air, because bop was somewhere between its Charley Parker Ornithology period and another period that really began with Miles Davis. And as I sat there listening to that sound of the night which it has come to represent for all of us, I thought of all my friends from one end of the country to the other and how they were really all in the same vast backyard doing something so frantic and rushing-about beneath. And for the first time in my life, the following afternoon, I went into the west. It was a warm and beautiful day for hitch-hiking.

[1957]