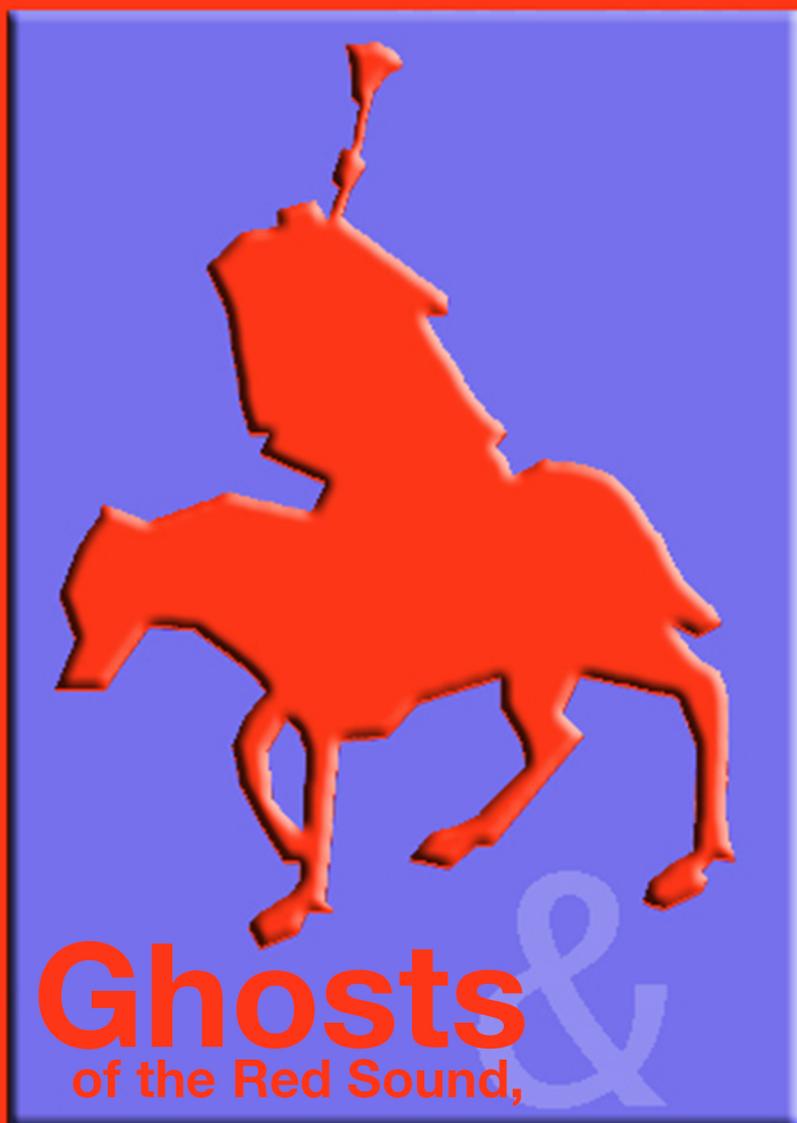


Vernon Howl



Other Stories

Glossoph
h t f e h R S
AND OTHER
STORIES

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Ghosts of
the
Red Sound

Ø

“Even if Megalamb had been a good guy,” my son breaks off. He can’t

finish the thought. I motion to Denise for two more. Joe slinks. His stool is like a pillar alone in the universe. He knows that he will eventually tire and fall off into nothing. So he doesn’t really care. Why should he.

“Here you go,” Denise says. Joe slides his fingers under the bottom of the wolf mask, under his chin. I really thought it was permanently affixed. But I feel indifferent that it’s not. He’s giving his actual face some air, I suppose. My son. Not a wolf. I can’t see his face.

“You know,” I’m scared to say what I’m about to say. “I didn’t finish watching the whole show. I missed the ending. I’m real sorry, Joe.”

“Show?” He’s upset. I have upset my suddenly adult son. “It was a movie.”

“It was certainly well-produced,” I say.

“It was a TV movie, but still a movie.”

“How long was it?”

“Two hours with commercials. Hour and a half without.”

“Oh.”

“You really didn’t watch the whole thing?”

“No.” I take a large sip of beer. “I thought there would be future episodes. And I could just, you know, pick up the plot again. At some point.”

“When did you tune out?”

“Well, let’s see. You were about seventeen. Maybe eighteen? You had just picked up that horse you got tied up outside. And you had a new weapon.”

“Weapon? I never had any weapon. You mean my horn?” I don’t know what he means. I want to be drunk and possibly asleep. I tell him, “The large metal thing. With the blue lasers.”

“Dad, that was a horn.” My son is disgusted. Even with a wolf mask on, his disgust is easy to see. I finish my drink. I search for Denise. Joe isn’t even half done with his. He abruptly stomps off his seat and goes outside. From the satchel slung to his horse he produces the thing from the TV show and comes back inside.

“This,” Joe says, aggressively shoving the apparatus within an inch of my face, “is my magic horn.” I reach out and touch the bell of the horn with one finger, as if I am telling the object to be quiet inside a cartoon. The object has yet to produce a sound in my presence, but this close, it does indeed look like a horn.

“But didn’t you shoot blue lasers out of this thing?”

“Those were sound vibes. In the movie galaxy, if your soul is not pure, music will subdue you. Sound is so rich and important that it has a color.”

“Why blue?” I ask him. I’m not sure why I’m curious, or if I really even am. Joe looks confused. I can’t believe his wolf face is not his real face. It is very emotive, very unique. I thought that his being in the movie universe meant that he got a new face, full-time. He sadly chuckles. I don’t know how anything works.

“You know,” he says, and then pauses to take a hearty sip of beer. “I don’t know.” I want to tell him that it’s alright if he can’t explain why the color of the sound from his magical space horn is the way that it is. “Some people,” he continues, “they have a red sound. And the red sound will kill you, kill anyone. If you have an instrument that makes a red sound, you have to wear special ear muffs. So, you know, you don’t die.” We both laugh. It’s forced and nervous laughter at a sad screenwriter’s expense. It feels pretty good, though, to laugh alongside my son. Even if the joke is not a joke. Joe goes on, “But imagine that? No one knows what the red sound sounds like.”

“Except for maybe ghosts,” I suggest. My son, through his wolf mask, smiles. Possibly for the first time in years. Possibly his wolf mask did that on its own. Maybe he doesn’t have a face.

∅

“Dad?” Joe stammers. Joe is drunk, more drunk than I am. I have consumed twice as much beer, but this is the case. This is where we are. I don’t think he has ever had alcohol before. Space travel and TV movies will do that to you. They will make you more normal than anything. I say, “Yes, son,” and I wait for his reply.

He’s slow at getting back to me. I wonder, if I rip his wolf mask off, if he’d ever forgive me. I don’t, though. I don’t rip his wolf mask off. I have forgotten what his face looked like. “How’s Mom doing, Dad?” he says. My little boy is so sad. He is probably thirty-seven years old.

“Well,” I tell him. I don’t really want to talk about this. “She’s fine. Still making those pancakes you love so much.”

The wolf in him says, “I never liked her sorry, burnt-ass pancakes,” but the boy doesn’t make this sound. It’s not easy to make out his

eyes under the mask, but they look to be shutting. They are wolf eyes shutting.

“Say,” I tell him. “Why don’t we get out of here. It’s getting late. Go back home, maybe get some food. How bout that, kid?” I touch him on the shoulder. It’s not firm or soft. It’s a grip that doesn’t know what it wants to be. I haven’t touched him since the morning he was born.

“Yeah,” Joe mumbles. “What?” He tries to stand. I grab his arm for real.

Before he crashes into the bar, I get my weight around and underneath him. He’s steady and let’s out a tiny grunt. I give Denise a wave. Everything is alright. She gives back a horribly annoyed snear. I have not paid my tab in weeks. As soon as we step outside, I see the horse. The horse is huge. It looks like a giant dog. It’s old and monstrous, mean and tired-looking. I don’t know what—

“Arrruuggghhhh!” The animal has me in its jaws. I now know it is not a horse, or any kind of animal I am familiar with. It is not of our earth. It belongs to the movies. It’s got me by the side and slamming me against the pavement. It looked so calm and peaceful on TV. It’s jaws clean have the length of my torso. They’re a yard long, like a crocodile. The neck muscles pump like a derrick. I feel blood and teeth and things

from my pockets falling onto the ground. At least 77¢ in pennies. Why do I carry so much small change around with me? Consciousness escapes me. But before it goes completely, I see my son Joe playing the heck out of his magic space horn. And I'll be damned if the vibes he's putting into the air aren't red. But maybe some of my blood has gotten in my eyes.

Ø

I wake up in the living room of our house. It's the house of a little boy with little boy toys scattered all over the carpet. On the couch, there's my wife and son. She's holding the wolf mask in her lap. He's telling her a story. The mask is off and I see his face. I see his lips move and I hear his voice. His face is my face.

I am in a state of dream paralysis and cannot move. So I just listen. I am in hell, potentially.

"Megalamb didn't want to hurt me," my boy explains. "He was just under a spell."

"I'm sure he was," Judy, my wife, tells him. Her voice is full of half-hearted interest. Her eyes might as well be bowling balls they're rolling so

hard. She strokes the fur of the wolf mask as if it's a cat or small dog between pulls on a long, mango-flavored cigarette. The room is very hazy. I didn't know she smoked, but it smells great.

"By the time I got back to Mount Hollandaise, to fetch my horn, Megalamb's henchmen had me surrounded. And Chad was yipping something fierce." This is the end of the show, the movie. I forget I'm paralyzed and just listen. It's a good story, probably. It doesn't make any sense like all the best stories do, at least. I assume Chad is the horse-thing that has immobilized me. What a name for such a beast. I am not sure if they say its name in the movie. I am intrigued. Maybe its name is Chad in real life too. They just use movie animals' real names a lot of the time, I feel, because animals are so dumb. Why am I not in the hospital? I am more interested in this than anything else that has happened in my entire life before this moment. I am the dumbest animal ever born. I'm not sure why I didn't finish watching the movie. I never don't finish watching movies. "Megalamb was flying above them," he says. "Kind of off in the distance. He was just watching. There had been a sub-spell that allowed him to do that. To fly, I mean. Megalamb never flew before, or not that I knew of." Joe reaches down to the coffee table to

grab a cup of milk. He has to shift his entire body. His arms are so short. The swallowing sound is thick and obnoxious. I bet the red sound is not too dissimilar. He continues, "The funny thing is, all the henchmen looked like Dad." Joe talks with his hands. He's maybe 5'7". It's unnerving, this scene. I can't even hear him anymore. I just see a stump and two absurdly small limbs flapping about. He's getting milk on the couch and Judy doesn't care. She's just puffing mango smoke. I hate this. I want to do child abuse on him. Shut the fuck up, boy! "So what I do is I just blow into my horn. As soon as I get it, I turn around and let it go.

"But one of the henchmen stuck his finger in the end. And this henchman is absorbing all the sound into his body. He starts to shake like he's getting electrocuted. He starts to get red all over. And I'm thinking to myself, geez, this is odd. I've never done anything like this before. This guy's turning into a huge pile of Jello, haha. I got this horn when I was seventeen and, in twenty years of aging, all it's ever done is shoot out blue vibes. So why is this man glowing red?

"It was quite the weird occurrence. I didn't know what to think. That henchman eventually died or passed out. He looked like Dad

used to when he used to drink and got so angry. He even passed out like Dad.

“Although, obviously, this just made the rest of them really motivated to get me. And they had me tackled before I could play my horn again. A couple of the henchmen pulled the dead henchman behind some bushes into a cave. I watched them while some others tied me up. All the while, I could hear the whooshing noise which accompanied Megalamb’s flying. He was closer now. I don’t know what happened to my horn, or Chad. The animal actor who played Chad was actually a dog named Rodeo. The special FX department did a great job making him like some kind of crocodile-horse. He was kind of an emotionless dog. Almost braindead. He had been trained to be that way in animal acting school. I always felt bad for him.

“When they got me to my feet, I looked at Megalamb, and I said, ‘Hey Megalamb, what gives?’ He didn’t answer. This is when I knew for sure he was under a spell. I could see it in his eyes. They dragged me into the cave behind the bushes and started to beat me up.

“This cave was the evil fortress. We never knew the name of the enemy we were fighting, but I could sense this was their domain. I could feel it and hear it in the vibes of that place.

Below, in a river of lava, thousands of children floated by on rafts. Each of them had their own raft and their own evil lyre. They twanged at the evil lyres as if they were demented banjos. The sound was a deep orange, as close to red as you can hear without dying. It swirled around in a coarse smoke. I could barely see a thing. Could barely breathe.

“They strung me up on a pillar opposite an identical pillar on a long thin altar. To the other pole they tied the dead henchman who still looked like Dad. The living henchmen formed two lines on each side of the altar. Megalamb hovered down into the center, halfway between the pillars. He turned and looked at the dead red man. Then he turned and looked at me.

“He kind of knuckled his toes into the surface of the altar. As if he had to go to the bathroom. Then he abruptly shouted, ‘Wolf Boy!’ which was my character’s name. Nobody called me Joe. The children’s songs from the river became increasingly difficult to hear, the orange air almost impossible to see through. He screamed again, louder, ‘Wolf Boy!’ I screamed back, ‘What?’

“He said, ‘Wolf Boy, I’m under a magic spell. The evil without a name is controlling me now. Do you understand?’ I told him I did. He

went on. “The evil without a name is blind, Wolf Boy. It’s all around us. It can only hear. And it can only hear in the colors of the deepest orange, almost red. It can not hear voices. It can not hear us speaking right now. Do you understand?’ Again, I told him that I did.

“At this point, Megalamb waved his arms in the air. This was a signal for all the henchmen to dive into the lava. They did so in a uniform, synchronized style. First the one row, then the other. When their bodies hit the river they transformed into bellowing, magical fish. Their vocalizations gelled with the sounds from the lyres. I only know the combination wasn’t quite red because I thought I was alive. It was actually kind of a lovely song.

“Then, Megalamb said

Art Class

El met Jack at a very weird party. There was graffiti on the walls inside the house but all the graffiti was just art and didn't look like graffiti at all. I know this because I saw the walls. El showed the art class a video of the party. She presented it as art. It was art. The house was so strange, filled with a manic energy, spidery young people in bright clothing. I longed to know strange people who knew about strange houses like that. The house and all the people in it, including but not especially El, looked like they were waiting on a monster to come and squish their skulls between its paws, or maybe a form of enlightenment to show itself in validation of their actions, to break down the walls and eat their hearts, and that's exactly the same thing. They all looked so miserable. But their tired sadness looked like bliss, to me. Like a funny form of freedom. The person who can truly understand irony is already dead.

El said to the class, "This is where I met my boyfriend, Jack. Well, he's not my boyfriend anymore." She said the second part in a mock reluctant tone, like she was flirting with the group as a whole, like the group was a single boy she wanted to fall in love with her. I couldn't tell

if she meant it or not, and that was probably the point.

A week or two went by and I noticed El had a nose ring. It wasn't easy to notice. The piercing in the flesh between her lower lip and chin kind of owned your attention, owned her face. Not that she didn't have a pretty face. But all other face piercings didn't stand a chance in that game of attention.

I always went to class, but I didn't say much. I guess I tried to look cool. El didn't need to look cool. She looked the way you look when you obviously are. Her friend Kathy was annoying but she didn't mean to be. It seemed like she didn't mean to be. She was attractive and tiny, Kathy. She was the 'manic pixie dream girl' aesthetic and there's no getting around that. She was only slightly larger than an actual faery. She bummed a cigarette off me on three or four occasions. Once she even stuck around and we had an awkward conversation.

"What do you think of Dan?" she asked me. I told her I thought Dan was pretentious and untalented. I took a calculated risk in saying that. I actually liked Dan's work, a little bit, maybe a lot. She agreed, though. She said, "Dan is the worst." We both fake-chuckled. Being alive is very weird and challenging.

I didn't ever want to know Jack, but that's how it goes. The last thing I ever said to Jack was, "That green looked stupid." But it came off more like a question when I said it. That was the last thing he ever heard. Not counting the fighting sounds that is. "That green looked stupid?" Maybe.

As the semester went on, El, in a natural way, started to look less cool. This, in turn, made her look slightly more cool. I want to say I loved her. I loved her? I love her. I was extremely sorry to learn that the person who stole from my friend was her boyfriend, or ex-boyfriend, Jack, the Jack from the weirdo party on the video that was art. I can't even recall how I figured it out, though I wish I never had. I don't like complicated things. Well, maybe I do.

Kathy was looking tired. Her series of oil paintings based on the design of the New York City subway map were not going well.

I skipped the opening for the thesis project at the art school's gallery to eat a giant plum on a hill. I was drunk. The plum maybe seemed gigantic because I was drunk? We had killed Jack the night before, Greg and I.

El was regular size. She dressed like a hipster, but I guess I like that look. One night I

dreamed of her. It was a sex dream, yes. It was more frustrating than good as those often are.

After the sex part, I dreamt that a mysterious child gave me the giant plum at the base of the hill and that I hadn't bought it at the grocery store a few days earlier. I wanted to believe, now that Jack was dead and gone, that El would take up with me. Kathy, as a tiny, fluttering faery, landed on my shoulder. But she was a mosquito now. She just kept getting smaller and more buglike, little Kathy did.

Kathy said, "Talk to me." I said, "My internet is not working. Verizon is sending a guy on Tuesday. They can't send a guy any sooner." Kathy's eyes lit up in understanding, each one of her ten thousand microscopic insect eyes. I looked into each and every one of them. "I knew there was something special about you," I said. Or maybe she said that. I was drunk. She smiled.

The night before the opening, the night Greg and I killed Jack, the art class had a final critique. Inside the gallery we walked around and everyone talked about their pieces. I got really nervous when it was my turn, like I always do. I get nervous thinking about how everyone is perceiving my nervousness. It feels like this is impossible when I think about it later. But this is exactly what nervousness is. It's easy to

understand. Like cancer or getting your head blown off by a gun.

We had no intentions of killing Jack, or even hurting him. We only wanted to take back what he stole. But then he started acting crazy. He seemed to be on very serious drugs. It was two against one. Things happen. Skulls fracture. That sort of thing.

Not an hour before, El had bemoaned the shade of green used for the background of her final piece. Her piece was a series of enlarged ID cards, which used fingerprints instead of photos. At one point she said, kind of under her breath, "That was Jack's idea." She was talking about the green background. I thought about Jack then, knowing I was about to see him. But I didn't think about him dead or injured. At least I think I didn't think of him like that. My subconscious might have thought of him like that. Bad, subconscious, bad!

The boy who might have given me the plum was like a charred stump of wood. He had on a red and white plaid shirt and grey pants.

"I suppose you'll want to suck my blood now," I said to mosquito Kathy. "No," she replied. "Not necessarily?" She looked at the giant plum. I could barely hold it with one hand. "This?" I

asked. "Want some of this giant plum, mosquito Kathy?"

"Well," she said. "I haven't been a mosquito for very long. I suppose it's worth a shot." I held out the plum with both hands. It looked like I was asking for communion at a Catholic church. Except I had a giant plum resting on my palms and not an empty space where the Body of Christ is supposed to go. Kathy began to suck. She looked satisfied enough. I could feel her mosquito mouth sucking through the fruit in my hands. It seemed unlikely but it was so. The boy at the bottom of the hill winked at me. I winked back. Let's call that boy, John-John.

"Kathy?" I asked. "Yes, Ray?" she replied, barely looking up from sucking on the plum. "What type of animal is El?" I wasn't mad that she called me Ray, which isn't my name.

She continued to suck up plum juice, clearly thinking about the question. She paused and offered a miniature belch. The air smelt of a mosquito plum juice burp. Then she said, "A fox. El is definitely a fox."

The thing that Jack had stolen was an external hard drive. It had nothing on it because Greg had only recently bought it. It was brand new.

$$U_n - O_h$$

Asher Wax had just finished the first draft of his third novel, *The Trial of Old Zoo Joe*,

when Un-Oh stubbed his foot on the uneven temple steps he had been meaning to fix. And there it was! The contents of Un-Oh, his beloved piñata, sixteen years old and still fully intact, unbroken for so long. The contents finally came spilling out onto the marble floors of Htefjaf, the holy place they called home. Dollhouse furniture. “Who knew, Un?” Asher asked his best friend. “Seems pretty random. That all this time, inside of you, was just... dollhouse furniture.”

Un-Oh sort of gripped his front right foot, now a gaping hole, with his three unhindered appendages in an awkward animal seat, the kind of odd position a fictional quadruped inhabits when they land on their butt after a decade and half of constant levitation, the only comedic and appropriate lynching, the piñata’s life. Un-Oh's form was that of a deranged pony. His head looked more like a dog. But his soul was a million years old and he might have been a God (according to one of Asher's flawed theories).

“I’ve split open!” Un-Oh screamed. “Ash, help!” Asher ignored his friend's cries and

scooped up the dollhouse furniture into a satin sack. Over the course of the next few weeks, he methodically got top dollar for each piece on eBay. It turns out they were antiques and the market for highly collectible dollhouse furniture was booming. Soon he'd acquire enough money to successfully bribe his publisher, Shoop House, to get the new novel into print ASAP. (They had grown weary after the sales of his second book, *We Rb*—pronounced "we are flat"—went down the toilet.)

All the while, Un-Oh cried and cried. Asher Wax got fed up with the racket and locked him in the basement. He couldn't deal with it. Between selling on eBay and working on his novel, he was drained. Un was on his second week in captivity when he discovered a portal to another dimension under the water heater.

He jumped in.

It was the most magnificent world, all neon shades of blue and hot pink, and everything in it was happy. He was so caught up in the instant happiness that he didn't realize his leg was fixed. He was whole, free, no longer a twisted-looking pony tethered to a string but an elegant show dog. His belly was full of air, no prizes or candy in this dimension. You didn't need that kind of stuff to feel good here.

He looked around for other beings. Everything seemed to be alive with light but nothing was living. There were glowing toy owls dangling from the trees but they only beeped and whirred. "Hello friend," Un said to one. "Hello... buddy?"

He kept walking, frolicking really. It just felt good to move. He came upon a pretty stream with a raft floating upon it, serene and welcoming, as if it had been waiting on the water for a century or two, just for Un-Oh.

Ø

Meanwhile, back in the old world, his pal and former master Asher Wax was not doing so well. The new novel had stunk up the joint worse than the last one. He was a professional failure and fast becoming a personal one, main-lining a new designer drug straight into his veins, a bucket at a time. "Where's that miserable creature!" He shouted. It had been a few months since he'd locked Un-Oh away.

He stormed open the door and descended the basement stairs. "Where are you, you filthy beast!"

Un-Oh was gone of course. And Asher could not see the portal because his soul was impure.

He had received Un as a gift on his tenth birthday. He threw a fit when the party guests tried to beat it with a broom handle. “It’s alive!” He screamed. His parents—a lovely, loving couple named Ashley and Judd—intervened. A week after the party, they brought him in for psychological counseling.

The doorbell rang. Asher wasn’t expecting company. He rushed up the stairs and straight into the room where he kept the drugs. **A quick hit. Then answer the door. Stay cool, bro.** He was so strung out.

“Who’s there?”

“Asher, open up.” It was his agent Melinda Brown-Butterworth.

“I’ll do just that but I need you to recite the pray first, darling.”

The prayer was enclosed in lamination and taped to the front doors of Htefjaf, which wasn’t technically a palace but a mansion in the center spot of a cul de sac in a suburb of Chicago.

“The Prayer for Htefjaf” was also the opening text of his extremely successful first novel, also titled *Htefjaf*. The “H” was silent,

according to Asher, and it was pronounced “Tef-Jaf.”

“Please... just do it,” Asher groveled.

“What are you selling sneakers,” Melinda quipped. **She was a fast one. Maybe *she's* the sneaker salesman. Or saleswoman. Nike... Just do it. What the fuck.**

“Haha,” said Asher. They both chuckled for real when he opened the door and embraced. “Gimme some good news, MBB. What’s snapping?”

“Wish I could, Ash. I really do. But I think you know what time it is.”

Asher knew. The punishment for having two flop books in a row was death and Asher had until the end of the month to turn himself in or else he would be hunted down on a popular reality TV show where they hunted down unwilling convicts, tickled them non-stop for seven weeks straight after they’d been captured, and then made them become the hunters on future episodes of the same show. A fate worse than death, no doubt.

“There’s really no getting out of this one, is there?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Melinda.

Asher dreamt of taking so much of the designer drug he was hooked on that it would

kill him, but the stuff was advertised as impossible to overdose on. Just his luck.

Ø

In the other dimension, Un-Oh floated on a magic river. But he soon began to realize that the magic was black, and the shininess of this place was merely a mirage. He was soon going to have to confront everything, every aspect of reality. He was heading to the *real* temple.

A voice began to speak from the sky. It descended down, booming, and alive inside echoes on the surface of the water.

It was the voice of God. She said,

Un-Oh. I need to speak with you. But I need for you to hear me and not yourself speak. If you speak you will kill me and then you will die. You will drown in the water. You will become waterlogged and die. It will hurt. The only thing keeping you afloat is my voice. But if you speak

above my voice I will become every drop of water and we will both die. In one half-hour we will arrive at the temple. The real temple. The temple is called Brooklynn. Like the real Brooklyn but not the one you're thinking of. This is the Brook. My wife's name is Lynn. She keeps the palace nice. This Brook leads to Lynn. So that is the name of the holy temple. The first thing you did wrong was think of that place. The second thing you did wrong was give it a name. When we constructed the official replica in Htefjaf, we knew it wasn't going to be perfect. But the lies you committed to paper need to be addressed. You polluted so many people's brains. Now there is a man on Earth who is being made to pay for your crimes. You can still help him, though. If you listen. Listen and don't speak.

Ø

Asher got in the back of Melinda's SUV. She would be getting a medal and an accommodation from the government for aiding in this passive surrender.

“I know you're doing what you need to do, MBB. I'm not mad at you.” They smiled at each other for a little too long and she swerved off the road into a herd of mad cows. The impact of the crash hadn't killed her, but she was too incapacitated to fend off the mad cows. So they ate her alive.

Asher was at a crossroads. He hadn't left the mansion in years and he didn't know these roads. Chicago was just farmland now but, after the law changed the game for imprisoned animals, he had to watch his back. In fact, this scenario was the exact plot of *Old Zoo Joe*. A common man made to survive outside in the world of mad livestock and hunters. This was why the book failed. The hunters took umbrage. And they controlled everything. They would never let a commoner defeat them... *with ideas*. It was a dangerous book. And not just because it wasn't a bestseller.

In the book, the main character, Joe, goes to a zoo. All the animals we have never eaten in

the entirety of human history have evolved and banded together. They have created language and can even communicate between species. They still feed on other animals, the mad cows, the mad goats, the mad chickens, and so on. Only the pigs have evolved past a state of madness and stupidity. The pigs walk on two legs and have opposable thumbs. Along with the dolphins, who control the waterways, they rule massive swaths of the world they continue to call zoos. Calling them zoos is a big-time “fuck you” to the humans in the way that words and ideas are appropriated across many forms of culture to mean the opposite or represent something defiant. The premise for the book was all non-fiction and most of the time people don't want to hear about what they think they already know about the things that are real and true.

While encounters, usually squabbles over hunting grounds, are a constant occurrence. There hasn't been a war in centuries. In the book, Joe bands together with the biggest zoo, which is really just all of Canada. Together, side by side with the animals, they are able to takeover the entire United States. And turn it into a zoo.

In the epilogue, they are defeated by international forces and Joe is put on trial for war crimes. But this ending wasn't good enough.

Asher had tacked it on to appease the masses (by request of his publisher) and it felt that way. The masses are sometimes not as stupid as they seem, or perhaps... more so.

After fending off a few mad goats with a stick, Asher came upon a pig. "Hey buddy," Asher called. The pig immediately discharged his stun-gun, striking Asher down in a numb lump. When he came to, the pig was snout-to-nose, furious and confused.

"You don't look like a hunter, boy," she said.

"I'm not," Asher said. "Could I... borrow your phone?" The pig laughed. She had seen a lot of weird, sad humans, mostly inept hunters sweeping the farmlands, but this was different. "Why the hell not," she said. "What's your name?"

"Asher." She handed him her cellphone. "What's yours?"

"Kathy. Make it quick."

In the receiver, Asher heard a recording he hadn't heard in a long time: "You've reached the offices of Wax & Wax, MD. Professional & trusted psychological counseling for delusional children..." He ended the call and returned the phone.

"What's a commoner doing out here anyway? What is it that you do?"

"I'm a writer."

"Oh, really? Written anything I might know?"

"Maybe," Asher wasn't sure if the animals read, or cared to read. Asher himself had never read a book after he learned how to write. "Um... my book *Hteffaf* was pretty popular... I don't know."

Kathy's jaw dropped beneath her snout. It was hard for Asher to tell what emotions she was experiencing because she was a pig. "You need... You need to come with me."

Asher's prospects weren't exactly plentiful—hell, he'd been a dead man just minutes before—so he went along. "We've been looking for you. You know that, right?"

"No?" Asher said, perplexed.

Death

I have nearly died 100

times. The first time I was only a little boy. I was doing graffiti on my neighbor's house. Writing "666" in black spray paint all day and all night long. My neighbor didn't appreciate this so he came out with a hatchet and started swinging it near my face. He got me pretty good. I have the craziest scar on my face to show for it.

At night, I sometime sleep in the lawn like an animal because I like to look up at the stars. They're pretty. I know they're just other suns and I know that they could burn my neighbor to a crispy piece of meat if he ever somehow got up there real close to them and that wouldn't be so bad because he is a mean person who cut my face with a hatchet but they are also real beautiful and important to the galaxy as a whole even if each one by itself seems a little boring. I have 17 sons of my own now. I would like to make as many sons as there are stars in the sky but that is impossible. When it was appropriate, I sent them all out on their own adventures to squash their own bad neighbors and raise their own children and we can look to the water or we can look to the sky for answers to our most important question. But we can never look down.

We can never stop being who we truly are. I think you know already where I like to look.

The next time I almost died I was in college. It was college itself that almost killed me. I drank too much in those days and one time, because every college is in Florida now, I fell into a gator pit. The gators were not too happy to see me or maybe they were too happy to see me, if you catch my drift. Because they tried to eat me! I didn't take too kindly to them trying to eat me so I ate them instead. Gator meat tastes just like chicken, people say. The pressure to be a success can cause a devastating stress in the young adult psyche, other people say. No one has ever said that "gator meat tastes like chicken" and also that "the pressures to be successful can be deadly" until now. I am the first person to say both.

So you want to know about the 3rd time I almost died? Let me tell you about number 3. I was 38 years old and I was down on my luck like you wouldn't believe. Everything was going wrong. My wife had left me and she was having sexual intercourse with the local dog trainer, a real piece of work asshole if you ask me. And the dog trainer's dogs all hated me and smelt my crotch like I was some sort of reeking menace when it was really their owner's crotch they

should've been looking in the eyes, and sniffing. They also peed on me. It made visiting my sons a drag. So, like I said, I was down on my luck. I wandered towards the train tracks and laid down on them. Not the best place to rest but it wasn't a suicide attempt. I just thought that, because my back was hurting in those days due to the blues of my wife's infidelities, the metal rails would do wonders for my spine and interior back parts. So anyway, the train comes and goes right over the top of me. I would not recommend trying this on your local train tracks, though, because I'm not sure how similar all trains and train tracks are but the one in my town was good for this sort of thing and it just rushed right over my head. It was actually kind of cool.

So that's the 3rd time I almost died but I won't be going into the other instances, not by number anyway. They will probably come up because they are defining moments in my life of course, but I'm not going to go out of my way to tell you about them. I never saw the Grateful Dead play because I am too young and also I hate the Grateful Dead. But it's probably a good enough band name. Being dead probably beats being alive. And an almost-dying story is never as good as an actually-dying one. "To live to tell about it?" Why bother.

What do I do for a living? Well, I sell insurance. It's not the sexiest job but it pays the bills and put all my kids through college. My kids had a real hard time in college and actually half of them died in college because it was so hard. Like father like sons. It was really sad for me and my family to see all those kids dying in college and, on top of it, they died weird deaths too. Like my son, Jim. He fell into a vat of hot oil in the cafeteria because he wanted to deep fry himself. He wanted to dunk himself in honey mustard and eat himself. He liked junk food. What can you say.

Another thing about me that is pretty interesting is that I am a Satanist. I worship Satan. I love pizza and making pentagrams out of the pepperoni and I love worshiping the devil and doing satanic rituals. Instead of Christmas, I celebrate a Devil Christmas where there is no Santa and only a devil in a Santa suit. He looks just like Santa but with the face and hands of a devil instead. My sons attempted to rebel against this tradition and cried and pleaded but I really do rule the roost and what I say goes. You may not know this about me but I can be stern and aggressive when I need to be.

When I was little, my mother give me a fork. It was an antique fork. She told me to only

eat pork with this fork. But I'm a vegetarian. So I gave the fork to this friend of mine who I knew loved to eat bacon. This friend put bacon on everything, including non-food things like the dashboard of her car and bacon bits sprinkled onto wildflowers that grew on the fence in her backyard. She loved the smell of bacon. I told this friend that she can only use this fork to eat pork. And the friend thanked me very much. She said, "Thank you for this pork fork, friend." I still think about this friend and wonder if she's using the fork to eat pork. Who knows.

Sometimes when I'm feeling low I like to go down to the local mall and just wander around like a lunatic. I don't buy anything except ice cream and I scream loud obscenities at children. Occasionally, I do shoplift. I've been arrested in this mall more times than I can count on my two hands. I've been arrested 12 times.

If you want to know something, just ask. Like, for example, my favorite store at the mall is the one that sells plaid cinnamon rolls. I thought this was a weird invention at first because who wants to eat fabric, but they're actually really good and they look fantastic from a fashion point of view. I actually took to creating watercolor paintings of my favorite plaid cinnamon rolls, like the yellow and blue one, what a magnificent

beauty. One day maybe they will have plaid other types of food as well. We can only hope and dream and pray for things like this. I pray to the devil himself for plaid spaghetti nearly every day.

I once slipped on a banana peel like in the movies. I fell down a well. If you're wondering if it was difficult to go from a *banana peel slip* straight into a *fall down a well*, well, let me tell you, it was. I lived down at the bottom of that well for nearly 2 decades. At the bottom of the well I wrote many good novels. I won't say that they are great novels, but they're pretty good. I think I wrote over 400 novels down there.

My literary agent had a hard time selling the well novels. Mostly because they were all about people getting stuck down a well and their subsequent efforts and exploits trying to get out. Almost every single sentence in each of the novels was a variation of, "Help I'm in a well!" Something along those lines. Write what you know. That's my motto. I fired that literary agent and now I'm a huge success. I ended up self-publishing 247 of the well novels. They were all *New York Times* Best Sellers. It was terrific supplementary income, to be honest.

One of the reasons I am so conflicted about the Grateful Dead is because my father is

Jerry Garcia. A few days before his death, he impregnated one of the counselors at the rehabilitation center in Forest Knolls, California where he had a heart attack. This is a grand secret. I am revealing it now for the first time. It was probably the last time he had sex if you think about it. Sorry. Didn't mean to make you think about Jerry Garcia having sex.

His Final Season

Mike was a TV show who looked like a football stadium.

Or vice versa? His girlfriend knew three different languages, but spoke only in gibberish and mumble to Mike who reciprocated with hand signals and offerings of freshly cut fruit. Mike liked to make lists of episodes that his TV show would air 'next season.' Episodes like "Hair for Love: A Readymade Requiem (Particles on the Barber Shop Floor)," from Season 13, and "Scuba Dive Sensation 12," from Season 41. Mike said that he was a TV show because people were boring. He looked the part of a stadium because it was very clear he had room inside for all the people he insulted.

His girlfriend's name was Eleanor. She had season tickets in a prime location, right in the middle of Mike's stadium, the 50-yard line, third base, front row, inside the brains of all the athletes and actors, not to mention the entire TV series on VCR cassettes. She studied the tapes and paid attention to the game. She said, "Muta ruek stama," and got a bowl full of pineapple.

When Mike's TV show got canceled, his football stadium was imploded. So he wrote the list of episodes for his final season, Season 115. All the people in the stadium began to fidget

madly because they were just dust particles. The game had ended, but they did not want to leave. They wanted to see the TV show one last time. It was better than the game. Seeing the thing inside the box is most always better than being inside the box at the thing in person. Eleanor agreed.

Today, the people are all gone. They left unsatisfied but they are all gone. They are the air. Eleanor occasionally watches her favorite episodes from Season 115. It's not the same without Mike there to add commentary, but it's something. Eleanor does the best that she can.

S115E044: A David to Simplify Light

There's David. He's in a room he's never left. I think this is actually about the time that I was sick. Really sick. David appeared in several episodes before this one. I want to say his arc peaked around Season 65, but I'm not sure. Why is his room decorated like an Egyptian tomb though? Oh, Mike. This is the first episode that really scared me, when I knew something was wrong. David was always so bright and boyish. And then Mike made him a goth.

David calls his mother on the phone. His phone is so goth, the gothest thing of all. It's black and has horns. It is a rotary phone and the

spinning wheel lights up red and pumps out smoke when David dials. His mother says, "You might have to come outside soon." (Mike has a pretty good old lady voice, funny yet also realistic.) David replies, "No, wait, I'm working on something."

Most of the rest of the show takes place inside David's mind. It's pretty boring: a lot of beige, the occasional house on fire. It's almost seven hours long. Then, at the very end, David comes out of whatever trance he's in and reaches for the string attached to the dangling light bulb overhead. (The set that is David's room is really just Mike's parents' basement.) You think the room is going to go dark, and the episode will end, but it doesn't. Instead, pulling the string turns the room into a tiny world. David is now a giant. It's light outside and there are tiny people darting between David's legs on tiny cars and tiny bikes. David smiles at first, but then abruptly looks sad.

The episode ends with him frantically calling for his mother as the people turn into bugs. He's yelling, "What's going on outside?" Like he is missing a birthday party he didn't even know they were throwing.

S115E015: Squash before Doom (Romance, 4024)

I think this is about religion. Mike was an odd duck concerning faith. I mean, he was definitely an atheist, like everyone else, legally speaking, but he was also obsessed with the idea of worship in a way that went slightly beyond being humorous.

I don't know this for sure, but I think 4024 is a reference to 2012, as in 'double 2012.' There is a lengthy tennis match sequence to start. Four hours worth, to be exact. The match features Mike doing a very poor imitation of some famous tennis commentator's voice (maybe Dick Enberg?). There are also a lot of fake commercials. More commercials than any normal broadcast would have. I like them. It's probably a 1:1 ratio, commercials to tennis.

The competitors are husband and wife. We know this because every once in awhile one of them will call out, "Are you sure that ball was out, honey-love?" And the other will respond, "I wouldn't lie to you, poodle-dumpling. Just missed the line. *So close!*" Over the course of the match, there are many close calls and ever intensifying passive-aggressive behavior. Some other pet names include twinkle-bird, boo-bear,

puppy-dove, sweet-bottom, rose-moon,
sunny-girl and buddy-boy.

On the ride home from the tennis court, the couple talk about squash. They are passengers in a computer-controlled flying car or giant drone thing. They literally go over every rule in the book, and how it differs from tennis. It seems like they live a hundred miles away. The flying car has no windows. Just three television screens on each side, each playing a different channel. Eventually they get to their house, which appears to be underground.

There is one thing about this episode that is very unclear: where exactly is the couple's house? Because the house, like the car, has no windows, and they travel for two hours of real world screen time (with multiple fade-cuts insinuating even more time has passed), we have no clue where they are. I like to think the flying car flew straight down a tube until it reached the hollowed-out chunk of earth where their house was inserted. But perhaps they traveled into hell, or another dimension, or Des Moines (where over three dozen episodes are set). Whenever I asked Mike where an episode was set he would answer, "Des Moines or a passable facsimile of." I really miss him. "Everything is Des Moines," I can hear him saying.

The rest of the show is just a lot of random, ambiguous footage tacked with a creepy, mock-poetic voiceover, which is how a lot of episodes play out after Season 92 or so.

S115E900: Norman Black

The season finale. I typically don't like to watch Mike's television programming in the correct order. But I had to wait to digest this. It felt like I had to watch his final season in order. It isn't my favorite episode, but it's definitely the most complicated. Sometimes I like to think Mike is still OK. And that he is living in another part of the country or the world. Des Moines? His parent's basement? They don't talk to me.

This one is about Norman Black, a new character, about how and why he has taken all of his sadness and morphed it into a bad attitude, as though it were clay, as if there were any other options for what to do with it.

The real Norman Black (well, the fake Norman Black whom Mike created) is not played by Mike. It seems that Mike paid a homeless person to act the titular part. Mike plays all the other roles, but there are no women in Episode 900. So I didn't get to see Mike dressed in drag for a final time. And this made me feel very sad.

The actor playing Norman Black seems like a legitimately homeless person. By that I mean, it seems as though his tattered clothes and dirty body have nothing to do with the role.

Norman Black is a urologist. I don't think Mike knew what a urologist actually does. Different patients come to see Norman and they all pull down their pants. Instead of having penises though they have a stuffed animal in the shape of an anthropomorphous tomato where their penises should be. Mike plays about a dozen patients throughout the episode, using the same stuffed tomato for each one. I wonder if Mike cut a hole in the back of the tomato or if he just taped it to his inner thighs. I hate thinking about Mike's penis possibly being inserted inside that stuffed tomato toy.

I remember the stuffed tomato. He had it propped in the corner with other toys and stuffed things. "Eleanor," he would quip with a smile. "What kind of man keeps stuffed animals in his bedroom?" I would answer in my made-up language. He would smile and bring me fruit. "Grisla katt noopo."

At his house before the funeral, up in his bedroom, I remember the big eyes of the tomato, looking into them. This was well before I got to the series finale, but I could feel the secret

between us, large and sick like a tumor. I'm glad I didn't pick it up. Didn't pick it up to have its white, fluffy stuffed animal guts come floating out of a mysterious hole in its back where Mike's dick might have been. I just left it there. It's still there, I think.

Hi

I never said hi to any other humans. Not one time in my entire life. I just threw bounce passes at their cellphones and smiled when the glass screens shattered on the pavement.

The only person who ever said hi to me was my mother. On my wedding day. But she might have been saying hi to my wife.

I'm not sure why my wife left me. It was either after I became an MMA fighter or before I started going to football games dressed as a deranged pig lady.

When I was forty, and truly thankful for the solitude, I started licking lit-up Christmas trees. I kept one in each room year round.

Whenever someone rings the bell or knocks on my door, I press play on a CD that is just dogs barking. The people eventually leave.

One time I saw a lady holding a cellphone in a pink case that was the size of a large piece of meat. I threw a basketball so hard at it that it launched from her palms and a bird of prey mistook it for a smaller bird and grabbed it before it hit the sidewalk. The bird snatched it in its talons and took it to its nest. When it realized it wasn't food, the bird created a Facebook page and eventually died.

I sometimes dream I am a bird. But in my dreams I never pick up cellphones when I'm looking for food. I only fly. It's all blue and white and occasionally gray.

After the divorce, I thought my mother was worried about me and wanted to come say hi. But she just wanted to steal my television.

The TV hadn't worked in years. One day I had poured orange juice on it until it sizzled. Sometimes, I used it as a blanket.

This was also around the time I started saying hi to every inanimate object in the world. But the task proved too tedious and I eventually settled on just saying hi to every cigarette butt I saw on the street.

Some people say once you start doing the drug that is saying hi, your life will never be the same. These people are idiots, in my opinion. Saying hi isn't addictive at all and I can stop whenever I feel like it.