

HUNTER S. THOMPSON'S WILD GOODBYE 

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DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON'S FINAL NOTE... A SALUTE FROM THE COLONEL...
THE CLENCHED FIST IS RAISED... THE PATRON SAINT OF RIGHTEOUS RAGE...
SPIRIT IN THE SKY... ENTERING THE NO MORE FUN ZONE

Football Season Is Over

—BY DOUGLAS BRINKLEY—

Myths and legends die hard in America. We love them for the extra dimension they provide, the illusion of near-infinite possibility to erase the narrow confines of most men's reality. Weird heroes and mold-breaking champions exist as living proof to those who need it that the tyranny of "the rat race" is not yet final.

—HUNTER S. THOMPSON, 1937-2005

FEBRUARY WAS ALWAYS the cruelest month for Hunter S. Thompson. An avid NFL fan, Hunter traditionally embraced the Super Bowl in January as the high-water mark of his year. February, by contrast, was doldrums time. Nothing but monstrous blizzards, bad colds and the lackluster Denver Nuggets. This past February, with his health failing, Hunter was even more glum than usual. "This child's getting old," he muttered with stark regularity, an old-timey refrain that mountain men used to utter when their trail-blazing days were over. Depressed and in physical pain from hip-replacement surgery, he started talking openly about suicide, polishing his .45-caliber pistol, his weapon of choice. He was trying to muster the courage to end it all.

Then, on February 16th, Hunter decided to leave a goodbye note. Scrawled in black marker, it was appropriately titled "Football Season Is Over." Although he left the grim missive for Anita, his young wife, Hunter was really talking to himself. Here, published for the first time, are perhaps his final written words:

No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun - for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax - This won't hurt.

At the bottom of the page, Hunter drew a happy heart, the kind found on Valentine's cards. Four days later, on February 20th, he committed suicide by firing his pistol into his mouth.



A Gonzo Farewell

Six months after Hunter's death, those closest to him gathered to honor his final request: that his ashes be fired from a cannon atop a 153-foot Gonzo tower.



ON SATURDAY, AUGUST 20TH, SIX months to the day after Hunter died, many of his closest friends gathered in the high-ceiling lobby of the Hotel Jerome in Aspen. Since the mid-1960s, Hunter had used the hotel's J-Bar as his boozy late-night office, its long outdoor swimming pool as his fitness club. Now, family and friends congregated here, waiting for a convoy of shuttle buses that would ferry them down the two-lane country road to Owl Farm, Hunter's home in Woody Creek, to say goodbye.

As the hour approached, the Victorian hotel became a Gonzo way station. Reporters wandered about with spiral notebooks while Ralph Steadman and Bill Murray held court at the bar. "I wouldn't miss this for the world," Sen. John Kerry said as he boarded a shuttle, his arm around former Sen. George McGovern. "I met Hunter in the days of Vietnam Veterans Against the War. Then, last summer I offered him the vice-presidency in jest. He's missed."

Because Hunter had been a perpetual Peter Pan, attending the bleak reality of his death came hard. Nobody coveted what his son, Juan, deemed "Dr. Phil closure." Instead, his family and friends wanted to find a gallant, jubilant way to remember him. Luckily, Hunter provided them with a dramatic, ready-made funeral scheme first hatched nearly thirty years ago, a self-aggrandizing stunt guaranteed to launch his posthumous literary reputation skyward in a final blaze of triumphant glory. "Hunter wanted to be crazy and outrageous in death, just as he was in life," composer David Amram said on the bus ride to Owl Farm. "Like a phoenix, he planned on rising from the ashes."

Back in 1977, Hunter had asked Ralph Steadman — his brilliant illustrator and trusted sidekick — to draft a blueprint for a Gonzo Fist Memorial, his warped idea of a pyrotechnics-rigged mausoleum. The morbid notion had been preoccupying Hunter for a while. A few years before, he had asked his artist friend Paul Pascarella to design an official Gonzo logo: an iconic two-thumbed red fist clutching a peyote button, ensconced atop a dagger. Now, with a BBC crew in tow, Hunter and Ralph wandered into a Hollywood mortu-

France celebrated the death of Victor Hugo with a no-holds-barred parade and, more recently, how Timothy Leary had his ashes fired into space from Grand Canary Island via a rocket. But Hunter had a much grander farewell in mind. He wanted to trump his own suicide with a surefire, high-octane, sizzling Gonzo epilogue complete

actor Johnny Depp, it turns out, is a charter member of the Direct Action School of Mourning. Depp and Hunter were homeboys. Both hail from Kentucky, and the two had become friends when Depp played Hunter's alter ego Raoul Duke in the movie adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. One of Hunter's great de-

want a Gonzo Cannon? We'll give you a Gonzo Cannon."

Following Hunter's thirty-year-old blueprints, the Colonel commissioned a construction crew to build the cannon. Cost was not a factor. So what if the price tag was \$2 million or \$3 million? Depp's recent hits *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* were financial grand slams, earning the forty-two-year-old actor enough money to buy his own island near the Bahamas. Doing it right for Hunter was all that mattered. "I loved him and wanted to make sure his last wish was fulfilled," Depp says. "It's that simple." He galvanized Hunter's inner circle to share his vision of building the most spectacularly weird monument ever erected for a writer. Without hesitation, both Anita and Juan signed up for the ash blast.

But greater Aspen has a notoriously hard-line building code. Pitkin County is NIMBY-land, a place where rich folks with \$10 million alpine homes don't want their scenic views obstructed by a giant day-glo peyote fist. Facing a political minefield, Depp dispatched his movieland troops to the Rockies, determined to construct a permanent monument for the Good Doctor. "There were a lot of community grumbles," recalls Sheriff Bob Braudis. "Nobody minded a small cannon blast, but 153 feet tall? And permanent? That, quite naturally, raised eyebrows."

So a compromise was struck. Depp could build his grandiose monument and his friend's ashes could light up the Western sky in a fireworks orgy. But the memorial would have to be temporary. Two weeks only and down it would have to come. Faced with this reality check, most people would have resigned themselves to building a makeshift memorial, some tawdry papier-mâché-like contraption modeled after a disposable Rose Bowl float. But Depp is not most people. "Our goal was to get everything right," he says. "We wanted to respect the wishes of the people of Pitkin County. These were Hunter's friends and neighbors. We wanted them to be part of the entire process."

In early June, construction crews armed with jackhammers, buzz saws and humongous cranes arrived at Owl Farm. While engineers and security guards roamed the property around her, Anita focused on the guest list. Hand-



Goodbye to the Good Doctor

Even though the memorial service was private, Hunter's fans flocked from all over the country to say farewell to their hero (left). When guests arrived, they entered a special Gonzo pavilion (above), complete with inflatable sex dolls and other HST memorabilia. Like others who attended, Bill Murray (below), to be sold in a limited edition to support Hunter's favorite causes.



**** "I wanted to make sure his last wish was fulfilled," says Johnny Depp. ****

ary to inquire about transforming the Gonzo symbol into a full-fledged artillery cannon, 153 feet tall, capable of blasting his ashes into the atmosphere. It started out as a lark, but as the years passed, Hunter grew serious about the cannon concept, telling his family and friends it was his "one true wish." He often spoke of how Mark Twain wanted to report on his own funeral, how

with a thunderous eight-piece Japanese drum band and a Buddhist reading and his ashes showering down on his lifelong friends while Bob Dylan wailed "Mr. Tambourine Man" from high-decibel speakers.

How one deals with the death of a loved one is a highly personalized affair. Some people weep for days; others take a hike in the woods or count rosary beads. The

lights was getting Depp enshrined as an honorary Kentucky Colonel in 1996. From induction onward, Hunter always called him "Colonel Depp" — or sometimes just "the Colonel." Since nothing could bring Hunter back to life, Depp decided to make his buddy's 1977 death fantasy come true.

"Fuck you, Hunter," he joked one afternoon not long after Hunter died. "You

some invitations with a silver-foil dagger topped by a double-thumbed fist went out to a select group of family and friends. "Hunter had so many fans, and I wanted them all to come," Anita says. "But reality dictated that we limit the event to 300 or 400 people."

Slowly the program began to take shape. Juan would be master of [Cont. on 112]

Dr. Hunter S. Thompson

GONZO MEMORIAL FIST PRINT



Artist **RALPH STEADMAN**, longtime friend and collaborator with Dr. Thompson, originally created this Gonzo Monument artwork in 1977, and now he has produced an edition of 150 prints to commemorate his friend and to further the causes he stood for. After the blasting of Hunter's ashes on August 20th, 2005, this original silkscreen print was signed by Ralph Steadman and a handful of Hunter's close friends in the War Room at Owl Farm, Woody Creek, Colorado.

THE ORIGINAL SILKSREEN PRINT WAS SIGNED BY THE FOLLOWING LIST OF HUNTER'S CLOSE FRIENDS:

**Ed Bradley, Bob Braudis, Doug Brinkley,
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Laila Nabulsi, Ralph Steadman, Anita Thompson,
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Dr. Hunter S. Thompson

[Cont. from 72] ceremonies, introducing nine or ten of the people closest to Hunter to make brief five-minute eulogies. The tone was funeral-solemn — a wake — but expansive humor was naturally welcomed. Only mint juleps would be served for phase one. A full bar would open up after the eulogies. Music, of course, would be a big part of the evening; given Hunter's preference for Kentucky bluegrass, Depp lined up Jimmy Ibbotson of the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band to play "Will the Circle Be Unbroken" and Lyle Lovett and David Amram to orchestrate variations on "My Old Kentucky Home."

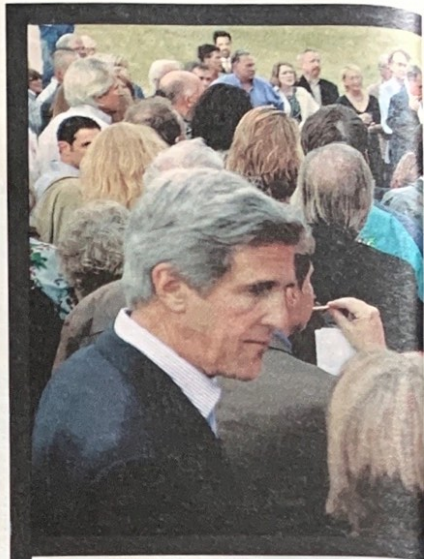
Finally, there would be absolutely no cameras or tape recorders or working media allowed at the ceremony. (An exception was made for the *New York Times*.) "We didn't see this as a media event," Juan says. "It was a remembrance of Hunter. Our goodbye. We simply asked people to respect the family's wishes." Not everyone got the message. Three days before the event, a freelance photographer who was snooping around the area was run off by Ibbotson, a neighbor of Hunter's, who fired off his shotgun for emphasis. "If you want to print the fact that neighbors are shooting at paparazzi, please do," Ibbotson told the *Aspen Times*. "It might save us a little hassle on the day of the event."



THE FESTIVITIES WERE SCHEDULED to begin at 7 P.M. As the shuttle buses approached Owl Farm, guests encountered a wall of frenzied fans, wildly waving Gonzo placards while toking on dope and mixing drinks. Virtually everyone claimed some connection to Hunter — be it a Utah bookseller or Honduran smuggler or Houston social maven or Pennsylvania hitchhiker. A few lost souls were even dressed like Hunter in Tilley hats and white Converse sneakers, smoking Dunhills from a cigarette holder. "Those folks weren't in Woody Creek to rub elbows with glitterati," said Gerry Goldstein, a close Hunter friend. "They came from far and wide to salute Hunter."

As I chatted with some of these pilgrims — all in awe of the fifteen-story Gonzo tower standing across Woody Creek Road surrounded by a forested canyon wall — it dawned on me that Hunter had become the Patron Saint of Righteous Rage for the voiceless outcast. Like Jesse James or Billy the Kid, Hunter took on the Bad Boy persona of the average guy's avenger. He wouldn't take shit from uppity bosses or dishonest police or corrupt lawyers or phony agents like most of us do. With a fierce vengeance, he lashed out, creating chaos from the mundane, psychedelic sparks out of the terminally placid. Most of us would never drive our Jeep through plate-glass windows or whiff rotten cocaine in a Huddle House parking lot... so Hunter did it for us. Mayhem was his calling.

And posterity was his obsession. Hunter spent his entire life in a childlike



state, wailing like a rambunctious newborn for things like Equal Rights and Prison Reform. He wanted his legacy to be both literary and political. As the invited guests and family arrived, they walked up a flight of stairs — an elegant, gondola-shaped pavilion on the hill above Owl Farm, constructed especially for the occasion. The décor was a luscious cross between a *Deadwood*-like brothel and a Vegas stage show circa 1970. One entrance to the Gonzo palace was adorned by large framed portraits of Hunter's favorite authors — Hemingway, Faulkner, Conrad, Twain, Fitzgerald. A fine circular bar stood in the center, flanked by furniture draped in black cloth, to be unveiled after the eulogies. Stuffed peacocks and Chinese gongs and other assorted Hunter artifacts were scattered about, his apple-rot convertible stuffed with blow-up dolls perched on a nearby knoll. "It was like entering an ancient temple," says Curtis Robinson, a former editor at the *Aspen Daily News*. "It reminded me of how much Hunter looked like the Dalai Lama."

Standing at the podium dressed in a tuxedo jacket, Juan Thompson called for testimonials from his father's family and friends. Anita, wearing a silk shirt with hand-painted red poppies (Hunter's favorite flower), sobbed her way through



Two Senators and a Colonel

Sen. John Kerry (above), who last year offered Hunter the vice-presidency in jest, was among 350 friends and family who gathered at Owl Farm on August 20th. Former Sen. George McGovern, whose presidential bid Hunter chronicled, remembered his old friend as "a man of deep goodness and justice and compassion and idealism." The driving force behind the event was Johnny Depp (left), who galvanized Hunter's inner circle to build the weirdest monument ever erected to a writer. "Fuck you, Hunter," he joked one afternoon not long after Hunter died. "You want a Gonzo Cannon? We'll give you a Gonzo Cannon."

Coleridge's epic poem "Kubla Khan." Steadman gave a rambling, hilarious toast, reading some of Hunter's lengthy faxes to him over the years, including one that demanded an immediate loan of \$50,000 ("Keep your advice to yourself," Hunter instructed, "and send the money"). Ed

trolling the surrounding roads and woods. "Hunter liked to refer to Owl Farm as 'my heavily fortified compound in the Rockies,'" Wenner noted. "Well, today that's never been more true."

George McGovern, whose campaign for president Hunter covered for *ROLLING STONE*, remembered him as "a man of deep goodness and justice and compassion and idealism." Sheriff Braudis, a longtime friend, gave a heartfelt speech recounting how he had helped Hunter out of various jams over the years. He encouraged those present to keep Hunter's wife and son and grandson in their thoughts before concluding, "Goodbye, Hunter... motherfucker."

Juan gave the final ceremonial tribute to his father. "So here we go," he said. "Let's do this thing... Let's shout, let's laugh, cry... Let's honor the great fallen warrior. Let us spread his ashes on our farm... Let us celebrate power with power. The king is dead. Long live the king!"

The previous week, Anita had flown to Pennsylvania to deliver her husband's remains — kept in an oak box draped with an American flag — to Zambelli Fireworks. The company loaded the ashes into ten mortar shells packed with gunpowder. Anita wrote "I love you" on each shell, which were then driven by armored car to Woody Creek and packed into the waiting cannon.

Now the moment had arrived. As "Spirit in the Sky" began blasting over the loudspeakers, even the handful of drunks in attendance sobered up. The massive drapey enfolding the monument was slowly pulled away, revealing the Gonzo fist at the top of the tower — two feet taller than the Statue of Liberty — a multicolored peyote button pulsating at its center. Ed Bastian, a close friend, read part of the sacred text of the Heart Sutra in Tibetan, and a troupe of Japanese drummers began a choreographed ritual. As the drums stopped, champagne flutes were passed around. Then, at 8:46 P.M., more than thirty fireworks rocketed high above Owl

managed to find someone to pull the words off the Internet. Struggling to hear over the blare of the music, he wrote the lyrics out in longhand by the light of the moon. Lovett and Amram then took the stage to perform the song, with Depp on guitar and Hunter's brother Davison on vocals.

Depp, bouncing on his heels, had a wicked grin on his face. He — along with Juan and Anita — had a right to celebrate. They had bucked the tiger and won. Everybody knew the tower and its ghostly beacon were temporary. But for the moment Hunter's family and friends indulged in a well-earned collective pride. They, better than anyone, knew that Hunter was no saint. Far from it. Not even close. At times, in fact, his veins seemed to fill with snake blood. But he was always bursting with kinetic passion and an indomitable prankster vision. Somehow it was hard to mourn his wildly vibrant sixty-seven years with a one-ton Gonzo fist in the sky and Lovett onstage singing "If I Had a Pony" and raw oysters and Gonzo-embazoned chocolates being handed out like Halloween candy. The party lasted until dawn, with Bill Murray cutting a fine figure on the pavilion's dance floor and others serenading an inflatable sex doll until the sun finally rose and fatigue settled in and everybody drifted out of Owl Farm full as ticks from food and booze.

As I left the farm with George McGovern and Anita Thompson to deliver a tape of the ceremony to an Aspen bar where hundreds of Hunter's fans were convened, we stared out the bus window, and there it was, from three miles down the valley — the green orgiastic fist, lighting up the mountain. Jay Gatsby's green light at the end of the pier had moved west to Hunter S. Thompson Territory. It glowed in the darkness like a long-ago lighthouse on loan from Haight-Ashbury, blinking a sentimental farewell, a bizarre hallucinogenic symbol soon to flicker out forever.

Suddenly, the shuttle bus grew hushed.

**** His ashes fell like snow.
Hunter was all around us. ****

Bradley of CBS News described encountering Hunter's work when he bought *ROLLING STONE* at a military PX in Vietnam and eventually growing to trust the notoriously erratic writer enough to allow Hunter to shave his head with a Bic razor. Colleen Auerbach — the mother of Lis! Auman, a young Colorado woman who was being released from prison after Hunter raised questions about her case — read a letter from her daughter. "Hunter saved Lis! life," Auerbach said. "Not a day goes by that I don't thank him and wish him love."

Jann S. Wenner, the founder and editor of this magazine, called Hunter "the DNA of *ROLLING STONE*." He also commented on the scores of black-clad security officers pa-

Farm, bursting in the night sky illuminated by a nearly full moon. The cannon atop the tower fired, and Hunter's ashes fell over the assembled guests like gray snow, "Mr. Tambourine Man" blaring from the sound system on cue. Hunter was literally all around us now, a destroying angel whooping it up with one final Rebel Yell. I glanced at Hunter's compatriots: Kerry looked curious, McGovern sad, Lovett silent. "I have never seen an event like this," whispered Harry Dean Stanton. "And I'm old. Very old."

Afterward, when the moment came to sing "My Old Kentucky Home," the performers discovered that no one knew the lyrics. George Tobia, Hunter's friend and attorney, whipped out his cell phone and

You could hear the wheels humming down the lonesome Colorado blacktop road. Our transport had become as solemn as an empty church. No human murmurs or casual asides, just stony silence. As the highway turned sharply right, putting the phantasmagoric Gonzo fist out of view, the collective fear of everyone on board was that we had all entered the No More Fun Zone. The Green Light was temporary. The sorcerer was truly gone. The ashes had settled, and only the dark shadow of the valley remained.

An award-winning historian, DOUGLAS BRINKLEY edited two volumes of Hunter S. Thompson's correspondence, "The Proud Highway" and "Fear and Loathing in America."

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