



# PYRE—AN LA INTERLUDE

BY JOE HILLIARD

**A**nd when I die.  
“Burial at sea?”  
“No ocean. I hate the ocean. I can’t even swim.”  
“Why live in LA then?”  
“No choice, man. My parents felt the call, the call of being jobless elsewhere. God wanted me to live here.”  
“And die here.”  
“And die here.”

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In Los Angeles, death is both palpably visceral and decidedly vague. Every day there is a fatality on the freeway. Maybe a wrong way driver hopping on the 5 drunk at 3 am. Maybe drag racing on the 210 at midnight. Maybe some heavy construction worker on the 10 didn’t screw the bolt in quite right on his forty-inch-blade circular saw while cutting into some K-rail and shot the dervish off and severed the spine of his unsuspecting partner at 6 am. Maybe a jumper on the 101 after a spectacularly bad business lunch at the Jonathan Club at 1 pm. And maybe a commuter just gave up and died from being in bumper-to-bumper on the 91.



image info

Anytime. All the time. What does any of that mean? Freeway call numbers and times and vague pronouncements on the news feed. More concerned about the traffic flow than the precious bodily fluids flow. It's a numbers game. And you never see it. You see more Tom Savini work than real bodies here. It's all the same.

I hadn't been thinking about death. Not really. Who does? Or my own mortality. Sure, my dad had his cancer show up when he was my age. Just past the big five-0. And he was dead within six years. Or maybe seven. I wasn't really talking to my father at the time. It happens. To the best of us. To the worst of us. And no time off for good behavior. No time off for bad behavior. Despite what Hollywood tells you, death does not take a holiday. Neither did my dad. He kept on working until he got laid off. And then he got sick. Maybe old Frederic March was laughing at him through it all. None of that Brad Pitt 1990s nonsense. My dad was old school. Fred was coming for him.

I presume I was one of the worst of us. Like Gooper's kids in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Always got my hands in the ice cream. And rarely bothering to wash them.

But that wasn't on my mind. I wasn't having pains. My nose wasn't bleeding. That was one of the first signs my father had. Unexplained nose bleeds. The docs thought he was snorting coke. He was more incensed by that than by the initial cancer diagnosis. How dare they think he was



Capitol Records Building

doing drugs? Clean living won't get you very far either.

Nope, I was as healthy as I had ever been. But we all die, don't we?

And when I die.

"What about the Cinerama Dome?"

"Maybe like thirty years ago when there was only one screen. Not the multiplex it is now. You know, like when we saw that re-release of *The Wild Bunch*. Where the print



Brown Derby Restaurant

bled right over the sides and onto the curtains and the ceiling. It was magnificent."

"And the bridge. The bridge seemed like it would wrap around the entire theater."

"The bridge blowing was amazing. We all held our hand up like Bill Holden. Wait for the sign."

"Was it that long ago?"

"1995. They even gave us commemorative buttons. Seems like yesterday."

"Time is kinda meaningless in Los Angeles."

"Unless you're going to die."

"Unless you're going to die."

"Or you wanna go into the picture business?"

"Some days you're too old. Some days you're too young."

"And some days you simply aren't dead enough."

"Amen to that."

I had a friend who worked in the [Capitol Records Building](#). In Los Angeles everyone knows at least twelve people in the business. Twelve hundred. Forget six degrees of separation from your bacon. That bacon is getting fried in the grease. If you are alive and breathing and walking down a street in LA, you've passed six in six seconds with skin in the game. I knew people who were trying to buy the Cinerama Dome, for crying out loud.

He did not work in the Capitol Records Building. His boyfriend did. Or maybe his girlfriend did. I couldn't remember which. It was the girlfriend that shot him though. Up on the trails underneath Griffith Park. So maybe it was the boyfriend who worked at



La Brea Tar Pits

Capitol. My friend survived. He moved out from his boyfriend's place. Got a restraining order against the girlfriend. Then married a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* gaffer? Does that sound right? Or maybe it was a project accountant?

I remember communicator badge gift bags at the reception. So kitschy. They weren't even metal, just plastic. And they didn't have sound effects when you touched them. May as well have given us a commemorative button. If you're going to do a Hollywood wedding, then go all the way. You know a special effects guy. Twenty special effects guys. Although I think there was at least one Ferengi in attendance. Which was something.

My date sold their comm badge on eBay.

We spent the dinero on a Ghost of Christmas Future Roy Choi food truck. And some sex toys.

And when I die.

"Where is the Brown Derby now?"

"Isn't it still on Wilshire?"

"I thought they moved it."

"That was the Tail o' the Pup. Dogs. Not hats. Get your anthropomorphic buildings right."

"It always bugged me anyway. Looking like a hot dog dripping mustard. Way too phallic for my tastes. It's pervy."

"Next to the Beverly Center? What's more pervy than that behemoth?"



Hollywood Bowl

"That's more Patrick Nagel cold brittle pervy. Didn't you get banned from the Beverly Center?"

"Never caught. No convictions. We used to drag our skateboards up the outside escalators. Five stories. Have a pocketful of 25¢ superballs from the machine at Alpha-Beta. Skate hard to the middle of the mall. Up to the food court where you could look down three floors. Unleash the balls without mercy. Bouncy bouncy. Then skate, book it hard to the escalators on the other side and out of the Center. Never caught. No convictions. Me and Reymundo. You never knew him."

"Eighties kids. Ya'll sick in the head."

"At least I survived. Not dead."

"Not yet. You keep saying you want to be

buried. In the penile hot dog building."

"Screw the dog. And besides, the Pacific Dining Car, way more phallic. I mean train car? Like the end of *North by Northwest*? Need I say more?"

"That's not even Los Angeles."

"The Pacific Dining Car is right downtown. I've been there for a post-trial celebration with a bunch of attorneys. Thank god they paid."

"It's closed now anyway. All of those places are closed. Gonna bury you in a vacant lot. And I meant Hitchcock. They never make it further west than the Dakotas in *North by Northwest*. Poor example."

"Your focus is all wrong. It's the dick, not the food."

“I bet you say that to all your dates.”

“Only when I’m on my knees.”

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So, where do you want to be buried then? Los Angeles does have its choices.

Angel’s Flight. Only if it’s out of commission again. *Como siempre*. Under the tracks. So easy to get underneath now. Not like when it was built directly into Bunker Hill, when you get kicked out the back like in *Hollow Triumph*. Or that German tourist in 2001. Now, it’s all tinkertoy tiers. Bury you in the metal.

**The Tar Pits.** Just plop and drop. Like that *Lord of the Rings* parody where they dump Goddam in a tar pit with the ring around his neck. Cause it’s just too far to climb up one more mountain to die. Ain’t that the truth? Peter Jackson got it all wrong. Do you really like anything he’s done after *Braindead*? Do you want to swim with the fiberglass mastodons?

Capitol Records. Where the stalkers go to find your cheatin’ heart. And the ghosts. Was Hank Williams ever really there? Frank Sinatra. Nat Cole. Better not go there if you are planning on dying and not coming back. Royalties in perpetuity. More Elvis Hitler than Elvis Presley.

Cinerama Dome. Asked and answered.

**Brown Derby.** Hats on the move. When I die, bury me down deep. Turn to stone. I’m not taking the night train moving truck anywhere.

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And when I die.

**“The Hollywood Bowl?”**

“When I was a kid I saw Mickey Rooney there for Easter Sunrise service. I was like ten.

My parents got us up really early to make sure we got in. We still were way way up at the top. I don’t know if they bought tickets in advance or it was my dad going cheapest. Or maybe we just showed up, and that’s all that was left. You think you understand Mickey Rooney was short, but when you see him from the top of the Bowl. Or not see him, as the case may be. We had better tickets a few years later to see Mel Torme. Now that was a show.”

“How old are you again? Mel Torme? Was Rudy Vallee there too?”

“I’m old like Mel Brooks *2000 Year Old Man*. I saw Salieri kill Amadeus.”

“At the Hollywood Bowl.”

“The Pantages.”

“Evil. But the Bowl is the perfect place with those winding paths on the outside going up and up. Or, like, under the escalators?”

“I’d feel too Cesar Romero like that. *Two on a Guillotine*. Play the recording of my will on the stage.”

“Better Romero than Adam West.”

“I do adore my villainy.”

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And when I die.

“The LA River.”

“Like set on fire all Viking funeral style?”

“I don’t think the drainage strip would fit a boat. Although we could hit further up where it’s not paved. Where it really is a river.”

“Now I know you’re lying. Next you’ll tell me Terry Sawchuck played for the Kings.”

“Up into Glendale, where it starts to trickle down. It’s a riverbed. I used to ride bikes down in it with *mis amigos* in junior high. José. Y Reymundo. They were cousins. Total opposites. But their moms made them hang out together all the time. I don’t even remember which I knew first. José lived by a

break in the fence. We’d drop our bmx’s down through the hole, slide down the riverbed sides. Mud and toads. Toads and mud. This was when we worried more about smog than drought. Maybe it’s all dried up there now. *¿Quién sabe?* Hell, we even got chased by the cops once down there.”

“That sounds pretty far-fetched.”

“Sure, like a Hollywood movie. It was *Terminator 2* really. Me and Edward Furlong. That liquid cop came this close to ending me in seventh grade.”

“Wise guy. Maybe I should just have them bury you under the Norris Theater on USC, you cagey film buff.”

“Screw you. You know how I feel about private schools. And . . .”

“The University of Spoiled Children. For sure. But they have the best film archive around. You’ve seen more than your fair share of films there.”

“Too many. People love to have their screenings there. Makes them feel all Milius-y.”

“Biliously. Spielberg-ian. It would be divine providence to bury you there.”

“Bitter irony.”

“You could pop out of the floor for one last hurrah like Bill Holden in *Stalag 13*.”

“And have them play Siouxsie for me. But no Viking fire boats. No pyre.”

“There’s a drought coming on. You would burn the whole city down.”

“Isn’t it on fire already?”

“Depends on your point of view. We could be drowning.”

“Could be buried in cement.”

“That would be the ghost of Huizar Ever-Present. Wrecking ball fever kills us all.”

“The buildings will survive. Even LA Supervisors can’t destroy them all.”

“Play some Exploited. *Dead Cities. Horror*

*Epics*. The Brits understand LA better than Black Francis.”

“Why not some Megadeth then? *Killing Is My Business*.”

“Kiss me on my business.”

“Drilling is my business.”

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“And business is good. Didn’t you have a Vic Rattlehead dentist t-shirt?”

“I think he was supposed to be a doctor. With a meat cleaver.”

“Do you miss Reymundo? Hanging with him?”

“Not really. I don’t miss much of anyone.”

“Perv.”

“You know it.”

“And no one will miss you, either.”

“Book it.”

“I know I won’t.”

“I love you too, Keyes.”

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Suck it, Gram Parsons. No Joshua trees for me. Although a nudie suit would be nice.

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Postscript: I don’t know if they buried me in the LA River. If they burned me in effigy down where they filmed the chase sequence in *Repo Man*. If they simply scattered my ashes across the cement. As they say in the movies though, if you are reading this, then I am already dead. At the very bitter end, where death belongs.

I hate when they start off with the death. *Sunset Boulevard*. That’s an exception. But then, Billy Wilder could get away with just about anything in this city.

I hope *mis amigos* did too. ✨