

Connors, Peter

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Peter Connors

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## Dustier Than Dust

PETER CONNERS

You've been outside the scene for a while. Shows here and there, but nothing like submerging head-first into a multi-day hippie music festival. The summer heat mixed with dry field dust caked to your bare feet looks like a message from an old friend: welcome back. Be dirty. Be sweaty. Be joyous. Be with us. There is a dusty film that can only accumulate on skin at outdoor summer music festivals—it's more of an invitation to the celebration than even the ticket to the show. You see the dirty, dusty bare feet around you and you know that everyone is together for the same reason and it's not about soap ads or berry shampoo or moisturizing lotion or finely crafted Italian footwear. It's the music, the dance, the community, the awareness that—if only for a few days—you're among kindred spirits and this energy can be saved and tapped into whenever you need it most to get you through the rest of your days.

These things are true. You know because you have lived them and they have buoyed your spirit through days you never dreamed you'd live long enough to experience: job troubles, money troubles, relationship troubles, adult troubles. Your memories of sweltering days spent meandering through hazy parking lots in random parts of America with tie-dyed

flags fluttering overhead and your favorite music filtering through an electric summer breeze have sustained you more than bread and wine.

Sissy is getting divorced. He sent you a text message with his divorce tattoo covering the entire left side of his rib cage. It's a quote from Kerouac that he's wanted for fifteen years and now he got it. He says it's his last. You don't believe him. Like a billboard his ribs read in bold black letters:

AS WE CROSSED THE COLORADO-UTAH BORDER  
I SAW GOD IN THE SKY IN THE FORM OF HUGE  
SUN BURNING CLOUDS ABOVE THE DESERT THAT  
SEEMED TO POINT A FINGER AT ME AND SAY,  
'PASS HERE AND GO ON. YOU'RE ON THE ROAD TO  
HEAVEN.'

You didn't know he was divorced until a month after it happened. So it goes. There were times when you and your tour family knew each other's every thought, emotion, dance pattern, and the complicated puzzle of each other's silences 300 miles into an 800 mile trip. Once forged, those ties are never broken. The silences now stretch across years instead of miles, but the conversations resume with ease. Like the dust, this too is a blessing.

The festival grounds are covered with kids who look like you once did. They are long-haired and lean in their youth. Their tanned skin pulls against their bones as they prowl the fields looking for what they need: sex, friends, drugs, shelter, maybe a little food. They glow with vibrancy and expectation and their shoulders point East to West without the bowed weight of obligation. You move among them but are not among them. You have reached mid-life now and your hair is shorter and graying and your eyes have seen these things and they are renewed, but not new. Even when asked you do not tell them your stories because those stories are dustier than the dust and they should not want for anything you lived when they have so much in front of them.

You try not to want for things you do not have anymore, but it is not easy. Now you try to use your eyes for seeing what's happening Now. The present tense demands a patience you didn't have in your youth. You are trying to cultivate that patience. You try, you try.

You are not alone here in your years. Old and young have always met on open fields to celebrate music and community, no matter what the groupings were called—gatherings, shows, be-ins, happenings, festivals—or whatever the music was called when it was called anything at all. It is good, and rare, in America to see the ages come together so freely. It is good, and rare, in America to see elders truly appreciated as holders of wisdom and experience—not merely lip-service paid to that notion.

There are old hippies here who have lived their lives with long hair and beards and tattoos and values forged and not discarded. There are wealthy men and women who will drink and smoke pot and sway back and forth to music they listen to on their solitary suburb-to-city commutes. There are lawyers, chefs, truck drivers, business owners, artists, nurses, teachers, social workers ... There are special areas for the people who have carried their love of the music through days of accumulating enough money to afford seclusion. There are bracelets designating their membership. There are bathrooms for them. There is special food and easy access to beer and water. There is a viewing platform raised high enough to see the stage across the dancing heads on the field and there are chairs on the platform for when their bad knees and sore feet give out. They are called VIPs. There are few festival kids among the VIPs. The festival kids and the VIPs mingle only on the open field. They mingle freely there with no open signs of resentment. There is economic segregation here, but no one seems to mind because this is the way of all things.

Bracelet. Tent. Water. Bathroom. Chair. Fan.

VIP privilege.

You move freely in and out of the VIP area. You are a professional writer and you were given credentials to go wherever you want. You did not pay for these. This is different for you. It is a change. You wear a lanyard around your neck that has the level of clearance emblazoned on both sides in a sparkling silver number: 3. There are five levels of clearance. You are number 3. This means you can go to the VIP bathroom and sit in their chairs in front of the industrial-grade fans. It means you can wander backstage to conduct your interviews with musicians or perhaps sidle up to the side of the stage for a better look at the bands.

You are still a fan. You are still amazed to find yourself wandering backstage with impunity. You are always waiting to be kicked out of special places. You wouldn't blame them. You were always a fan and a writer and getting kicked out of such areas was expected. Now you are welcomed into them. You are a chance at publicity. You bring this to the table. You sit in a chair in front of a fan while festival kids sweat out on the fields and you scrawl notes about the economic segregation of the festival scene and you know there is hypocrisy there, but it is hot, so hot, and you will address it all in time.

You will write the stories you don't want to bore the festival kids with because you'd rather hear their stories. Your stories are dustier than dust. You will hear their stories and watch the scene and then, all at once, pull back the curtain and show them the things you want them to see.

They may listen. They may not. Either way you are ready for them now. Let them come. Let it all come down.

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#### NOTE

This sketch was written as notes on the 2012 Gathering of the Vibes festival while working on the book *JAMerica: The History of the Jam Band and Festival Scene* (Da Capo, 2013).

PETER CONNERS is a poet, novelist, essayist, and writer whose works include *Growing Up Dead* (Da Capo, 2009), *The White Hand Society* (City Lights, 2010), and *Cornell '77: The Music, the Myth, and the Magnificence of the Grateful Dead's Concert at Barton Hall* (Cornell University Press, 2017). His writing was included in the Yale University Press anthology *Forty Under Forty* (2012) and appears regularly in *Poetry International*, *Mississippi Review*, *Brooklyn Rail*, *Fiction International*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals.