

# STREET CAKE

experimental writing magazine

## issue 100



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## On the Run

I am *on the run*.

I haven't slept well since the doctor said I had six months to live. She didn't say why it was six months, not more or less, but I don't recall my asking. I might have quit my job and enjoyed what was left of my life, maybe traveled some. I've never been to New Jersey, or the original one, but all the money I had, including the cash I hid under my mattress, wouldn't cover half a month's rent. So, I kept working.

I was the janitor working the night shift on the night of the high school prom, Friday, June 25, 2004, an unseasonably cool evening. I was wearing a barn jacket, a gift from old McDonald, no, not the one you're thinking of, when, as I approached, a mop fell out of the broom closet, or was it a dead high schooler, or a drunk one? Under normal circumstances, it would not have been hard to tell, but given my prognosis and my not sleeping well, I wasn't thinking straight. Booze may also have been a factor.

The students at Jefferson High were known more for their pranks than their smarts, and the broom closet caper might have been one of them. Legend has it that their reputation for mischief began the day the school opened in '93. The student body president broke into the library. Stole the book there. The student body was a girl named Jen. Very pretty. During her fifth, sixth, and seventh years of high

school, she was voted prom queen. As for the purloined book, no one noticed but me.

I've never so much as hurt a fly, fly paper excluded, but that night I was overcome by an impulse to do harm.

Whatever fell from the closet, I shoved it headfirst into a steel bucket of soapy water, sloshing some of it on the gray linoleum floor- and on my new Tims. Don't know why I wore them. I lifted it as easily as if it were made of papier-mâché. Turned it over as if it were a baton; held it down until I was sure it was dead, or if not sure, this was my first try, until I had the feeling it was. Whatever it was wasn't moving. Of course, it wasn't moving to begin with; it just fell, but I didn't think about that until later.

Satisfied, I turned and ran.

I wasn't in the best of spirits that evening. I didn't know how I would take the news of dying until I got it. It seemed like bad news to me; my bad news- no one to blame. But have you ever been in an argument with your significant other, one that starts off calm, but as it goes on, the injustice of it all becomes apparent, even if they're right?

You don't want to hear it, you don't want to be there, you're sorry you met, and then it creeps up on you. How it happens is how it happens, but you're getting angrier and angrier. That might have happened to me. I'm not going to live, so why should you? Of course, I might have drowned a mop.

I left the floor dirty, a salary-docking offense, in a spotless career. Get it—a janitor with a spotless career. That night, I hitched a ride to New York City. Eventually, I got picked up by a man who might have been legally blind, judging by the way he leaned over the steering wheel, and drove slow. His wife just died, said he was going to the Statue of Liberty, gave me a fiver when I left.

"Have one on me," he said.

I used the bill to buy my first meal of the day.

Most nights, I slept on the street, in the subway, or in a hospital emergency room, but almost always in the loving arms of my own body. Some nights they'd say, "not tonight, dear," but only on the nights I've been drinking.

Once, I spent a rainy-day panhandling, and at the end of fifteen hours, I had enough for a cheeseburger and fries, and then along came this cat. I don't know where she came from, but I sensed she was hungry, so I shared my burger with her. I kept the fries. When she was through, she got up and left.

I suppose some somebody, somewhere sometimes finds doing good its own reward. Not me. I fed the cat. My reward? I got to even things out. Even Stephen.

The next day, I thought about it.

Who was I kidding?

Didn't take long for me to realize that panhandling wasn't my talent, so I did odd jobs. I wasn't looking for steady work; I wanted to

keep on the move. The oddest? I shaved the bearded lady. She was retired at the time. We met at a bar in Greenwich Village. I was the handyman. At closing time, with breasts that loosely resembled bananas in a supermarket package, she made it clear she wanted more than a shave, but I kept it zipped until she met my price.

"And 98 cents," I said.

Don't judge unless you've been there.

Shave cost extra.

The thing is, I'm pretty sure it was just a mop, but I've been on the run since then. Been two years now. I wonder if I'm missed. By who? No wife. No kids. I might have married, but I had the misfortune of dating sensible women, so I never got the chance. They must have sensed I did not have the personality to acquire a prize that takes a lifetime of nurturing to keep. As far as upkeep is concerned, it's enough I had to put gas in the car I used to have. I don't know why they repossessed it. Didn't they check on the people they gave loans to? And the doctor. I guess she was wrong about my dying, or not wrong about my dying, I'm sure I am, that's the downside of being born, but wrong about when.

I've been troubled since I drowned the mop, or the possibly drunk, high schooler, or the dead person I happened to come upon. There were days when I replayed the evening, the image appearing uninvited. What I remember most is the bucket of water. I imagined the worst, and I couldn't shake it off. The feeling was guilt, guilty guilt,

the take-me-away kind. If I knew how, I would have removed my conscience; it's nothing but a troublemaker. It's like having a sister who tells on you. I'm sure parents know they will be taught to marry off. Maybe that's where the expression give away the bride came from. Still, there was nothing I could do about it if I did it, and if I did, punishing me wouldn't help her. Besides, let's be fair about it, who has the right to get even other than the person wronged?

I wish I knew for sure what happened. At least I think I do. I've heard it said to be careful what you wish for. Well, not heard it said, I heard that it was said.

The bad part was that I had no one to talk to. I kept it inside. That was difficult, as close to impossible as Adam was romantically close to Eve. I was not going to walk up to a stranger, friendly-looking or not, and tell them I committed a murder, or maybe I did. There could be repercussions. Could be an undercover cop. Could be one of the conscious ones.

The worst part was that my body was fighting with itself. We are part of the same, yet I felt uneasy because my conscience was bothering me. Well, sport, what if I ended it? Then where would you be? Six feet under. Would you like that?

Whatever happened, I can tell you it wasn't easy living in doubt, but then I had a realization as profound as one I ever made. Might have saved my life.

I'm not sure how I figured it out; maybe I didn't figure it out. Maybe it just came to me. Anyway, one night I'm sitting on this park bench passing the time, (I was thinking killing time, but I'm living with enough guilt), when I see this couple walking hand in hand, new love, I suppose, and I get to thinking about the women I knew and how they left me.

"Bye, Albert."

Some said that much, some just left.

Eventually, I got over them. The leaving part hurt. Always did. No matter how many times it happened, I always felt like I was jumbled inside. Doing fine before we met, she left, and I got jumbled inside. There ought to be a law.

I guess it was meant to be, the anxiety of living life as if on an elevator with frayed cables was gone. If that wasn't the exact feeling, it seemed close enough. Whatever it was, the Lord, why me, the feeling sorry for myself, the did I do it or not.

Like the leaves of autumn, they just went away.

## Taking the Twins to Lunch

I am so fascinated by them, my own family.  
I asked how often you think about dying,  
one said never  
the other said I carry a knife wherever I go but it's for other people.  
Mysterious near year they float  
tandem in the amniotic unseen,  
They scoff at each other's order.  
Their love language is to  
never see eye to eye.



## With or Without?

Professor Abrams stepped into the elevator and found Professor Shore standing by the bank of floor choices.

“History, I presume?” said Professor Shore.

“Thank you, Shirley,” said Professor Abrams. “And you’re English, five, if I remember.”

“Alzheimer’s hasn’t yet shot you in the head,” Shirley confirmed. “Yes, unfortunately, I get off before most people.”

“Not always. At least not in our day.”

“You’re very sweet, Frank. Welcome back to another year of teaching with periodic breaks for brie and chardonnay. How are you?”

“I’m mourning the loss of quotation marks.”

“Oh? Who did them in?”

“God damned elevator’s slower than Eve’s temptation and Adam’s first bite,” said Frank. “Joyce braked first, Cormac derailed them, and now everybody’s on board a runaway train.”

“Quite an august—but flawed—analogy.”

“From an historian’s literal perspective perhaps.”

“Still combative. Still writing?”

“Love that ‘still.’ Yes. Last piece in *Ploughshares*. Sent it in using naked dialogue.

Sans quotation marks.”

“I get it. Congrats,” Shirley said. “My latest’s in *American Scholar*. Whoopee.”

“Can we meet?”

“With or without quotation marks?”

--You decide, Frank said.

Wednesday. 3 pm. Ambassador East. Name, Curtain.

Your floor, professor.

**CLICHÉ**  
4 x 4

Wind can only whip  
or whistle. Only mouths  
or wounds can gape  
which only time heals.

beyond the border

your name written so small almost silent digital clues  
instead of letters an alphabet of bones pieces  
of abandoned stories sympathy cards  
from all those computer children left behind  
on a one way street facing the wrong way  
beyond the border the wild birds  
sound like piccolos playing  
out of tune



## DYSREGULATION

All of summer / bees dragging tallow  
across earthstars / dead clover / distorted  
blueprints / falling from stasis rapidly / retching /  
throat as a wound / fire out / rain / held in a goblet /  
body out of sync / disgorged moon / gone / disrupted /  
pulse / earth / uncovering / cords of lunular / do not  
wait / for the snow / you never understand / not even  
when we are lying / in the remnants of irises / words  
swallowed whole / mouths held open / for Lethe / you  
remember nothing / the next day / years from now /  
numbness in stages / wilderness / cold nettles / scars  
as bracken / solstice air / an attempt / to dispel  
nausea / trying to think / just the right amount /  
to solve the confusion / stop wondering / how to  
make / you love me / reasons / why there are  
small marks / most of it invisible / hushed up /  
unless / we say / too much / deprivation /  
punishment / evolution / that small dent  
of light / where moths ate away the glass

A scimitar falls on the  
unwary  
evening.

The moon chases  
receding  
bodies.

Silence

steps

on

needs

swells

on

nature

Poems as

we need,

sufferings

ongoing

loss

speaking

loved

diminishments

piecemeal  
trust

poems

weep

comfort

An erasure poem

Source:

Tess Gallagher, [\*Poems as a Reservoir for Grief\*](#)

(her text is in white font behind visible words)

## Eyes

air balloons sway  
 m*les* beh*nd* the lens  
 i had a friend whose sun set in turkey  
 optical illusion sl*de* away confusion  
 these guys sing from different hymn books  
 coll*de* backsl*de*  
 oculists optometrists & webcams  
 hum before their words escape &  
 gl*de* through the rippling n*ght-*  
 t*me* spectrum-optica of an eye's optics  
 they know  
 sm*lingly* know

orange str*pes* blue sk*es*  
 balloons take off or land  
 with baskets of glass eyes  
 an eyeball falls & rolls to a s*de*kick  
 a ballet dancer spins in wh*te*  
 says my head's heavy  
 as a box of rocks  
 the optic disc gapes in surpr*se*  
 scarlet sea anemones open w*de*  
 float in aqua sway s*deways*

ophthalmometry  
 casts their upbeat chat-up l*ne*  
 is the **O** br*ght* or dim better with l*ght* or  
 polar*sed* glass is the **O** best with this lens  
 or that i want to get out  
 with the two i brought in but  
 can't f*nd* them under  
 the tw*l*ght** outs*de*.

*Poet-itis; Inflammatory Condition of the Poet**\*always wash your hands after eating other people's poems\**

Distract! I have Other Poets in my head!

They retort:

Write down that you are hanging your head between your  
knees, write

about your cold feet, the way [expand, thesaurus in need]  
make you want to vomit!

They insist:

Tell the world you are depressed, depression is *trending*,  
you are *so* depressed the best thing happening  
is the blood in your head  
when you hang it.

Here come the Other Poets! *\*take notes\**

They want me to yap you how:

I chucked my log splitter in 15 twisted maples and 13 knotted  
pines—imagining each was a face of something I

hate = a place for elaboration hate about America right

now                    split!

hit!

repeat!

Final lines are on rise = let em' what what what

The Other Poets, *\*group of bawdy enemies*, give them  
more to run with—

corrupting in my head

implore me to tell you:

How *cathartic* log splitter felt, how sometimes

violence is a human vice,

so violence in the poem is *so vice* let's write

the most *awful*,

*twisted,*

*retaliation:*

sonnetshaikusconfessionsghazalsfreevers  
epilatedwoodpeckersfishermeneatingegg  
sarspoeticastwelvebarbluesgoldenshovels  
gravediggershaibunshotcrossbunssestina  
sabecedarianstrioletsblackteajohnlennon  
villanellesepicballadsodesauthoritarianis  
mbadtimegetaphonecallmentalacrostics  
yllabicversesbreakdownsekphrasticsshak  
espeareglosasstartagaincentos

I hang [words = I guess elaborate on this but not sure why  
it is anymore]  
my head???

These Other Poets—  
I'll let them  
talk.



WE ?MUST? ENLIST

I hesitate ⇔ a shy delay ∪ where many wait · —no— · Fill Out The Form.

↓ I too ↱

but ... but ... but ... it means

?????

:: :: - go but don't know the markup,

should I move ?????

- Yes, we're tangled

and hear a {mad} word [[‘freedom’]] : afraid

↓

↓

it will enslave me

→

in a lively vehicle

She “assigned”.

↓

The uneven panels : peach-flesh metal — partly plastic,

↓; hours unravel ↻ yet I can't see

where/while we go.

Sour Angels plan.

May we choose

↓?

our means for destruction?

*Woocho!!* These forms! 4 forms ∴ united :

each a different **DARKNESS** — all called “{ }light{ }”.

I look for a seat —→ arrival

whose

↓

a rival of leaving.

↓

stand / can't step / *a whirlwind* · breezeless — mind could replace mine!?

「The lady」 {takes my forms} — I choose no questions

for we never ↱ ↪ why hours repeat

and weeks continue.



christopher woods

## JUST BEFORE I HUNG UP THE PHONE

It was the seventh or eighth *I have no interest in what you're selling* call of the day, so I was in no mood to mess around.

When she said the Medical Alert system was absolutely free—which I knew it wasn't—I asked, "How long would it take to get it to me?"

And when she answered, "No more than five business days," I responded, "What day is today?"

"Today is Wednesday, December 3rd. Why do you ask?"

"Well... I'm planning on killing myself on Friday, the 5<sup>th</sup>, so I wouldn't get it in time."

"We could possibly get it to you sooner," she replied, just before I hung up the phone.