

The Jack Kerouac Disembodied School of Poetics

(Abridged version)

by Rudy Rucker

Copyright Rudy Rucker (C) 2006

I got the tape of Jack's soul in Heidelberg. Germany, 1980. A witch named Karla gave it to me.

The soul-player looked funny. Instead of a speaker it had a cone-shaped hole. There were no controls, no fast-forward or reverse, just an on-off switch. The device was like a cassette player, with a tape in there, a very fine and silvery tape. The case was etched all over in patterns like circuit diagrams.

"... right after death," Karla was saying in her low, hypnotic voice. "Jack's complete software is in here as well as his genetic code. There's only been a few of these made ... it's more than just science, it's magic." She handed me the soul-player. "Go ahead, Alvin, turn Jack on. He'll enjoy meeting you."

I clicked the switch.

The tape whined on its spools. I could smell something burning. A little puff of smoke floated up from the tape-player's cone, and then there was more smoke, lots of it. The thick plume writhed and folded back on itself, forming layer after layer of intricate haze.

The ghostly figure thickened and drew substance from the player's cone. At some point it was finished. Jack Kerouac was standing over me with a puzzled frown.

Somehow Karla's coven had caught the Kerouac of 1958, a tough, greasy-faced mind-assassin still years away from his eventual bloat and blood-stomach death.

"I was afraid he'd look like a corpse," I murmured to Karla.

"Well, I feel like a corpse --- say a dead horse --- what happened?" said Kerouac. He

walked over to the window and looked out. “Whooeee, this ain’t even Cleveland or the golden tongues of flame. Got any hoocha?” He turned and glared at me with eyes that were dark vortices. Everything about him was right except the eyes.

The soul-player had a carrying strap. As I slung it over my shoulder, Kerouac staggered a bit.

We clattered down the stairs, his feet as loud as mine. Jack seemed a little surprised at the street-scene. I think it was his first time in Germany. I wasn’t too well dressed, and with Jack’s rumpled hair and filthy plaid shirt, we made a really scurvy pair of Americans. The passers-by, handsome and nicely dressed, gave us wide berth.

“We can get some brandy down here,” I said, jerking my head. “At the candy store. Then let’s go sit by the river.”

“Twilight of the gods at River Lethe. In the groove, Al, in the gr-gr-oove.” He seemed fairly uninterested in talking to me and spoke only in such distracted snatches, spoke like a man playing pinball and talking to a friend over his shoulder. Off and on I had the feeling that if the soul-player were turned off, I’d be the one to disappear. But he was the one with black whirlpools instead of eyes. Kerouac was the ghost, not me.

But not quite ghost either; his grip on the bottle was solid, his drinking was real, and so was mine, of course, as we passed the liter back and forth, sitting on the grassy meadow that slopes down to the Neckar River. It was March 12th, basically cold, but with a good strong sun. I was comfortable in my old leather jacket and Jack, Jack was right there with me.

“I like this brandy,” I said, feeling it.

“Bee-a-zooze. What do you want from me anyway, Al? Poke a stick in a corpse, get maggots come up on you. Taking a chance, Al, for whyever?”

“Well, I ... you’re my favorite writer. I always wanted to be you. Hitch-hike stoned and buy whores in Mexico. I missed all that, I mean I did it, but differently. I guess I want the next kids to like me like I like you.”

“Lot of like, it’s all nothing. Pain and death, more death and pain. It took me twenty years to kill myself. You?”

“I’m just starting. I figure if I trade some of the drinking off for weed, I can stretch it out longer. If I don’t shoot myself. I can’t believe you’re really here. Jack Kerouac.”

He drained the rest of the bottle and pitched it out into the river. A cloud was in front of the sun now and the water was grey. It was, all at once, hard to think of any good reason for living. At least I had a wife and son. Cybele and Baby Joe.

“Look in my eyes,” Jack was saying. “Look in there.”

I didn’t want to, but he leaned in front of me to stare. His face was hard and bitter. I was playing way out of my league.

The eyes. Like I said before, they were spinning dark holes, empty sockets forever draining no place. I thought of Edgar Allen Poe’s story about some guys caught for days in a maelstrom, and thinking this, I began to see small figures flailing in the dark spirals, Jack’s remembered friends and loved ones maybe, or maybe other dead souls.

The whirlpools fused now to a single dark, huge cyclone, seemingly beneath me. I was scared to breathe, scared to fall, scared even that Kerouac himself might fall into his own eyes.

A dog ran up to us and the spell snapped. “More *trinken*,” said Jack. “Go get another bottle, Al. I’ll wait here.”

“Okay.”

“The player,” rasped Jack. “You have to leave the soul-player here, too.”

“Fine.” I set it down on the ground.

“Out on first,” said Kerouac. “The pick-off. Tell Karla leave me alone.” With that he snatched up the soul-player and ran down to the river and disappeared under the water.

I walked home.

Cybele and Baby Joe were glad to see me. My son held out his arms and opened his mouth wide. I could see the two little teeth on his bottom gum. His diaper was soaked. I changed him. As usual with the baby, I could forget I was alive, which is, after all, the only thing that makes life worth living.

I gave Cybele a beer, opened one for myself, and sat down in front of the TV with the

baby. *Zorro* was on. The month before they'd been showing old Marx brothers movies, dubbed of course, and now it was *Zorro*, an episode a day. Baby Joe liked it as much as I did.

But there was something fishy today, something very wrong. *Zorro* didn't look like he was supposed to. No cape, no sword, no pointy mustache. It was vortex-eyed Kerouac there in his place, sniggering and stumbling over his lines. Instead of slashing a "Z" on a wanted poster, he spit on it. Instead of defending the waitress's honor during the big saloon brawl, he hopped over the bar and stole a fifth of tequila. When he bowed to the police-chief's daughter, he hiccupped and threw up. At the big masquerade ball he jumped on stage and started shouting about Death and Nothingness. When the peasants came to him for help, he asked them for marijuana. And the whole time he had the soul-player's strap slung over his shoulder.

After awhile I thought of calling Cybele.

"Look at this, baby! It's unbelievable. Kerouac's on TV instead of *Zorro*. I think he can see me, too. He keeps making faces."

Cybele came and stood next to me, tall and sexy. Instantly Kerouac disappeared from the screen, leaving old cape 'n' sword *Zorro* in his place. She smiled down at me kindly. "My crazy Alvin. Just take care of Joe while I fix supper, honey. We're having pork stew with sauerkraut."

She disappeared into our tiny kitchen and Kerouac reappeared on the screen, elbowing past the horses and soldiers to press his face right up to it.

"Hey, Al," said the TV's speaker in Kerouac's voice. "You're going crazy croozy whack-a-doozy."

"Cybele! Come here!"

She ran out of the kitchen, and this time Kerouac wasn't fast enough; she saw him staring out at us like some giant goldfish. He started to withdraw, then changed his mind.

"Are you Al's old lady love do hop his heart on?"

"Really, Cybele," I whispered. "My story's true. That's Kerouac's ghost inside our TV."

"A beer for blear, dear." The screen wobbled like Jello and Kerouac wriggled out into our living room. He stank of dead fish. In one hand he held that stolen bottle of tequila, and his other hand cradled the soul-player.

“Just don’t look in his eyes,” I cautioned Cybele. Baby Joe started crying.

“Be pope, ti Josie,” crooned Jack. “Dad’s in a castle, Ma’s wearing a shell, nothing’s the matter, black Jack’s here from Hell.”

“Isn’t there any way out?” I asked him. “Any way into Nothingness?”

Just then someone started pounding on our door. Cybele went to open it, walking backwards so she could keep an eye on Kerouac. He took a hit of tequila, a pull of my beer, and lit one of the reefers the peasants had given him.

“*Black-jack* means *sap*,” he said. “That’s me.”

It was Karla at the door. Karla and her friend Ray. Before Jack could do anything, they’d run across the room and grabbed him. He was clumsy from all the booze, and Karla was able to wrest the soul-player away from him.

“Turn it off now, Alvin,” she urged. “You turned it on and you have to be the one to turn it off. It only worked because you know Jack so well.”

“How about it, Jack?” I looked over at him. His eyes were swirling worse than ever. I could feel a breeze rushing into them.

He gave a tight smile and passed me his reefer. “Bee-a-zlast on, brother. They call this Germany? I call it the Land of Nod. Friar Tuck awaits her shadowy pleasure. The cactus-shapes of nowhere night.”

“Do you want me to turn it off or what? I can’t give the player back to you. You’ll drive me nuts. But anything else, man, I mean I know your pain.”

Suddenly he threw an arm around my neck and dragged me up against him. Karla, still holding the soul-player, gasped and took a step back. Kerouac’s voice was harsh in my ear.

“*I knew a guy who died*. That’s what Corso says about me now. Only I didn’t. He’s keeping me in the whirlpool, you are. Let me in, Al, carry me.” I tried to pull back, repelled by his closeness, his smell, but the crook of his arm held my neck like a vise. He was still talking. “Let me in your eyes, man, and I’ll keep quiet till you crack up. I’ll help you write. And you’ll end up in the whirly dark, too. Sweet and low from the foggy dew, corrupting the boys from Kentucky ham-spread dope-rush street sweets.”

He drew back then, and we stared into each other’s eyes; and I saw the thin hare screamers in the black pit same as before, only this time I jumped in, but really it jumped in

me. All at once Jack was gone. I turned off Karla's machine, saw her and Ray to the door, then had supper with Cybele and Baby Joe. And that's how I became a writer.

---End---

The full-length version of this story originally appeared in the Boulder magazine *New Blood* in the summer of 1982. It was reprinted in my two story anthologies *The 57th Franz Kafka* (Ace Books, 2983) and *Gnarl* (Four Walls Eight Windows, 2000). It also appears in the group anthology, [*Paraspheres*](#) (Omnidawn Books, 2006). For the purposes of a group *Parapsheres* reading at City Lights Books in San Francisco, September 28, 2006, I abridged the story from 3,200 words to 1,900 words.