

In propria persona

John Dogg

This text piece has been done without the cooperation of John Dogg.

Dogg's passages are transcribed from recorded conversations between him and the author from March 1985 to approximately June of the same year. The reproductions accompanying this text have been supplied by the author from his own collection. The title of this text means, to act in one's own defense.

—Richard Prince

Me: John Dogg asked me to share a house with him in Los Angeles, California. This was the beginning of February 1985. I had been staying at the Hanging Gardens on Franklin Street up behind Hollywood Boulevard, just below Yamashiro's in West Hollywood. The house he wanted to share had three bedrooms, a living room, an enclosed porch, a cabana, two and a half bathrooms, a pool that took up what there was of a backyard, and a five-car garage. It was the garage that made John think he found the right house.

John: Do you see what I see?

Me: The house was on the Santa Monica-Venice line, right behind the Fox Theater. The house cost \$1,375 a month with two months in advance and one-month security. The lease was for one year. Our landlady was Mexican. Married to a black. The husband hosted a local radio show called *Talk Black*.

I'd been out of New York for three weeks. I came to Los Angeles for an opening of my work. John came to see me at the opening. He asked me to stay a couple of days before my plan to go back. He was a different John than the one I knew in New York. John, not "Johnny." When he asked me to stay, part of the reason I said yes was to be with him and his new side.

John: I never had a penny to my name, so I changed my name.

Me: The first thing John did to the house was fill it with cars. John had been making a living delivering cars, special ones, "drive-away" or "drive-aways" was how the job or the cars were referred to.

John had just driven a 1970 Dodge Challenger RT back from Denver. He did it in sixteen hours. The owner wasn't expecting the car for three weeks. John parked the car on the front side of the lawn.

This was John's favorite car. The same type that was in the movie *Vanishing Point*. It had a 110-inch wheelbase, 191.3 inches overall length. The rear track was 60.7 ... generous. This RT had come with a special-edition comfort-and-appearance option. It had a triple Holley 2bbl inducted six-pack (smoked), a domed hood, and through-the-hood "shaker" scoop. *John* said this Challenger was designed for serious rolling. A four-speed Hurst shifted transmission, torsion bars up front, and semielliptic leaf springs in back seemingly removed the roll from radar.

John: There's nothing inside me dying to get out.

Me: John never bought any regular furniture for the house. He bought ready-to-assemble sawhorses and a couple of hollow-smooth wooden doors and made two work desks. He bought two chaise lounges, a beach chair, and an inflatable pool float, the kind that had compartments for "drinks." The living room had wall-to-wall carpeting. All the walls were painted flat primer gray. The three bedrooms were left empty. We slept on foam mats in the enclosed porch. We had a NEC color monitor and Sony VCR with 3RF stereo range speakers so we could see and hear. The house was clean.

John: I used to watch Perry Mason. Now I watch People's Court.

Me: John liked the house because it came with appliances and services. "Things" he said he didn't have in his places in New York. Washer, dryer. A dishwasher.

A large range oven. These "things" were *with* the house. A big Amana refrigerator, garbage disposal, fans on the ceiling. He'd say, "I didn't put them there," like he was genuinely amazed that they existed at all. There was also a trash man who came Mondays. A kid who mowed the lawn Thursdays. And a pool "manager" who came three times a month.

"These things are here to make life easier." John talked about the conveniences like a farmer who just saw Paris.

John: In 1964 John DeLorean and advertising ace Jim Wangers wanted to release a car that would be a lightweight passenger car endowed with a midsize power plant. They wanted to add styling and charisma and

price it within reach of the masses. They hoped to sell 5,000 of these machines when first introduced. By the first year they shipped 32,000. The car was the GTO.

Me: The first car John registered in his own name was a 1970 Hemi Cuda. It had a 4bbl 440 high-performance V-8. Four-speed manual with Hurst linkage (this came with a pistol grip). Like the Challenger it had a fresh-air-inducing "shaker" hood scoop. Heavy-duty suspension (the car was over 5,000 lbs), 11-inch-diameter brake drums, front sway bar, F70-14 tires, 4-inch-diameter hood lights (with 90,000 candlepower), action clutch, dual exhaust, and 60.7 rear track. John drove this one. Usually up to Santa Barbara, on Sundays ... he'd race it out on Point Courage. His fastest run was 11.33 at 117 in the quarter mile. A Cheetah valve body and a 4,200 stall converter from Turbo Action put him about a shift ahead of street competition. A narrowed Dana 60 rear end with a 5.57 gear ratio completed the driveline. You needed to set your f-stop around 5.6 to stop this car in a picture.

John: The names that appear most in the Antique and Art for Sale section of the New York Times are LeRoy Neiman, Erté, Marc Chagall, Keith Haring, Julian Schnabel. The people who are selling these artworks make TV commercials. The people who buy this "art at resale" make rock videos.

Me: John called the *Los Angeles Times* and asked for home delivery. A few days later when he went to the front door, the *Times* was on the lawn. Every morning John couldn't believe his luck. He would look at the paper there on the lawn like it was a lost wallet.

John: March 3, 1985, the books I just bought: Correction by Thomas Bernhard; Jerry Hall's Tall Tales; Auschwitz: A Report on the Proceedings Against Robert Karl Ludwig Mulka and Others Before the Court at Frankfurt; They Became What They Beheld, photos by Ken Heyman, text by Edmund Carpenter; The Lovomanics by Rona Barrett; Great Jones Street by Don DeLillo; and You and Me, Babe by TV's Chuck Barris

Me: John didn't watch much TV before moving to the house. He didn't like TV or the movies. He liked to read. But the house was cabled and this picture on the TV was dear and remote-controlled. Twice a day John watched *The People's Court*. That was "his show." The defendants and plaintiffs were real people, not actors. Sometimes you could see spontaneous actions and reactions on the show. Unlike most TV the endings or outcomes, or decisions or rulings, were critiqued by the principals as they were leaving the courtroom. They were usually asked the same question by "court reporter" Doug Louellen ... "How do you feel?" ... "How do you feel?" John would scream. How do you feel, Jesus ... how do you feel? John would start singing "Like a Rolling Stone" after every program. Just before John's singing ended, the credits would roll and he and the TV audience were reminded by voice-over not to take the law into their own hands.

John: Is that what I think this is?

Me: In the middle of the living room John had installed this thing he called the Elephant Motor. "Shrouded by lore and legend." It was all there was in the room. The lore and legend was showcased. Even I knew the 420 Hemi engine occupied a rarified place in the pecking order of the auto kingdom. Hemi... those four little letters adorning the flanks of an otherwise nondescript piece of iron immediately elevated it above lesser, more-mortal horsepower. That was the living room. The bedrooms were decorated with tires. One to a room. Each covered with a kit, like the assemblages you see on the backs of vans and jeeps. One was covered with white vinyl. One in pony hide, with a metal casing surrounding the hide (continental style). The last one had an all hard-case cover with a metal-flake painted surface. The bedrooms were small, about nine by twelve feet... with wooden floors, one window to each room, each window covered by a white sheet. Spartan. Shaker. Monklike. Rooms for prayer, thought, communion, spirituality. Rooms to program the psychic and sensory life. They reminded me of the Fra Angelico rooms at San Marco.

John: I've always liked the later paintings of De Chirico. The ones after the chimneys. The ones that are always being put down for looking like they were painted for people who shopped at Sears. I like the fact that De Chirico, when he painted these "democracies," was a grown man living with his mother.

Me: John cooked his own dinners. Prepackaged. Frozen. Lasagna was his favorite. He said Stouffer's froze the best. John would preheat the oven to 450 degrees, put the package in for about seventy-five minutes, let it stand for another fifteen.... While he was waiting he'd cut up a cucumber and make vinaigrette with olive oil, mustard, lemon, and capers. John would eat this dinner five times a week. On Tuesdays and Fridays John would eat with his friend Carla. Carla was a cartoonist. She rented a bungalow near the Hollywood Bowl. He had met her at a dinner party in North Hollywood in the Valley. She was a widow, her children grown. She had two by the time she was eighteen. Both her parents and husband died by the time she was nineteen. She was straight. Pragmatic. Had a little of the Christian Scientist in her. Could have been a

Calvinist, a Yankee from a place like Burlington, Vermont. She had a full-time job. Worked for Disney Studios. No one took care of her. Caria was a big girl... woman . . . forty, forty-five? . . . 165, 170 pounds. Breasts. Big thighs, bottom (John had become very cunt-and-ass minded). Carla could separate sex from love. In their sex Carla didn't make John feel bad about his regressing a couple of years.

John: My .44 Magnum carbine. My .32 caliber Llama with the 6-inch barrel and simulated pearl handle. My .25 Colt automatic. What I'd really like is to find a Weaver scope for my .22 Magnum lever-action rifle.

Me: A Mustang Buss 302. That was the next car. The same one Steve McQueen drove in *Bullitt*. John parked it under the carport, a plastic transparent aquamarine roof without walls, suspended between house and garage. Fastback, with competition suspension and front air spoilers, this "stang" had a small-block 351 Cleveland. You could hear the baffle from five cars back. For this one too he had a drag-pack option with positive-action no-spin lockers ... mechanical valve lifter camshaft, 780 cfm Holley carb (high nodular iron crank), forged aluminum pistons and four-belt main caps on numbers 2, 3, and 4 pistons. John's Boss was alive. For backups John had quickly collected block heads, exhaust manifolds, rocker assemblies, and carburetors. He estimated he had enough hardware to build three complete Hemi engines. A lot of the spare parts were NS1: code letters and number for the word "obsolete."

John: From where I stand. I really don't see things from where I stand.

Me: John was happy with the price of beer in Los Angeles. A dollar sixty-nine a six pack. He liked the idea that a drugstore like Thrifty Mart sold beer. This "liking" had something to do with the country. "Like, if it wanted to, this country could make a lot more things accessible."

This was John being political. "If it wanted to and when it wanted to" was a way John described the country. John had a nonsensical political attitude, a position of opposites. If they say no, he says yes. "I want someone running the government who hasn't a clue about what art's about." Another position of opposites. John was the first one to say that Jane Fonda and Tom Hayden, not Ronald Reagan, would censor his work.

John: When I was a child my parents punished me by forbidding me to watch TV.

Me: Another idea John liked was the three-dollar watch. He had been wearing one for two years. John had always associated a watch with an expensive accessory, functional jewelry ... a special present from a relative or a gift for a retirement. "They were not three dollars in 1954 when I was five years old. To have something you need and not care whether it gets lost or broken gives me a great deal of satisfaction. It's probably how a millionaire feels about their car. It's probably how a good gambler feels when he sees the bet.... He can afford to lose the money because he doesn't lose the money, he loses the bet."

John: I went to New York in 1973. I went for three months. I ended up staying to the beginning of 1977. I went to New York because of what I had seen in a photograph of Franz Kline when he was staring out a window of his 14th Street studio... leg up on the sill, cigarette in hand, his face, and what he was thinking looking out over the scene that was outside the photograph. Whatever there was in that photograph, I wanted to try to be in. That kind of desire and seeing for me started around 1963. This fiction ended for me in 1977, fourteen years later.

Me: John had worn the same sunglasses for the five months I lived with him. He bought them on the Venice promenade for four dollars. In the same five months I had lost or misplaced at least sixteen pairs. It was always strange to me that John managed to hold on to everything. Leases, cars, clothes ... even something as losable as sunglasses. When I left him, I bought him a little sunglass screwdriver-and-screw kit. The present was particular and thoughtful.

John: [Telling me -why he picked that color.] I picked that color blue because it was on sale, A lot of my work is about being under the circumstances....

Me: John called one of his tire pieces *Creative Evolution*. He said he had seen the name "illustrated" on the door of one of those monster trucks, the ones with the huge wheels, a truck that one usually sees on top of an old car, crushing that car's roof as it makes its way forward onto the next old car.

Creative Evolution he said was a perfect name for such a truck. A perfectly comic name. Perfectly comic because one usually laughs when one compares two similar faces neither of which has a comic effect by itself. When one finds such repetitive faces, one usually suspects some queer mechanism lying behind the faces, like the faces appear to be "living things." And according to our expectations, "what is living" should never be repeated exactly the same. And what John ultimately thought the joke was behind the name (behind the face) was that the relationship of the truck driver's brain to the mass of the truck looked pretty much the same as the relationship of the brain of a dinosaur to the mass of the dinosaur's body.

John: A lot of thumping of chests and breasts in the '80s art world. Heroes and heroines, artists with all kinds of private points of view, living in apartments, living in castles, living on the beaches and in forests. They have their portraits taken. Hans Namuth, '50s style. Looking like Abstract Expressionists and Method actors. They look great in their portraits. Serious and believable. They never come across looking at all what they really are in real life. Good portraits. I don't know how they do it. I feel like I'm in a mobile home at a rest stop on Highway 95 North, somewhere around Stamford, Connecticut, on the phone talking to Vogue.... Listen, I'm hung up here, traffic's so heavy, too late to step on it, looks like I won't be getting my picture taken today. Huh? What? Sure I want to be remembered, thought about, we all do. Yeah, well, what can I say? Next time.. .Jesus, you know, I can't seem to bring my self to make the who's who connection. The "bringing" just doesn't figure in except as a hang-up. Why the resistance? I can't explain it. Can't guess it. Me to the '80s art world, I feel, I don't know, AWOL.

Me: John was thinking about one more car. He'd found a '69 Dodge Charger, a kind of sister car to the Challenger. He found it with just 9,000 original miles on the clock. It still had the tire size that had been scribbled in yellow crayon at the assembly line on the inside of the car's trunk lid. Next to the size there was also this other scribbling, in the same color yellow, probably by the same assembly worker... "pavement pachyderms reign on the asphalt jungle." ... I looked up "pachyderm." Odd ... any thick-skinned nonruminant mammal, esp. the rhino.

*John: I dreamt I was a traveling salesman, and my car broke down one evening on a lonely road. And I asked at the only farmhouse in sight, "Can you put me up for the night?" "I reckon I can," said the farmer, "but you'll have to share a room with my young son."
How about that, I gasped, I'm in the wrong joke....*

from: *Richard Prince*, edited by The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, exh. cat. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; Walker Art Center, Minneapolis; Serpentine Gallery, London, Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2007, p. 326–333.