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EXPLICIT LYRICS

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from Bruce Craven, Fast Sofa (NY: Quill/William Morrow, 1993)

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Rick was sitting in the Buick, absently brushing at his teeth with the new yellow toothbrush, while listening to the monotonic hum of the shorted radio. He had on his sunglasses. He had lifted the hood and messed with the wires. No luck. He had slugged the dashboard. No luck. He had kicked the dashboard with the heel of his boot. He'd even crawled down into the luxurious seat well and stared up at the underbelly of the dash. No luck. Stock molding. He couldn't tell if any of the wires were loose or crossed. Rick hated mechanical problems. And he was still tuneless.

Fuck it, he decided. The stations all suck anyway.

He slipped the toothbrush into his duster and worked a cold Hamm's out of the Styrofoam cooler. Washing his mouth with beer, he traced his finger along the blue artery of the Ventura Freeway, onto the 210 and out to red Interstate 10. East . . . toward Palm Springs and Cathedral City. The Vesuvius. Happy hour with Ginger Quail. Yeah, *she* was going to be his dessert. Ginger Quail. And he'd need some major bliss protection if he was going to take on that fierce scruff again. She wasn't a job, she was an adventure. One random package of girliness. The perfect genetic expression of the word *fuck*. Make your eyes bleed and your skin blister. Yeah, he'd need a *major* bliss screen. Liquid protection would be *crucial*. Rick laughed aloud. Solarcaine for your dick. Bain de Soleil for your brain. Coppertone for wayhono moan. Bliss Factor 30. That's what he'd need. 'Cause she was sunlight. Pure sunlight.

He was glad he'd given that squid a few bucks. It made him feel kind of Christian. Kind of fat, sassy, and Christian.

Rick refolded the map and dropped it in the seat well. He kicked his feet up on the split upholstery. Yeah, if you weren't driving, you might as well be parked.

He stared out the passenger window and nursed his Hamm's, happy he'd got that cash off the manager and was doing something cool for a change. Like a road trip. The only drag being the couple of days to kill before hooking up with Ginger. Normally, it'd be no biggie, but now that Tamara and Jack . . . well now it was sort of like he didn't really have anyone to hang with. It'd be too weird to hang with them. Tamara and Jack. Whatever. It definitely made sense to hit the road. Lose himself in the desert. Piss on a lizard. Throw rocks at the sky.

Rick yawned, turned the ignition key, and was about to back out when the stranger returned, peering down into the open window, forehead glittery with sweat. There were traces of chili on his chin. "I would like to offer my thanks for your kindness."

"Later," said Rick.

"And," Jules continued quickly, "ask you for one more favor."

Rick clicked the gear lever on the steering wheel column; the parking brake released automatically.

"I understand that it's an imposition—"

"Yeah." Rick gave the car gas and began to back out. Jules Langdon clung to the edge of the window. "An imposition . . ." he repeated, "an imposition, yet something that . . ."

The Buick squealed as Rick careened over the curb. Forced to hit the brakes just as a guy on a ten-speed clicked past, juggling his handlebars over the crenulated cement and showing Rick a sour face.

Jules appeared at the windshield, palms spread in a plea.

Rick mouthed *no* and turned to guide the Buick back into the oncoming traffic. The river would not part.

The radio whined. Jules knocked on the windshield. Rick clicked the radio off. This Christian gig was fun for about five minutes. Twenty-four hours of it would be a major drag. But the squid was still there, forehead still bulging. Ugly face still staring. Rick gave up. "So what's the imposition? Got some Samaritans after you?"

Jules composed himself. "As I was without the means to feed myself, I am also temporarily without the means to return home . . . to Arcadia. I fell a little short of money. If you could see your way clear toward assisting me . . . I will gladly reimburse you by mail in the very near future."

Rick laughed. "Yeah, I bet. Why don't you just click your heels together three times?"

Jules's face clouded.

Was the squid going to cry? "Look," continued Rick. "I'm heading out that way . . . why don't you just get in. But there's no way I'm fronting you more cash. For all I know, you're just a wino in yuppie clothing."

"Really?" asked Jules brightly. His pale hair whispered.

"Yeah, *whatever*. Just hop in. And hurry. I'm not into getting killed."

Rick leaned over and unfastened the bungee cord, hitting at the door. It sprung. Jules lurched around and began to wipe at the seat with the handkerchief.

"Get *in!*" barked Rick.

Jules did and leaned back, smoothing his hair with his hand.

Rick sighed, rehooked the cord. The traffic parted with eerie suddenness and accepted the Buick Skylark. Acceleration. Jules's fragile blues beamed.

"Going traveling?" Jules clung to the headrest and looked over into the backseat, where Rick had stashed his belongings. Milk crates of his remaining albums. A couple Hefty bags of clothes. "I'm a man of the road myself. Always loved the vistas and the great *leks*. The swoop of the kestrel."

Rick's hangover had returned with a vengeance. The Hamm's had done nothing to soften the edge of nausea. "Who taught you to talk . . . Walt Disney?"

"Ah!" exclaimed Jules. "Walt Disney. What a wonderful man. Defined the standards for animation. A visionary. A pioneer. Rather like a Marlin Perkins. A modern Darwin or Audubon for the entertainment industry."

"Yeah, like that. That stuff. *Defined the standards. Visionary. Rather*. Why don't you holster that shit and talk normal?"

Jules's expression went cloudy. "Yes," he said carefully. "Quite. If that would make you more comfortable."

"It would," snapped Rick. "*Quite*."

They drove without speaking.

Rick couldn't believe it. It wasn't even morning anymore and here he was, still dealing with weirdness. No tunes. The beer hurt his head. And *sympathy* had trapped him with this serious vegetable who drooled this strange squid language. Yeah. Well. Whatever. It *was* a road trip. The idea was to *enter* the wilderness. Make it strange. Make it vicious. Make it weird. "So you like Disney?" Rick finally asked. "Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, Dumbo? The whole crew?"

"Yes," answered Jules. "Although really his features, *Snow White, Fantasia*."

"Uh-huh . . . and Marlin Perkins? Wasn't he that dude from *Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom*? That sixties show where they were always out in the jungle and desert filming wombats and pumas and whatever?"

"Yes," repeated Jules. "Excellent. Strong habitat focus."

"Darwin? Audubon? Like Darwin did that Galápagos gig?" Rick watched Jules out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes," repeated Jules, struggling not to elaborate. "*Origin of Species. The Ornithological Biography*. We all know their work . . ." Jules shifted against the upholstered bench seat.

"Okay," said Rick. "Forget it, spew away. Do your gig, squid. Twenty-four and seven, three sixty-five."

Jules's expression was inquisitive.

"Just talk however you want. Like twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Three hundred and sixty-five days a year. Whatever. *Visionary* and so forth. I was just hassling you. Go with the fierce wordage, hombre."

Jules sighed. "I certainly would find it preferable." He looked back out the window. "You must include Tinbergen. Nikolaas Tinbergen."

Rick said, "For what?"

"Niko Tinbergen. Dutch biologist. Born in 1907. His influence has been substantial thanks to his book *The Herring Gull's World*. Virtually all of the work done today owes something to Tinbergen's research."

"Of course," said Rick. "Crucial. But what are we talking about?"

"Shell-disposal behavior, for example. *Avian ethnology*. The study of bird behavior in natural settings. Tinberger shared the Nobel Prize with another great ethologist, Konrad Lorenz, as well as Karl von Frisch. Frisch was the forerunner in honeybee communication—distance, direction of food source, ritual dancing on the honeycomb."

Rick sighed. Hello. Earth to squid.

"Now Darwin's work was with the finches of the Galápagos Islands, well of course you know the history of natural selection theory. The struggle. The great sacrifice. The voyage of the H.M.S. *Beagle*. But from a contemporary ornithological perspective, it was really Audubon and his contemporary Alexander Wilson who did the ground-breaking *discovery*. The seminal *investigation*. The incomparable engravings, the hand-colored lithographs. The five-volume study. Absolutely essential. *Visionary*. One thinks of Audubon's description . . ." Jules looked up into the blank Los Angeles sky. "Imagine passenger pigeons, those now-extinct flocks of the deciduous forests that once carpeted the eastern United States. Nesting colonies

could be several miles wide and up to *forty miles* long! Their droppings were at such a capacity as to destroy the forest understorey . . ."

Rick looked at Jules. This dude was amazing. Nonstop babble. That was the thanks Rick got for letting the squid hitch a ride. Nonstop babble.

"Audubon described a flock that flew over his head for *three* days. He estimated three hundred million pigeons flew by sometimes *each hour*." Jules gave Rick a pregnant look.

"They're gone now, right? Like *history*?"

"Very severe habitat destruction. Very severe colony disruption. There were laws, but people ignored them. Some would sew the eyelids shut on captive pigeons and leave them as decoys. Put them on a stool. Of course, you see . . . *stool pigeon*. This would attract other pigeons. Who would be clubbed or shot. In nesting times you could simply pick them up. It seems that they had previously survived by *swamping* predators. The flocks were so massive, yet they covered such a large area migration-wise . . . they proved an ephemeral resource to predators. They were always moving so the *number* of predators never had time to adjust upward. Unfortunately, they could not adapt to the *new competition* of an increased *human* population. One killer in Michigan supposedly shipped three million birds east in 1878."

"Wow." Rick looked up at the sky. "Can you imagine what three million pigeons shitting would do to a freeway? *Heinous*."

"I would argue that there are two points here." Jules fussed with his shirt collar. "One, if we are not careful, we will reduce our habitat so that it is incapable of supporting anything but very tenacious species. We will reduce our world to doves and starlings and sparrows. We will lose our global avifauna. And *second*—Jules's voice got ominous—"the story of the passenger pigeon suggests that it is not necessary to actually kill the last of a species in order to guarantee its *demise*. Our own survival is *interdependent*."

"Ouch," said Rick. "Spooky."



Rick thought of Ginger. She had been so yummy up against that clamshell headboard. She had arched her back. She had got all soft. She had fought with her hips. Opened her eyes when he needed to see them blue. This thin line of sweat between her breasts. The way her lips went *okay* when he told her to roll over . . .

"Do you require any assistance, maybe a companion for your adventure?"

Rick felt the high, thin blank sky and the way it hovered above them. He felt the sun and the way it burned through to the dashboard, upholstery, the floor carpet, his black cowboy shirt. "Oh, really?" he said. "How could you *be of assistance*? You're broke and you're seriously clueless."

Jules mulled this over. "I helped change a tire once."

"Brilliant. Mondo Road Warrior. What else?"

"In terms of applicable skills . . . as in the field of auto mechanics? Facility with tools, emergency repairs?"

"Whatever," suggested Rick pleasantly.

Jules concentrated, then his face brightened. "Motor oil?" he asked. "*Gasoline*?"

This is really special. Rick wished Jack were there to share in the road trip hell. Jack would have loved this guy. "Yeah?" asked Rick. "And?"

Jules watched him sadly. "I can't remember."

"You can't remember what?"

"The actual relationship . . . in terms of the eventual, well, of course, the gasoline is placed *in* the tank . . . and being flammable there's a clear intent for combustion . . ."

Rick smacked himself on the forehead. "What are you yapping about?"

Jules lowered his eyes; the wind of the speeding car pressed his hair into a skullcap. He was a man swimming underwater. His hands moved in supplication.

"What?" demanded Rick. "Choking or something?"

Jules's cheeks welled scarlet. He wiped at his eyes with his handkerchief. "I've never been very mechanical."

Rick reached over and ripped the handkerchief from Jules's hand, held it out the window, letting it thwap. Then released it. Jules's head snapped around as the handkerchief spiraled off like a clipped gull.

Rick shook his head and put the pedal down, guiding the Buick up the ramp onto the Ventura Freeway.

Jules's head bobbed. He turned away and faced out the side window. Yeah, Rick decided, he was *definitely* about to cry.

Rick slid his sunglasses down and peered over them. "Gasoline, huh? Like you know how to put it in . . . that kind of thing?"

Jules turned.

"Really," continued Rick. "Like you're experienced at filling the tank?"

Jules straightened in his seat. "I know my way around a gas station."

"Right . . . the pumps, the cash register, the squeegee bucket, the candy machine. Well, that's awesome. *And* you've changed motor oil? Or just poured it in?"

"The latter. On occasion. I used to be called upon to assist my father when necessary."

"Right. Anything else?"

"Yes . . . certainly in the nontechnical sector. *That* would be my special field. The nontechnical. I *do* consider myself a man of the road . . . with a particular emphasis on nontechnical skills, appraisal of the environment, wildlife identification, seasonal changes."

"Really? Cool. That stuff is pretty damn *handy*. Like you can tell if it's raining? And you must be pretty good with roadkill? Can you tell the difference between a cat and an eagle?"

Jules ignored him, his head out the window. Rick sighed. Jules's hair a dim hedge,

chin resting upon his hands. His eyes watering from the wind, the scarlet of his cheeks now earthy, vigorous.

"You like driving?"

Jules turned back and cupped his hand to his ear.

Rick yelled above the wind, "*You like driving?*"

Jules nodded.

"Yeah," Rick confirmed quietly. "Me too."

They drove on for a while. Eventually Rick turned up the radio, noise hungry. Even the whine of electricity might be okay. He twisted the whine down again to a low hum. "What were you doing today, squid? Just out begging for chiliburgers?"

"Early in the morning I was in Pasadena, watching the feral parrots in the park. Had a cup of tea. Then I decided to make a visit to the Los Angeles Zoo. The aviary is very cathartic. Walked in Griffith Park. Walked through town."

*Walking?* What a loser, thought Rick. The V-8 jumped beneath his foot.

"Feral parrots?"

"Yes, *feral* means when a nonnative species has gone wild. Established a breeding population. Parrots have escaped from cages and probably, smugglers . . . much like the red-whiskered bulbuls. Or even the greater flamingo down in Florida."

Rick had seen parrots in cages, but this was weird . . . were parrots just *flying around*? How come he'd never noticed?

The day had turned clear, windswept. The smog packed back against the mountains. The glass façade of downtown Glendale flickered with internal fires, an overpass clutched up against the rolling green hills dotted with church steeples, criss-crossed with power line, roads, and cable.

"Where's your ride? In the shop?"

"Excuse me?"

"Your ride, you know, your car?"

"My car? I've never owned a car."

"You're carless? What do you do for wheels?"

"Oh, I don't usually go out these days and if I do, well . . . I use public transportation. The bus is my preference."

"*The bus?* Bleak. No one rides the bus. Only insane people and Mexicans ride the bus.

Don't you have any friends?"

Jules thought about it, then shook his head.

"What do you mean? No friends or no friends with cars?"

"I've just been rather solitary these days," Jules explained. "I'd rather leave it at that."

"Yeah?"

Jules placed his hand upon the bungee cord. "What is this?"

"What?"

"This." Jules pulled on the cord as if to hand it to Rick.

"It's required by law. You know, for your *safety*," Rick said.

"This?"

"Yeah, it's like a seat belt only more awesome. It was designed by Lockheed to protect those supersonic pilots. You know, those guys who break speed records all day out above the salt flats? Yeah, well, duty demanded something mega-effective. But something that wouldn't *hinder* mobility. So Lockheed ended up swooping the contract and after five years of top-secret, high-tech R&D, they cranked out this baby."

"Really?" asked Jules, impressed.

"Sure. But you can't order 'em unless you've got special government clearance. Like you've got to get this stamp on your driver's license. That says you've been approved for reconnaissance and electronic combat procurement testing. The stamp says Supercool Airborne Product-testing. Anyway, once you've got that, you're *in there*. Then the government's constantly boasting you wicked, state-of-the-art test gear."

Jules's eyes widened. "Super what?"

"Supercool Airborne Product-testing . . . but they just call it SAP. Get it? SAP." Rick looked at Jules.

Jules nodded. "Impressive. SAP."

"Jesus!" Rick's hands jumped from the wheel. He smacked the dashboard. "SAP. Get it?"

Jules cringed. He didn't get it.

"SAP," repeated Rick. "As in dumbfuck-squid-retard-from-Arcadia-who-can't-tell-when-someone's-feeding-him-a-load-of-horseshit! *Understand?*"

"You mean—"

"Yeah!" Rick laughed. "Man . . . you're fucking *unreal*. Like how old are you . . . and not in bird years?"

"Forty-two," Jules answered evenly.

"Yeah, I figured you like to be in decline."

"I've certainly felt old lately," Jules admitted. "The last few years have been difficult. A rough road to hoe."

"Shit," said Rick.

The Buick battled a head wind. Rick stepped hard on the gas pedal. They sped past Eagle Rock and the exit for Rick's Arroyo College, entering the garden of terra-cotta tile roofs and brick that was Pasadena. Parrots lurking in the trees, a tenor of green unwinding in acacia, oaks, palm, and stunted pine. Eucalyptus shimmered to the south of the Colorado Street Bridge. *Suicide bridge*. Angela had called it that. The students at Arroyo had called it that. Told stories of high school kids lost against the sky, diving toward the red rose logo of the distant football stadium.

"So what's your destination?"

"Uh? What?"

"Where are you going?" Jules asked.

"Cathedral City. Out by Palm Springs."

"Where exactly?"

"Cathedral City," Rick repeated. "You know, like by Palm Springs . . ."

Jules was puzzled.

"You *do* know where Palm Springs is, right?"

Jules shrugged.

"How long've you lived in Arcadia?"

"Since my birth."

"And you don't even know where Palm Springs is?"

Jules shook his head. "I often have trouble with exact locations, cities, streets. I just don't think that way. It's environment-specific in an urban sense, but very limited. Arbitrary."

"Yeah. A *serious* road warrior . . . doesn't even know where Palm Springs is." Rick shook his head. "Quite a man of the road."

Jules was nonplussed. "I refuse to be restricted by *that*. I have my thought patterns. My chosen focus."

"What?"

"Simply because my mind is concerned with different issues, well, that's no reason to deduce I can't contribute. Rather—"

"Shut up. It's in the desert. You know, palm trees, dirt, tennis courts . . ."

Jules stared at him. "Of course." He turned away and gazed out the window. "What's the purpose of your trip?"

Rick guided them past a Volkswagen. Didn't answer.

"Why did you choose *that* destination? The desert? Are you planning to *camp*?" Jules pronounced the last word strangely, with a festive lilt.

"*Camp*? No. I'm going to the desert to get laid."



Jules stared out the open window.

"Hose," said Rick. "I'm driving out to the desert to hose some bliss. Like a chick, *comprende?*"

Jules didn't.

"You know, bump uglies. Bohk. Screw. Do the antler dance. *Fuck*. C'mon, you know, like *fornicate?*"

"Ah!" said Jules knowingly. "Of course. That would explain the competitive, unfriendly behavior."

"What?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." His head moved in acknowledgment. "I wondered about your tendency to *display*."

Rick's hands were very tight on the wheel.

"Do you live in the desert?" Jules asked.

"*What?* No. I sort of live in Burbank."

"Oh." Jules was thinking. "And your wife? Or are you promiscuous?"

"No," Rick said with extreme patience. "And yes. No, I'm not going to see my wife. I don't have a wife. And yes, I'm sort of promiscuous. 'Specially as of yesterday. Friday. And now I'm going to the desert to meet a crucial wayhome . . . you know, like a *girl*. Then after I meet her, I'm going to fuck her. Assuming she's into it, which she will be. The desert's good for that kind of thing. Sunshine. Blue swimming pools. Air-conditioning. Cocktail bars."

Jules nodded. "Good *lekking* territory."

"What?" Rick was counting the last few miles to Arcadia.

"It's part of the mating system. Certain species travel to traditional sites year after year. They display in competition for females. It's very exciting as they inflate brightly colored air sacs on their necks. The central male generally ends up with the highest proportion of females. Very promiscuous breeding patterns at the lek. A central *position* is a sign of success

in the male dominance hierarchy. This is very common with most grouse, prairie chickens, for example. Some people prefer to call this traditional site an *arena*. But of course, you get the picture."

"Yeah. Sort of a prairie chicken orgy. My . . . how *enticing*." Rick reached for the radio knob, then let his fingers trace the impotent AM dial screen. "Now what exit are we looking for, squid?"

Jules was silent.

"C'mon, dude. What's your off ramp? Baldwin Avenue?"

Jules looked away.

"Let me guess," asked Rick. "You *did* escape from somewhere, right? A nuthouse or a prison? Some place mellow where they give you lots of sedatives?"

Jules moved his finger to his lip, started to say something. Stopped.

"Fess up, squid."

Jules looked down at his hands. "Well, in point of fact, I *did not* escape from some place . . . yet, I *am* temporarily without a home. I'd rather not admit it, but it *is* my situation. I was recently informed that my assets are tied up until I clear a few impending debts. My creditors are upset, as you can imagine, and recently have taken it upon themselves to unite with the bank to try and remove me from my home. I'm trying to avoid them."

"Yeah?" Rick felt a certain justified sympathy. "And what about your family? Parental units? Wife thing? Little creatures?"

"I'd rather not go into it," Jules said. "It's personal."

"And you're broke?"

Jules nodded. "At least for the moment."

"And no friends, right?"

"Yes," blurted Jules. "As a matter of fact . . . I have some good friends . . . in Palm Springs."



"Imagine that. What a *super* coincidence. You mean, you've got friends in just the exact place that I happen to be heading?"

Jules nodded.

Rick showed his teeth. "I doubt it."

Jules didn't know why.

"I don't believe you, squid."

"You don't?"

"No," said Rick with a laugh. Thinking to himself what a *major* drag it'd be to be over forty years old and be scared to go home. To not have a single friend. Or a car. Even retards in penny loafers deserved a better world.

Rick sighed and watched himself drive past the exit for Baldwin Avenue. Yes, it slipped by and along with it Santa Anita Racetrack. Rick looked off over the tops of the trees, wondering what the odds were on him ending up on the road with a squid like Jules Langdon. 30 to 1? 50 to 1?

Or how about getting ripped off and losing his apartment? Or Tamara and Jack?

Wow.

The odds were escalating. Probably up around 99 to 1. Yeah. At these odds he could have bet the trifecta and woken up in a house of gold! Apartment and the *ecstasy* to win. Jack and Tamara to place. And last but not least, Jules Langdon to show.

But sorry. Money was not his reward. Rick steered the Buick into the fast lane and motioned toward the Styrofoam cooler. "Get me a beer, squid. We're on the road."