

# Grateful, but not dead -- yet

*This the story of a woman who needs to graduate.*

Thursday before last, I attended my first Grateful Dead concert. I knew from the start my motives weren't pure. I'm working on a character who has hallucinogens in her past and thought I'd get in some observational research. But mainly I needed a break from being an English major. I knew things were bad when I watched *Star Trek: The Next Generation*. Five minutes into the show, I began composing a mental thesis about how having multi-planetary species all speak English compromised the story's integrity. I had, however, underestimated my dementia. The Grateful Dead concert made me realize how bad off I really am.

Walking through the Dean Dome parking lot, I was fascinated by the Deadheads. The were

oblivious to their blackened feet, ragged clothes, and well-defined rib cages. They were pilgrims, drawn to the shrine that held their leader. And it was easy, even for a novice like me, to tell who was a real pilgrim and who ran out that afternoon and bought tie-dye tee shirts. "Hey," I thought, "this

is just like *The Canterbury Tales*." I made myself a note (yes, I really wrote it down) to tell Dr. Knight I finally understood Chaucer's emphasis on his

pilgrims' clothes. I worried a little about myself.

The crowd thickened as we got closer to the Dome, but in the middle was a clear circle around two young women who carried a sign that said **WILL TRADE SECRETS OF TERRAPIN STATION FOR RIDE TO THE ALBANY SHOW**. My experi-

enced brother explained that "Terrapin Station" is a collection of songs about wise turtles who live in a world beyond a door of fire. To crack the code, he said, is to achieve Deadhead nirvana. As I got within earshot, I heard the pilgrims asking reverently who the women had studied under and if they knew Jerry. "Hey," I thought, "this is just like American lit when Dr. Gilbert revealed Eliot's secrets in 'The Waste Land.'" The similarities were striking: Garcia's fire door versus Eliot's fire sermon. Fortunately, I was distracted before I began reciting lines.

On a nearby embankment a real side show was forming. A wild looking young man, with tattoos and earrings covering most of his body, had a small dog hanging from his dreadlocks. After checking the dog's bite to make sure it was fastened securely, he twirled round and round — thereby making the dog fly. Another guy, motivated by the clink-clink of change in Mr. Dreadlock's guitar case, mounted his cooler and began reciting "Casey Jones" in his best Olivier-wannabe voice. "Shoot," I thought, "Jean Jackson (with Willy) and Garry Walton out do those guys every day, and they don't even have a tip jar." Completing the triangle was a turbaned person — gender unspecified — selling pamphlets entitled "Mental Health Thru Better Writing," (a Nan Miller motto if ever I heard one, but she'd spell it right). I looked at the would-be poets, philoso-

phers, and journalists gathered round Le/La Turban and wished desperately I had copies of *A Writer's Rhetoric* to give them; Suzanne Britt is nothing but specific.

The competitive vibes I'd been building up were quieted by the peaceful aura that overtook the pilgrims as the crowd moved toward ticket-gate heaven. Standing beside me was a hulking brute made eight-foot tall by the red and white striped Dr. Seuss hat he was wearing. "How cool," I thought, "this semi-literate giant and tiny-woman-mammoth-scholar Louise Taylor share the same hero. And how cool it is that I am here to make the connection." I was feeling groovy. I was ready to enter.

But no. Even in the presence of psychedelic providence I couldn't escape my professors. I found myself studying this group of groupies who were twirling and twirling even when the music stopped and never getting dizzy. They were so beautifully feminine in their baggy dresses and unpainted faces, so much enjoying being female. They reminded me instantly of Sarah English — pre-Laura Ashley, of course. And when the Grateful Dead played "Terrapin Station," the arena was as electrified as a Freewill Baptist congregation at the last preaching of revival week. But I was solemn; I couldn't help being sad that Betty Webb was not there to see the purple splendor that illuminated the Dean Dome.

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**Jackie Webb**  
Senior  
Major: English with  
a Concentration in  
Professional  
Communications

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