

The Bitter Southerner Saved My Life



This morning, The Bitter Southerner began their annual membership drive. I command you to click through and offer whatever support you can.

Most of you know that for most of June, 2014, I was in a hospital bed, laid up like a beached whale and experiencing the most delightful and disturbing episodes of hallucination and dementia. And then, suddenly, all better, except for the inability to walk more than a few steps at a time, or think about one idea for more than ten seconds, or even stay awake through the day. I was, to be medically technical about it, all kinds of fucked up.

About 18 months ahead of this apocalypse, I had reconnected with Chuck Reece via Facebook. I had known Chuck back in the University of Georgia days, where he was editor of the student paper and I was general manager of the student radio station. I wrote a few articles for the paper. We weren't tight, but we knew each other well enough to engage a good-natured media rivalry and to give each other shit about this thing or that when our cups had been emptied a few times. But time marches and people drift.

About a year after we reconnected, Chuck and his gang launched The Bitter Southerner. I was knocked out, by the concept, by the execution, and mostly, by the sheer ballsy audacity of the whole affair.

And I was more than a little envious. Damn, thought I: this is about putting it on the line and creating a life that makes getting up in the morning something to look forward to.

By this time, I had found myself in the pincers between gray hairs and creative economic disruption. I was, essentially, unemployable. My long and storied career stringing words together to make the world a better place for software manufacturers or insurance tycoons was deader than Trump's dick. I had never taken the plunge to play music for a living. I had never, despite my early ambition, become a real Writer with a capital 'w'. I was a has been who never had been.

To make the cliché complete, I was depressed and beaten and certain that everyone else had the puzzle figured out. People like Chuck. They had it going on. Yeah.

Then that damn tick knocked me flat.

One night that August I was home alone, moping, lying in a dark room staring at nothing, and I saw the entire saga of my apocalypse formatted on the ceiling. I up and hobbled to the computer and started writing. And lo, it was lame and flabby. And glorious and funny.

I was still reading Bitter South every week. It never dawned on me that I would write for BS, but it did strike me that, if they could publish one great story a week, I could commit myself to post one story – as best I could – every week, too. So started this bloggy outpost. It paid poorly (still does), but I had a reason to look forward to waking up each morning.

I actually went one step beyond: I committed to two stories a week for a year. I made it about 40 weeks before I missed a week. I had a good reason, though.

I had an assignment for the Bitter Southerner.

Chuck had mentioned that they had not run anything on jazz in

the South yet. Might I be interested? After a few months of telling myself that such a thing was way out of my league, I came up with an idea. I drove to ATL and met Chuck – for the first time in ~~~ years – at Mary Mac’s. Over a customary lunch of meat and three, I pitched.

“Sold.”

Damn. Well now I was well and surely fucked, destined to exposure as a fraud or worse. I set to work, over the next four months, to write Koshier Gumbo, an epic tale of how NOLA brass band music and Eastern European klezmer music came together under the banner of the Panorama Jazz Band. Plus a few other necessary digressions and diversions.

I wrote and wrote, researched, traveled to NOLA three times, and joined a Mardi Gras krewe. I marched, costumed as Donald Trump. The story went deeper than I had imagined. In the end I had 16,000 words. I cut it to 14,000 and sent it to Chuck, certain of its rejection. I mean really, who runs 14,000 word articles? John McPhee gets that kind of space, and let me tell ya, sister, I am no John McPhee.

I was wrong. Chuck loved it. And even better, he liked it the way it was and did not want to trim it. It ran on Mardi Gras Day, 2016, the longest story the Bitter Southerner has ever run. “Or ever will,” sez the editor every time I talk to him.

I was a Writer. Capital damn ‘w’.

What next, then? Well, if you’re a Writer, you better write, fool. It only took me 57 years to figure that one out.

There’s a novel underway. (Maybe two.) A few short stories submitted (and rejected). The blog hobbles along. The Uganda famine relief project has hit some roadblocks, but we’re still hoping.

Last night, I submitted my latest to Bitter Southerner. If

they run it, it will be my fourth article for them. I'm like the Alec Baldwin of BS. (See here and here for the other two rambles.)

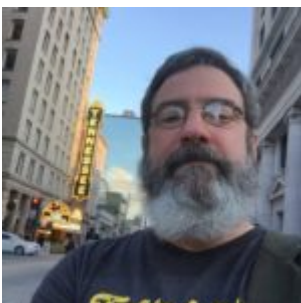
Ladies and gentlemen: I am a Writer.

I won't say I owe it all to Chuck and BS. But credit where due: The foolish leap of faith the BS crew took to birth their beast gave me the inspiration to launch this bloggy vineyard. Then Chuck took another leap and put my work in front of a real audience. And then again, and again, and now, maybe, another time. (And beware, Chuck...I have another dozen pitches in my pocket.)

So damn right Bitter Southerner saved my life.

Go give them all your money. It matters a difference.

Letter From a Foot Soldier in Knoxville



My Dearest Stanwyck,

I sit down in near exhaustion to write these few lines in between the grueling marches of the Knoxville Big Ears campaign. My weary feet cover many miles each day so as to position myself advantageously in front of the august purveyors of the Euterpean muse, many of whom invoke Polyhymnia, Terpsichore, Calliope, Clio...in fact, it appears that while Euterpe stands central to the affair, all eight of her sisters enjoy more than adequate representation amongst the artisans and craftspersons hard at work.

Everyone maintains a relentless good cheer, save for a few grumblers and malcontents who find the queues for sustenance longer than their yearning for pleasure can forbear. Yet even these laments of bellyachers and moaners, few and far between, cause barely a ripple across the mood of the assembled.

These many days of relentless struggle have taught me much about this town Knoxville, and about myself, as I come to terms with my frailties and prejudices. The people of Knoxville, to a man and woman, have been warm and courteous even as our discommodious invasion has imposed itself. It does a heart good to encounter such generosity as one is distant from one's own hearth and home, and leads one to feel, fleetingly, that one is in fact at home in this stranger's locale.

The great divisions that rend our everyday discourse – avant gardist v. lovers of traditional song, West v. East, and, most trenchant, jazzers v. the world – are as mist here in the trenches. Troops from every camp meet in the middle, happy to share in each other's experience. Once bitter foes freely exchange food, tobacco, strong drink. There is some laughter on the wind, but in the main we find shared reverence and wonder at the spectacles as they unfold.

We had a fine rain a few minutes ago that was much needed. My jacket leaks very badly. I got rather wet for the rain was very hard, but lasted only a short time, and I got dry and

have resumed my deep listening. Later, I will sleep very well.

My darling, my Stanwyck, how I miss you and your sage counsel and warm touch. Alas, I fear my obsessions with the Muse sisters would generate no end of frustration and despair and would likely serve to drive you once again unto the arms of that damnable scoundrel Clooney, damn him three times. And so I must content myself to gaze upon your locket of hair and a faded photograph as the sole means of connection with you, my one true love, as I gird my loins for yet another presentation of Art in this, perhaps, fairest City in the South. It is a desperate trial, but I am determined to maintain a noble spirit and spry step, no matter how I suffer.

I must resume my march, dearest, as the next maelstrom is many strides away and promises a decibel assault of relentless terror. It is a harsh duty, but it falls to myself and my fellow foot soldiers to offer embiggened ears to these noble artisans, people whose sufferings and trials to bring their visions to life far exceed my own pitiful efforts as a receptor of their message.

I shall describe the events in greater detail by means of the electronic Bitter South tabloid at a later date. Until then, know that, as the artists of Big Ears excite my stereocilia in manners heretofore unknown, I remain,

Always.

Your Faithful Narrator.

Wave the Bloody Shirt



It's not hard to find examples of politicians exploiting tragedy for cheap emotional gain. But it's hard to imagine a more cynical episode than the stunt trump pulled last night during his congressional address.

On January 28, just a week into the trump reign, our Commander in Chief green lighted a military raid in Yemen. By most accounts, the president* took a cavalier attitude toward approving the mission. He could not be bothered to attend to the mission in the Situation Room, preferring to stay in the residence and tweet about trivialities. Leadership.

During the raid, CPO William Owen died, and six other SEALs were injured. An estimated 29 civilians died in the raid, including children. A \$75M Osprey helicopter was disabled; airstrikes were called in to destroy the aircraft to keep it from falling into enemy hands. No strategic intelligence was attained, no strategic hard target or combatant captured or killed. It was a clusterfuck from start to finish.

This woman, Carryn Owens, lost her husband. Her grief is beyond my imagination.



I'm confident in saying that it is also beyond the president's * imagination. Or interest, really, in anything other than its value as a show biz gambit that allowed him to bask in one minute and forty-four seconds of standing ovation tribute, tribute that may have been intended for Mrs Owens and her late husband, but which he treated as his due. He even made her stand up a second time, this woman consumed in mourning and public grief, reduced to a prop in a sick game to let this sick man believe himself to be a popular leader.

Watch the tape. She wants to go away and hide. Now look at trump: the sick bastard is beaming, smiling, waving thumbs up as though he had just had a protester dragged out of one of his rallies. The world is just a reality show set to him. He could care fuck. all. about human feelings, about suffering, about yearning. Give him an applause line and everything is fine.



This is what sociopathy looks like<fn>And isn't Speaker Ryan the cutest little puppy dog?</fn>

Trump quoted the Bible. Trump said "Ryan" was looking down from heaven, and "he is very happy because I think he just broke a record" for the ovation. Huzzah.

Now, take a look at the Joint Chiefs of Staff during this revolting spectacle.



RETWEETS
2,023

LIKES
3,965



Ever since the botched mission, trump has swung between claiming everything went great to blaming the failure on Obama. And then a few days ago, he tried to hang it around the necks of the military.

"This was something that was, you know, just – they wanted to do," Trump said. " And they came to see me and they explained what they wanted to do, the generals, who are very respected."

"And they lost Ryan," Trump continued.

Not one of those generals would deny their responsibility for CPO Owens' death. It's part of the role of leadership. (And by the way, Don, to you his name is Chief Petty Officer Owens. His friends call him Ryan.) The look of disgust on these faces is telling.

Trump, a pretend leader, is never to blame, never culpable for any failure. When things are going well, it's all to his credit, just as when an audience is on its feet cheering, it is because of his magnificent greatness.

FWIW, CPO Owens' father has refused to meet with the president*, claiming that the questions surrounding the approval and execution of the raid make it impossible for him to face trump. He has called for a full investigation, saying, "Don't hide behind my son's death to prevent an investigation."

The schmuck from Queens went one step further. Not only will he hide behind CPO Owens' death to avoid an investigation, he is waving a good man's bloody shirt to wrap himself in applause and adoration.

It's difficult to imagine a more revolting manipulation of genuine grief. Somehow, though, I think we have a long way to go before we hit bottom with this guy.

Morning in America



Like so many of my friends and allies these days, I wake up every morning with one thought at the front of my mind:

What fresh hell will Trump bring today?

Maybe it will be careless antagonism of one of our long-standing international allies.

We have always been at war with Australia! Bad hombres!

Maybe it will be careless antagonism of one of our long-standing international rivals. What could possibly go wrong with putting Iran “on notice”? Or warning China to steer clear of the South China Sea? Especially when the Pentagon itself had no advance warning that such red lines would appear.

Maybe we will wake up to the news that the new Supreme Court nominee was in fact the founder of the “Fascism Forever Club” at his “elite Georgetown prep school”. Remember how the Trump voters were all up in arms about those dalgurned elites from Washington ruining the country? Yeah, me either. Here’s a fellow who can be counted on to give the god botherers dominion over those pesky lady parts and the ladies who think they belong to them. Strict construction!

To give you an idea of how OCD Your Narrator can be about these things, when the new nominee was announced I immediately

wondered if he might be related to Reagan-era EPA director and noted Bircher nutjob Anne Gorsuch. He is, in fact, her son, a man nurtured from birth to become an avenging scourge of ladyparts, clean water, and consumer protection. Here's to draining the swamp!

What other fresh hell? The Muslim ban has generated an astonishing amount of spontaneous street protest. The infighting at the White House, and all the leaking that goes along with that – plus the preposterous quibble that it isn't really a ban – is almost comic in scope and content; the knives are out and being sharpened, and if we can avoid getting into WWII, we will soon be treated to some truly Shakespearean defenestration and ritual disembowelment in the Trump inner circle. Knowing Trump, it will likely be a prime time special event, brought to you by Geico with special guests Amarosa and Scott Baio.

Maybe we will wake up to Trump making a mockery of a sham of the National Prayer Breakfast which, truth be told, should be ridiculed into extinction with a Trump v Terminator dick measuring, followed by this nearly perfect remark about the Senate Chaplain: Another idea that should be mocked into extinction ffs, but I digress:

“I don't know, chaplain, whether or not that's an appointed position. Is that an appointed position? I don't even know if you're Democrat or if you're Republican, but I'm appointing you for another year. The hell with it.”

The normally delicate fee fees of the Christianist cult failed to ruffle over this. Of course they did not; Trump promised to get rid of those pesky church-state restrictions that prohibits politicking from the pulpit. He could have said “fuck it” to the chaplain and gotten a pass.

Watching the press secretary slowly lose his mind on a daily basis is another source of pretty swell entertainment. It's

more fun than watching a penis-compensator shoot himself in the foot.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yipi9D921yvs>

I love this way more than I should.

There are some truly comic elements at play in all this, but it is hard to muster much more than a mordant giggle. Take the tone-deafness of Trump ~~wank~~ ~~fantasy~~ daughter Ivanka posing while the airport protests were at their peak. It would be funny...



\$5000 to Look Like a Baked Potato?

..but frankly, I thought this girl wore it better.



I wish this were funny.

I wish this were actually funny. It is not. Darkly comic, yes, and mordant chuckling at (some of) it is damn near necessary to deal with the darkness. But it's hollow fucking laughter at best.

The pace and severity of the coming fuckery are going to have serious negative consequences for years to come. Consider: if Gorsuch is confirmed, he will still be fucking the world up for my kids for years after I'm dead and buried. Consider: a crack in the Keystone pipeline will foul the Ogallala Aquifer for generations. Consider: people will die needlessly because of cruel decisions on immigration and health care. There's no reversing that kind of thing.

So what to do? Well, face it: the left has zero power right now beyond the ability to obstruct and raise hell. Senate rules have already been tossed overboard for the sake of expediting the fuckery. Like Trump, the rest of the ruling GOP sees any agreement or contract (or treaty!) as something to be torn up when it becomes an inconvenience. Why any party would trust this Nation under the current government is a

mystery.</fn> They have the power and they are going to do what they want. Because fuck you.

There are still actions we can – and really must – take if we want to turn this around. I visited the office of our local congresscritter on Monday with a group of fierce women. We have a face-to-face scheduled with the congressman later this month only because we refused to leave until we got a commitment for a meeting. I suspect he will be unmoved by anything we have to say. But we're going to make him listen. Unless he chickens out in the end and cancels the meeting. Any bets?

Tomorrow, I will be visiting the office of The Emptiest Suit in Florida Politics, the diminutive and cowardly Marco Rubio. I doubt we will ever manage a face to face with this little chicken shit, but we can at least make him run and hide.



We marched. We will march again. We have been calling Reps and

Senators daily. We do what we can. But it ain't much.

I suspect that we aren't going to see much more than a few dreaded "moral" victories at least until the mid-term elections. Maybe those tiny steps will add up to something resembling counter-momentum by then. But I feel confident that these tiny gestures can accumulate, that the nearly unprecedented taking-to-the-streets we have seen in these first two weeks<fn>Seriously...only two fucking weeks. It's like time is standing still.</fn> is harbinger of real, sustained resistance.

We are entering a dark a gloomy time. There is no shortcut through the forest. We keep going, one step at a time.

There has to be a clearing out there somewhere.