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.



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.

This is What Democracy Looks Like



Friday, January 20, 2017, Inauguration Day, was one of the hardest days of my life. I felt, at turns, crushing despair and overwhelming nausea, mingled with a steady stream of red-hot rage at the people who brought us to this sorry pass.

Many friends refused to watch. I would not have missed it for the world.

A long-habituated politics nerd, I watched the proceedings, as I have for every transfer of power since Nixon rode his helicopter into the sunset.<fn>I also watched LBJ take the oath, but missed the incoming Nixon event. </fn> Every time, I have been amazed that this kind of thing happens, that an outgoing President can welcome his successor with grace, courtesy, and dignity, and walk away – voluntarily – to leave the office in the hands of someone eagerly prepared to undo as much of the standing legacy as possible.<fn>The transfer from Reagan to Bush an obvious exception to this dynamic.</fn> Not because it is written into law – it's not – but because it has become a symbolic dramatization of the kind of Republic this nation strives to become.

This is what democracy looks like.

Another reason to watch: this could be the last time it ever

happens this way.

Try to imagine President Asterisk gracefully welcoming his successor. Go on, I can wait.

Trump and his crowd – and that includes pretty much the entire GOP at this point – has shown themselves more than happy to discard any of the established norms of governance that they find inconvenient. Conflict of interest, naked cronyism, and – very likely – collusion with a foreign government to influence the election outcome<fn>A neat trick invented by Nixon, enhanced by Reagan, and perfected by this gang.</fn>, all of these decisions to violate established norms are a clear declaration: They will not be bound by anything other than a desire to impose their will.

The stonewalling of Merrick Garland, the steamrolling of Tillerson, DeVos, &c. – these are the tactics of a gang that has been given the power to do whatever it wants. And you can bet they are going to use it to the hilt.

This is not what democracy looks like.

But it’s what we got.

For now.

Because as despair-inducing as Friday was, the next day was all bright-sunshine, despite the all-day rain and tornado watches. On Friday, we despaired. On Saturday, we marched, motherfuckers.

I’m a cynic about marches, street protest. Oh, I show up sometimes, and usually end up feeling embarrassed by the miasma of impotence that attends most such events. My standard experience: a pitifully small cluster of people waving unreadable signs, desperate to gin up enthusiasm by mandating choreographed theatrics and indecipherable slogans.

And despite the occasional horn toots of support, I generally

felt like people were laughing at our pathetic gestures. Because if it was the other side doing it, I would be laughing at them, too.

So the day of the Women's March upon us, I was all set to stay home and bury myself in books and music. But Herself was determined to go, hoped I'd join her, gently suggested it would be a good thing to do. I've been to too many of these things, found myself in a bedraggled cluster of a couple dozen earnest people, and gone home more hopeless than I had been before. And the forecast called for terrific thunderstorms all day. I pictured myself standing like a drowned rat with a couple of anarchists in Guy Fawkes masks. I demurred, opposed, argued.

I went. And man, am I glad I did.

We arrived about two hours ahead of the march. There were around a hundred people there, already way past my expectations. Alrighty then.

We ducked into Proof for a fortifying pint. It was nearly empty when we arrived.



The intrepid team

Twenty minutes later, it looked like this.



The pudding is in the Proof

And when we walked outside, we found this.



This is what it looks like

And this.



Let it rain down justice

And it rained. And people chanted, often unintelligibly, but with real fervor. We were not alone.

Beyond a certain size, it’s hard to tell from inside a crowd just how big it is. But when we reached the top of the hill and looked back, our scientific calculations gave us a precise answer:

Fucking huge.



Twitter let us know that it was happening pretty much everywhere. All around the globe, from Australia to Kenya (!) to Paris and London and Dublin. A protest organized on a ship in Antarctica.

And there was New York and Boston, Chicago, LA. Washington, DC.

Smaller towns, too, like Helena, Montana (population 30,000), which turned out 10,000 people. Tiny Mentone, Alabama (!), pop. 360, turned out 50 people.



Mentone, AL. The Bitter South. Hell yes.

And when it was all said and done, lil ole Tallahassee, Florida, population 190,000 or so…how'd we do?

Official estimate: 14,000-plus.

Hot damn. This is what democracy looks like.



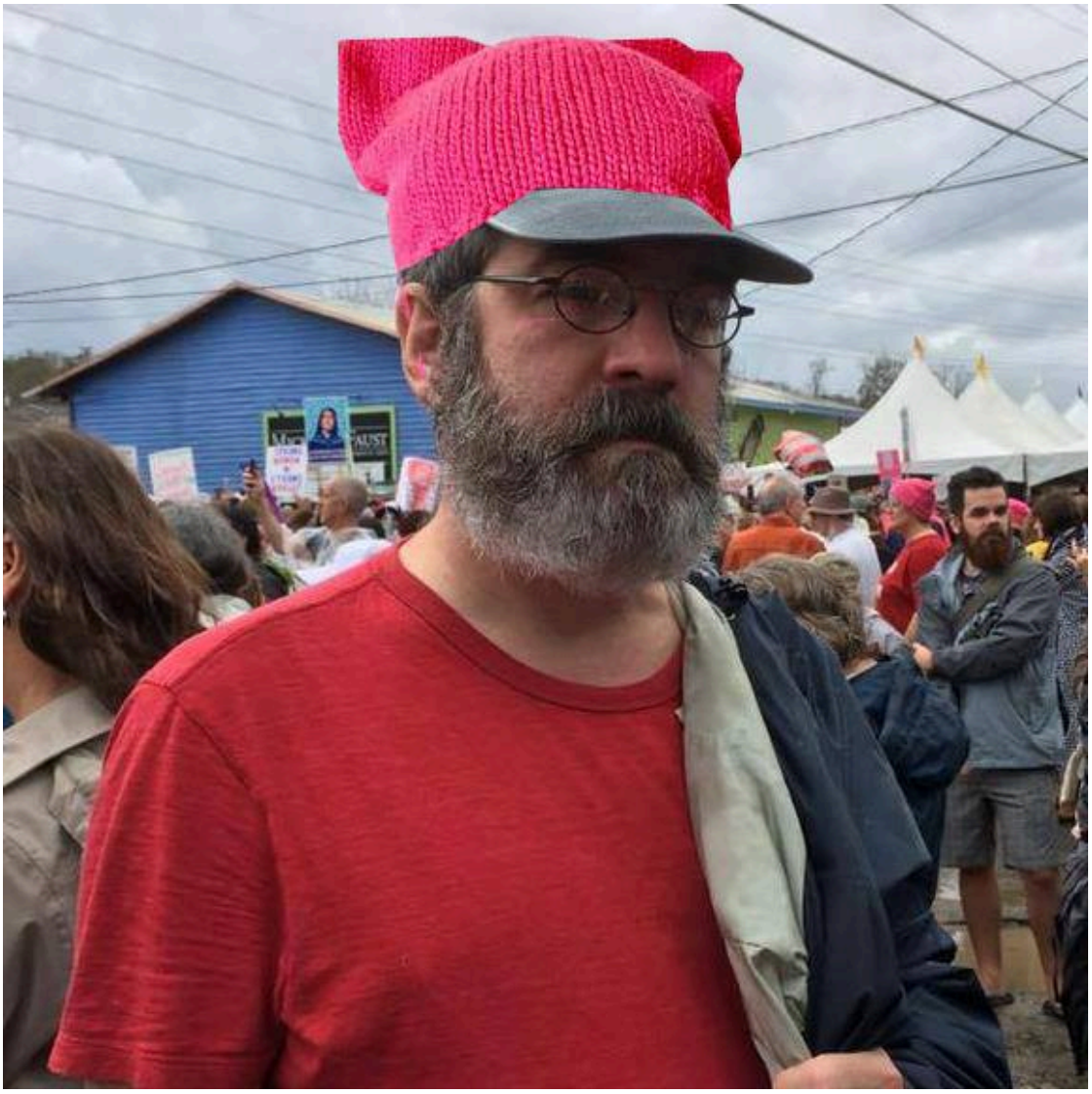
Real America

And it was a rainbow, a real picture of Real America. None of this rural white bubble that voted for Trump, but the Real America, people who stand for all their neighbors, who stand for people who may not look like them. People who stand for equality.

So the day after the end of the world, we find ourselves once again becoming acquainted with hope.

Make no mistake: all the levers of power are arrayed against us. But we are on the right side of history, and the more we keep standing up, organizing, and resisting in ways that effectively push back at the flood of bullshit headed our way, the better our chance of stemming the tide.

Don’t give up. Fight. It’s the Way of the Pussy.



Old Goat as Pussy Warrior

A Typically Hackneyed End of Year Sum It All Up Post



Hey kittens! It's been far too long since I dropped some knowledge here in the bloggy vineyard. The wait for knowledge will, alas, continue, but there are a few things to talk about as we wrap up the 2016 calendar.

First off, and maybe biggest: we've (you and me) amassed a little more than $4000 towards my travel expenses for the Uganda/RUTF project. Massive gratitude to everyone who donated, and big props to pal Doug Blackburn who put together a terrific piece for the Tallahassee Democrat to give this project wider exposure.

As of last week, we are targeting mid-February for the journey. We had hoped to go in October, then November. We are at the mercy of the NGO we are traveling with and the conditions on the ground in Africa. I am about to crawl out of my skin with anticipation.

AND IF ANYBODY NEEDS TO RING UP A LAST MINUTE TAX DEDUCTION,
please click here
and drop a little coin in the kitty.
Fully tax-deductible, and all for a good cause.
You'll feel so much better if you do.

It's been quite a year in the vineyard, even though the blog frequency has been, uhm, infrequent. Mea culpa. Life has been full, and I've had the great luck to place two pieces in The Bitter Southerner in 2016, one of them included in their Best

Stories of 2016 roundup. Attention ho that I am, I am extremely proud and honored, especially when you think of the consistently amazing writing they serve up all year long.

The ridiculously long piece on New Orleans and the Panorama Jazz/Brass Band and the merely-absurdly long piece on Hearty White were true labors of love. The opportunity to stretch out and tell stories about places and people that I love is one of the year's great blessings for me. Hard to thank the BS crew enough, especially Chuck Reece, for letting me ramble at length. And now there's another piece in the pipeline for the Bitter crowd, one that will be either longer or shorter than the Hearty piece, but definitely shorter than the NOLA ramble.<fn>btw, I've started looking at how I might expand the NOLA material into a book. Anybody knows a publisher or a deep-pocketed benefactor, please send her my way.</fn>

And bigly: Judy invited me to collaborate on her new Comma project. Look at me, Ma! I'm in the Academy!

I'm also deep into the research on the Uganda project and have begun sketching out some fiction projects that are either short stories or novels or perhaps a multi-volume epic that will make me richer than George JK Rowling Martin.

Hey, kidz! Let's get interactive. Take this poll to help me decide which fiction project to tackle first.

[Total_Soft_Poll id="2″]

Vote. It's important.

On top of all that, some fairly challenging and satisfying corporate 'ho type work that has been fun and rewarding. Hey, a guy has to eat.

And on top of that topper, a couple of really cool music projects in the first half of the year kept me hopping. Most notable of these was the Edgewood Big Band project led by my

pal Jeff Crompton (pictured up top). Fortunately, this beast will rise again in 2017, with at least one ATL performance already on the books.

Here’s a taste of EBB in action. Really excited about this next go round.

There’s more over at Jeff’s SoundCloud page if you get the hankering.

So, yeah, I’ve been as busy as a one-armed wallpaper hanger with the hives. And the blog has suffered neglect. But I’m back, bitches. Plans for the next year include regular visits to the vineyard. I hear we have a new Preznit to look after.

Other plans for the year? They’re yoooooge, the best plans anyone has ever had, you really aren’t gonna believe them. Suffice to say it means lots of scribbling, lots of string tickling, and lots of walking.

We may be in a world of hurt with the Orange Haired Thin Skinned Pencil Dick in charge, but there is still Shit. To. Be. Done.

Who’s with me?