

THE PRODUCTIONS OF TIME

by Marc Porter Zasada

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom.

*Drive your cart and your plough over the bones of the dead.
Prudence is a rich ugly old maid courted by Incapacity.
He who desires but acts not, breeds pestilence.*

The cut worm forgives the plough.

*The hours of folly are measured by the clock,
but of wisdom no clock can measure.
If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.*

Eternity is in love with the productions of time.

—Proverbs of Hell, from “The
Marriage of Heaven and Hell,”
William Blake, 1790

When he was twelve, he was already Red Peters, but he was a boy soprano. Gentle of face and freckle, he had a soft glow in his scarlet hair, or so it seemed, wherever he went. Red was the darling of Miss Tomlinson, choir director at the East Lawrence Middle School in the Bronx. Miss Tomlinson, who had ambitions, tended to choose works a little too hard for her troupe of seventh and eighth graders, especially as she had them for only two years, best case. Often, her ambitions proved an embarrassment at recitals, when an otherwise perfectly good Bach was slaughtered as a sacrifice to high culture. But Red! He would get the solo bits and sing like a messenger from Heaven, holding the sopranos together as he looked Miss Tomlinson straight in the eye, his face intelligent with concentration, his voice spot-on. And if the sopranos held, the other parts didn't matter all that much really. Naturally, in later years Miss Tomlinson spoke frequently of her time with Red, and stood one of his publicity stills, lovingly framed, on her mantelpiece—even if he had not responded when she had tried to contact him, no less than five times.

Red did, of course, remember Miss Tomlinson, even when he became the Red Peters. He had received her messages through his agent. But he had avoided her along with everyone from his

past, because *the only fucking thing* he cared to recall from those years, and remember often, was that one concert, near to Christmas, when Miss Tomlinson's little choir stood on the steps of the Metropolitan Museum of Art to unleash sixteenth century madrigals on unsuspecting passersby.

You see, forty seconds of that afternoon had changed everything.

East Lawrence was last on the program, the kids were tired and antsy, and in general, their performance was worse than usual. But during "Shepherds Awake," right after the first repeat, all four parts came miraculously into both tune and synchronization. As genuine music arose from the ragged choir, time seemed to stand still. In this magical suspension, Red saw how the pillars of the great museum stood forth in regular majesty above their heads, how the great shadows marched down Fifth Avenue as they moved toward evening, how the sun chose this tree and ignored that, how the traffic could be seen to move in dance—and for a few forever minutes, Red was filled with wonder at the universal order of all things.

It was an order which spread out from the museum as a complex, but comprehensible map. He saw how the madrigal both expressed that order and existed within its confines.

And then he saw how it was within his power to *break free* of both the madrigal and the order. “This,” he thought, “would be greater yet.” And for forty seconds, he allowed himself to soar entirely unrestrained. In his head he heard a higher counter-melody, not written into the score, and his strong little soprano improvised like a great bird taking flight. A dark bird, that is, in a startlingly related but minor key, full of jagged blue notes. This dark bird soared laughingly, mockingly over the madrigal, over the museum steps, over the spectators, over Fifth Avenue and over the city itself. People turned in alarm, as the world did not sound like Christmas anymore.

During this strange but musically brilliant rebellion, Red broke eye contact with Miss Tomlinson and looked inward. Indeed, he allowed himself to grow unaware even of the *existence* of Miss Tomlinson, who did not, after all, fit within the suddenly discovered universe of his own making. At the tender age of twelve, Red Peters saw how easy it was *to win the game. As in completely win the whole fucking game.* And when the piece finally ended, and Miss Tomlinson caught his eye with a look of blank incomprehension, he gave her what can only be described as a mean little smile.

After that, of course, Red dropped choir entirely so he could perfect his guitar work and focus exclusively on a

specialized form of contemporary song called “heavy metal.” By fifteen he had lost his virginity in his girlfriend’s parents’ bedroom as “Paranoid” by Black Sabbath played in the background.

At sixteen Red left home with a forty-year-old who had a tattoo of a scorpion on her left breast. With this move he felt, perhaps correctly, that he was embracing chaos wholeheartedly. He felt *unbound*. The next two decades exploded. And by his thirty-fifth birthday, anyone would agree that Red Peters was one of the world’s leading representatives of chaos. It was his job. When he stood at a microphone, clothed in sweat and ragged glitter, lifted his Stratocaster and stated his worst intentions, chaos was not just celebrated, it was *conjured*. It was brought into the world *bitching and screaming*. Or so believed the 20,000 fans in his average crowd as they lifted their glowing phones for a shot of Red unbound.

Indeed, *Red Unbound* was the title of the present tour, though of course, it offered only the illusion of chaos. In truth, each show in each city was a carefully controlled event. Before Red’s arrival in Chicago, for example, a dozen unionized workers had been toiling five days to construct the stage, perfect the sound system, tune the lighting. Vendors had carefully laid out the *Bitching and Screaming* t-shirts, stocked up the beverages, hosed down the snack pavilions.

Contracts bound Mr. Peters, his touring band, the promoters, the people who wrote his backing tracks, cut his famously scarlet hair, and arranged his lodging. Two lawyers tracked everyone's deliverables; three accountants tracked expenses. Security was, of course, exquisitely tight. Much as a ride in an amusement park offers the safe illusion of danger, so did Red Peters offer the safe specter of chaos. When he cried out:

*Up to it, up to it, get on up to the start, Lay
yourself on the steeple top,
Stop asking for the devil man,
It's me gonna shoot a hole in your punkshit heart...*

...he meant it only metaphorically.

Tonight, after the last encore of a three-night Soldier Field run, and now leaping from the stage wet, hoarse, and briefly happy, Red looked for release.

The adrenaline had to drain. The coke had to run out. Now was the time, as he said, to *fall apart*. This too was part of his job: to rest the chaos generator for the next show, a week hence in Atlanta. He would go fall apart, probably gracelessly, even as the stagehands moved into the still-lit stadium to gather up the enormous equipment, the sets, and the spent pyrotechnics; even as the crowd, having fulfilled its own mission of release, filtered into the wee hours of the city.

Out in the big world, other workers slept while preparing for their jobs as bakers, bankers, brokers, or limo drivers. And often the whole system worked beautifully: generally, all men and women were *bound*. But briefly, all men and women could believe themselves *unbound*. And often, instead of actually killing one another, or raping one another, or screaming down midnight streets, the fire of chaos within each human heart could be wonderfully torched to life; all the Miss Tomlinsons of the world could be overcome in one fatal blow; each man or woman's flame could be found to burn still brightly; and then that flame could be ignored once again so that the world might continue.

A great deal, however, depended on Red – and he knew it. Always, when the drugs and adrenaline wore off, fear moved in. What if one night, the fire failed to catch? What if one night, the crowd just stood and stared? This vision haunted him, woke him at three a.m. It was the reason he usually had to get plastered before he went on, or tried to write a new song. Or lately, even to rehearse. During such times, he had to *not care* whether or not he succeeded as a demon. When he was plastered, he could *just be* the fucking demon, as he liked to say. Sometimes it helped if there were people around to worship him. To tell him he was a genius. To let him take them to bed. To limit his drug and alcohol intake. But sometimes it didn't help, for sometimes he found himself

loathing these people, and sometimes trying to live up to their expectations, and sometimes having just really too much sex with them, and sometimes not believing a word they said. Worst of all, Red Peters often felt he was faking it: *just pretending* to be Red Peters and to represent chaos. That it was all an act. That he was now *just imitating* the younger Red Peters of five or six years earlier, who would soon be forgotten. Worse, he knew that when it came *right fucking down* to it, he was alone in the world: when it came right fucking down to it, *he couldn't trust anyone's punksbit heart*.

And so it happened that come 1:10 a.m., after running around manically backstage hugging the band, kissing the bald spot on the head of his manager, pulling down the blouse and kissing the (surprisingly untattooed) breasts of a woman who might be his current girlfriend; after eating a huge roast beef sandwich and drinking champagne and pissing grandly out the window of his dressing room onto the parking lot below, Red Peters became depressed and locked the door. The crowd had seemed perceptibly older. He had not written a song in five months. His manager had been an ass earlier in the evening, chewing him out for taking too many bennies before a show, causing him to forget whole verses. The tantrum was no doubt a ruse to hide the way the manager was ripping Red off. Not to mention that Red's back hurt even worse than the night before.

Two fingers on his left hand were bleeding. He was pretty sure the coke had been spiked with something nasty. His mother was dying of some autoimmune disease he'd forgotten the name of, but she wouldn't speak to him. He'd had a weird red welt on his neck for a week that he hadn't told anyone about. The list went on and on until he remembered, gratefully, that it was *time to fall apart. Time to shut 'er down for the night. Time to 'ave a drink and get some sleep, mate*, he told himself in that fake English accent he used when he needed to remind himself that he was a fucking rock star. And lo, there appeared a bottle of English gin, as if by magic, in his left hand. He took it to the couch in the dressing room, where he collapsed all sweaty in his ragged, yet skintight stage glitter, tearing a couple of seams in the process. This was, at first, a sleep without dreams. His manager had to get the janitor to unlock the door, and two stagehands to carry *the famous scarlet idiot* down to the limo, and then two grunts from the Hyatt Hotel to haul Red into a back entrance and up a service elevator to his room, where his manager and the woman who might be his current girlfriend got him undressed and into bed. It was too much to ask the two of them to haul the hairy and naked singer into the shower, even though he stank like hell.

The manager, whose name was Alan Cork (leading to many ribald jokes from Red), wasn't sure whether he should let

the girlfriend sleep there, even though she claimed that Red had begged her to. Cork hadn't known her long enough to decide if she was one of the safe ones, and in the end, he decided no.

This proved to be a mistake, for Red Peters was left alone. And lo again, the Representative of Chaos, bobbing like a wayward dinghy on a mix of drugs, lying filthy between the clean sheets of the Executive Suite, his body drained by the wicking of tremendous energies from thousands of desperate citizens, did begin to dream.

He dreamt first of Heaven and then of Hell.

Heaven looked a good deal like Tuolumne Meadows, high up in Yosemite, which he had once visited while on tour. He was standing by a river, much like the North Fork of the Tuolumne as it tumbles gently through wide grasses beneath great mountains. It was a sweet summer afternoon. Men in tuxedos sat at baby grand pianos spaced gracefully along the banks of the gentle river, far into the distance. They were playing Mozart.

Indeed, they were playing Mozart with a sense of joyful inevitability. As sometimes happened in his dreams, Red himself was again twelve years old, with his sense of wonder still intact.

“Mozart,” he reflected, with all the happiness of revelation, “represents eternity: ever occurring anew, yet ever the same.” For what seemed a forever, he wandered along the river, smiling shyly at the pianists.

After 20 minutes, however, it was time to dream of Hell.

Tuolumne Meadows disappeared, and Hell proved to be not a *place* at all, as a *place* would be far too safe and predictable for the most terrible fate of humankind. No, Hell began with three women talking at the same time, shouting and gesturing about things unsettling or perhaps annoying. They might have been from a film by Almodóvar, but Red could not make out a word. And then something else, he wasn't sure what, began with a dirty snowstorm or perhaps a fall of ash, but just when he was almost sure it was something he should understand, a big organ came in, pipes quite loud—or maybe it was an organ of the body, possibly the pancreas, wrapped in a dull newspaper from an organization which told him something which many persons agreed with, persons who might have been Swedish. Or not. In any case, due to the noise, he couldn't get a thought together, *any thought*, much less a tune, and certainly not Mozart, put together. Not considering that his left hand was handicapped by the cane he had to walk with, or perhaps the caning he was receiving—or maybe he was actually in Cuba, stripped to the waist in a terrible summer

sun, harvesting sugar cane with a hundred other sad men, singing a work song to which he could not remember the words.

Did that make sense? Like chaos itself, no doubt not.

In his bed he sweated and clutched the pillow. In his dream, he was only certain of one thing: he should *ask someone who knew*, but then he wasn't certain that would be the right move at all—as suppose maybe he was just supposed to listen. And then it was night and he was horribly not alone on Hollywood Boulevard, as he had wished to be, but followed by a gang of youth or perhaps police with nightsticks—but he could not see properly. It was, at least, a *place*.

And they drove him at last, with some relief, into another actual place, a store called “Aunt May’s Antiques.”

Aunt May’s was the kind of musty little antiques shop you find in small towns in the South—and like the TARDIS, which he normally worshipped but not this time, bigger on the inside than the outside, a space packed floor-to-ceiling with a confusion of bric-a-brac and the entire lost effort of humankind: lamps in the shape of the Eiffel Tower, light switches in the form of Mickey Mouse, serving bowls shaped like artichokes, elaborate signs for cigar shops, tin fire engines for children, old guns for old men, old hats for old women, serving platters shaped like loaves-and-fishes

and ears of corn, along with hideous watercolors of the Grand Canyon.

The great noise of Hell did not abate. The cheap objects seemed somehow made of the noise. And Red, who did manage *one goddamn thought in Hades*, thought only of how all the people who had made all that cheesy crap were lucky to be dead.

Unlike, say, himself.

After twenty minutes of Hell, Red awoke, terrified. It was mostly dark, with just a sliver of light from somewhere. He felt that an enormous amount of time had passed, but the glowing clock on the nightstand read just 2:42. The clock was a clue that he was, as so often happened, in a hotel room, and now he saw with relief that the sliver of light was coming from a partly-open bathroom door. No doubt Corky had left the light on in the bathroom so he could find it.

This much, at least, was as it should be. He roused himself out of the bed, stumbled toward the light as toward a revelation, and began to shout when the shower came out cold.

Unfortunately, however, even though he was pretty sure he was awake, Red could not remember Heaven, and could not shake the memory of Hell. *Could not shake the fucking memory of Hell.* It haunted him with its many voices, far too many of which, he was almost certain, were familiar. A haunting mediocrity of voices.

Of fucking everyone faking honest emotion to produce rapidly antiqued kitsch.

“Oh. My. God.” he said aloud.

He wondered if he were having a drug event of some kind, and found that a bit of a comfort. A drug event, after all, was something familiar. When it came down to it, however, the only thought which could now fully form in his head was his oldest and most familiar thought of suicide.

Suicide was a thought which had been with him since he could remember. You might even say that Old Joe Suicide was his only truly reliable friend, a buddy to whom he felt especially close when booze or coke were wearing off and bringing on a PDD: Post-Drug Depression. As usual, he pictured a headline in the music press like, “Red Peters Slits Wrists After Amazing Concert: Obviously Wanted to Go Out at His Peak.” Nobody carried razors around anymore, and the windows on the 10th floor of the Hyatt were sealed, but fortunately, room service had never cleared the dinner tray. He grabbed a steak knife and went to wash it off in the sink—it wouldn’t do to use a dirty knife. Should he write a suicide note? Not so easy, as it turned out: nothing but a cutesy pad of paper in the fucking drawer and a ballpoint that didn’t function. In his luggage, he found only a thick black marking pen he’d used to scribble on his shipping boxes.

The note would be awkward, at best.

You will be shocked to learn that the woman who might be Red's current girlfriend had the name of Crystal, was twenty-two or thirty-two, possessed large breasts, wore trumpy clothing, and was not considered bright by others. She had dyed her hair a streaky and uncertain green, she wore three silver rings in her left nostril, and six in her left earlobe. When Alan Cork made her leave Red alone at two a.m., Crystal was steamed, but she dutifully followed the manager down to the lobby, where the band, now in civvies, was having its usual chill-down. There she made a show of joking with the drummer, who was careful not to overstep his bounds. Sometimes he drummed his hands on the bar to keep them occupied.

It was nearly three before Crystal could slip away and head back upstairs.

In the hallway she was lucky to run into Tom Donkins, a young room service guy she'd seen earlier in the night, way, way back before the concert, when she was coming out of Red's door.

"Is that Ed Brown's room?" he'd asked, cooly. "Ed Brown" was Red's usual hotel pseudonym.

"That's right," she had smiled cooly. "I'm Ed's boring wife."

“In town for a convention?” pursued Tom, who was charmingly blond.

“That’s right,” smirked Crystal, liking this Tom, who was cute in a dorky way.

“The Unconventional Convention.”

“Right,” said Tom, “I hear it’ll be cool.”

And lo, here he was again in the dead of night, pushing a cart to pick up trays left on the floor outside of doors.

“Oh look, it’s Ed Brown’s boring wife!” he greeted her.

“Tom, sweetie pie, I left my little door-cardy-thing in the room. Could you be a darling and let me back in?”

“I’m not really supposed to do that if you’re not registered to the room, Mrs. Brown.”

“Do you want me to start banging on the door and wake Ed, along with half the floor? I’m sure your boss would love that.”

And so she was in.

The room was dark, but somehow, instantly, she sensed that something in the universe had shifted. (People were wrong to say that Crystal wasn’t bright. She’d just never had the opportunity to use her smarts properly.)

“Red, baby, you in here?” she ventured, but stayed in the entryway of the dark room.

“Who’s that?” came a suspicious voice from the bathroom, which was open, but out of sight around a corner.

“It’s Crystal,” she said loudly, but did not venture forward. “You wanted me to stay, remember?”

There was a pause. “Give me a minute, will you? Or actually, just leave, darling. I want to be alone. Yes, as it turns out, I want to be alone.” Red was drifting into his fake English accent again.

“Sure, baby.” But she did not move. Instead she watched his wavering shadow, cast into the room.

“I didn’t hear you leave.”

“No.”

“I thought you said you’d leave.”

“I will when I see that you’re okay.”

“I’m okay. I just want to be alone. Like I’m pretty sure *I just said.*”

“What are you doing in the bathroom?”

“What do you mean, what am I doing in the bathroom? What the fuck does that mean? Maybe I’m taking a crap.”

“Or maybe not,” she said boldly, for she knew something in the universe had shifted.

“Jesus H. Christ.”

“Just come out and show me you’re okay. Then I’ll leave.”

“Why don’t you think I’m okay?”

“Just show me.”

“You’ve known me what, two weeks?” “Three, actually. Since Boston.”

“I’ll call the fucking desk and have you bodily removed. Did Corky send you up here?”

“Red, just show me you’re okay.”

And with that he stepped out of the bathroom, buck naked, both hands up. His wiry, hairy-but-pink body was covered, head to foot, in the lyrics of *Punksbit Heart*, scrawled wildly with the black marking pen. On his right cheek was the word *Stop* and on his left the word *Asking*. Written backwards. Crystal recognized the lyrics instantly—and knew they were a pathetic choice for a self-abusive statement, given that the song was nearly ten years old. The steak knife was in his right hand. His left hand was open as if in a gesture of surrender. He was, however, apparently not yet harmed.

“See? I’m fine.”

“A naked man holding a steak knife is not fine.”

“Oh, the knife?”

“Yeah, the knife.”

In a show of yet-youthful defiance, Red Peters improvised. He brought both hands together, raised the steak knife above his head, and leapt straight up in a stage move, ready to plunge the weapon down into his belly like a samurai. But in her heightened state, Crystal was too fast for him. She took three rapid strides and leapt forward, catching Red in midair, and causing the two of them to fall heavily to the well-padded carpeting of the Executive Suite.

As they fell, Red let go of the knife, which flew away with a sharp slap against the wall. Red did not, however, rise to retrieve the knife, or struggle, or even shout. Instead, like Crystal, he just lay back on the comfortable carpet, full length, naked, marked with nearly-ten-year-old lyrics, and breathing heavily. At last he said:

“I had a dream about Hell.”

“No kidding?”

“Seriously. It was terrifying.”

“Was it like, a cavern with fire?”

“No. I’m not sure I’d remember, though. Something like an antiques shop.”

“With, like, spooky porcelain dolls?” asked Crystal. “I always get freaked out by those old-fashioned porcelain dolls.”

“I don’t remember any dolls. There were a lot of other things though, and people talking. I wanted to shut them all up so I could think. But I could not.”

He said it with such seriousness that she felt compelled to reply, “It does sound like Hell. Maybe you were really there.”

“It’s not a ‘there,’ that’s part of the problem.” He paused briefly, unable to explain this remark. “I’m afraid to die, Crystal.” he said finally. “But just think how quiet it would be.”

“Everyone’s afraid to die, baby. It’s like... reasonable. And *everyone* thinks how wonderfully quiet it could be. That’s not unusual at all.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Absolutely reasonable. And it’s normal to want to die for the peace and quiet. I mean, if it *is* quiet. It’s fucked if it’s not.”

“You’re not treating me like an idiot,” noted Red. “Are you an idiot?” asked Crystal.

“No,” said Red. “I’m really not. I’m actually quite bright. Did you know that I started out singing classical?”

“Like, Mozart?”

He looked at her quizzically. And then she became the first person he ever told the story about Miss Tomlinson and the madrigal on the steps of the Met.

With all the hundreds of interviews he'd done, he'd never said a word about that afternoon. He'd kept that one single thing to himself. Because unlike, say, his first sexual encounter listening to *Paranoid*, which he had related many, many times, his afternoon on the steps on the Met was personal. He and Miss Tomlinson were the only ones who knew. The other kids were too young or stupid to remember. Crystal did not interrupt, but when he was finished, he wasn't sure he'd done the right thing telling her until she said, "Ah," and asked no further questions.

This made him somewhat interested in her. "Is that your real name, Crystal?"

"No. Is Red Peters your real name?"

"It is, actually. Well, Richard. But even my mother called me Red. Though I'm no longer sure that I *am* Red Peters. Maybe he died, like, a few years ago, and now I'm just filling in for him."

His angst was tedious. And at that moment, she could have said many things. She could have called him a poser and gotten thrown out. Or she could have said the things everyone said: *Oh don't talk like that, Red. You're just tired. I'm sure you'll feel better in the morning. Everyone loves you, Red.* But instead she said:

"Why is *that* unusual? Nobody's really the name they use in public. That's just, you know...standard."

"Really?"

“Of course. You’re not that different from anybody else.” This made him smile. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely certain,” she replied, matter-of-factly. “You play Red Peters to make a living. Duh. Five afternoons a week, I play a cashier at the Walmart, all the way until closing. Seriously, I wear, like a uniform. Mostly, I play Crystal, and I’m not ashamed to admit it. Otherwise, how would *anything* work? I mean, we’d all just be completely *helpless*.”

Then she yawned. When she got tired, her speech patterns generally declined. “If I fall asleep, do you promise you won’t try to kill yourself again until sometime, like, after two p.m.? I mean, like, after you talk to your manager or someone? Otherwise, I’ll have to, like, call 911, and neither of us will get any goddam sleep.”

“Good.” And then some time passed in quiet until the sound of their breathing took over, and they slept side by side right there on the carpet: Red naked, but marked. Crystal marked by her tramy clothing.

“Okay, I promise,” said Red. “Not till after two p.m.”

Red awoke first, and realized with some relief that he had not dreamt again. Sunlight entered in a sharp and menacing halo around the hotel blackout curtains. He saw Crystal, and the sight of her soothed him, and he recalled his promise about waiting until after 2 p.m. to commit suicide. He meant to honor the request, and needed to check the time. He even tried not to wake her as he stood.

When he saw the marking pen all over his naked body, it actually shocked him. Though he did have a vague memory of writing *something* all over himself, it was depressing as crap to see *Punksbit Heart* instead of some brilliant new lyric. The only cool part was the way the two words *Stop Asking* were written large, right across his face. It couldn't have been easy to make that come out the right direction, doing it by himself in front of a mirror. Or wait...it was only right when you saw it in a mirror. And he stood for a time in the bathroom, checking it out. Indeed, after he dressed in a long sleeve shirt and jeans to hide the rest of the lyrics, he found his phone, returned to the bathroom, shot a selfie in the big mirror, and posted the pic without explanation to social media for his fans. Idiot, he thought to himself, *I could have recorded a suicide note. Never mind a goddam pen.*

Momentarily inspired, he went to the bed and picked up an acoustic guitar and his little portable recording machine and tried to write a song. After a while, he gave up.

Then he took a couple of pills he thought were for hangover, and added a couple more. But he was right that the cocaine had been spiked with something nasty. The gin was still in his system. And the pills, alas, were not for hangover. So after he staggered back into the bedroom, took a pillow off the bed, and laid himself ever so gently back down beside the surprisingly sweet and intelligent Crystal, he fell into a coma that lasted six years.

Naturally, the selfie went viral.

Indeed, the phrase *Stop Asking* became not just a meme people used to label tens of thousands of creative images—placed as a caption above sports figures, works of art and pics of New York cabbies—but it appeared in graffiti throughout the world.

It appeared on overpasses. Abandoned buses. Subway walls.

Stop Asking became a symbol of repressed youth, of the desperate masses, of the terrors of modern life, of the timeless frustration of everyone with the hassle of everything and everyone else in the batshit age we live in. In casual conversation, *Stop Asking* came to mean, very roughly, “You are wasting my time and challenging my dignity as a human, and you *still keep asking for more*.”

So now, *fuck off*.” Ultimately, of course, like all the best memes, it was untranslatable—and ever associated with the famous look of infinitely exhausted, infinitely defiant disregard on the face of Red Peters as he stood gauntly in a long-sleeve black collarless shirt in a hotel bathroom— just minutes before he checked into the world’s greatest-ever *fuck off* coma.

A few people noticed that the words “stop asking” appeared together in not just one, but three Red Peters songs, so they created many rabidly argued theories about Red’s actual intentions: Alan Cork being enough of a showman not to spoil the meme by telling the world that the entire lyrics of Punkshit Heart had been written on Red’s body. As noted earlier by Crystal, that would have been pathetic instead of heroic. Corky paid off a couple doctors and nurses to keep the secret. He tried to pay off Crystal, but she said she was insulted by the offer. Of course she wouldn’t say a word.

Here’s what happened during the six years of coma, aside from the usual depressing global events, which we will ignore.

In the first month or so, fans organized candlelight vigils outside the hospital in Chicago, and Red’s catalog enjoyed a surge of interest. Corky had the doctors do inconclusive

encephalograms to check on brain activity, and they replied: *Maybe he has periods of consciousness or perhaps he enters the dream state from time to time, but mostly there's not much going on.* By month four, the prognosis hadn't changed.

So Corky felt free to do whatever he wanted.

Part of what he wanted was to properly time the release of the song Red had composed and recorded on his little recording machine sitting with his guitar on his bed, that night in the hotel. The song only Corky knew about. He had it digitally enhanced to fix the out-of-key parts. He had the engineers add some repeats, and worked in a few subtle backgrounds while keeping the raw acoustic guitar and hoarse-throated essence.

Which is how it happened that in month six after Red Peters entered a coma, his song *Stop Asking* was released as a single to pandemonium in the music industry and headlines around the world. In month eight, it appeared as the last track on a new greatest hits album, *Stop Asking*, which went platinum, earning big bucks for the Red Peters estate, administered by Alan Cork.

The song was goddam depressing, but still... *so right*. It was in such contrast to Red's usual bitching and screaming that it left everyone kind of breathless. *Stop Asking* clearly represented the

end of a certain road, and the end of a certain function for Red Peters in the world. It went like this:

Stop Asking
by Red Peters

*Stop asking the sky to be blue,
Stop asking for something new,
Stop asking me how it should be,
Stop asking me how to be free.*

*Stop asking the wind to blow,
Or asking me to know
And shout out your needs,
And shout out your needs.*

(chorus)

*Just keep flowing down to the sea,
You and the river and me.*

(then quieter again)

*Stop asking the bright lights to shine
Through every new verse and rhyme.
Stop asking for some new desire
That you can stoke into a fire.*

*Stop asking to be beautiful,
Stop asking to be musical,
Or sound a spectacular note,
Baby, in this land of smoke.*

*Just keep flowing down to the sea,
You and the river and me.*

(bridge)

*And hey, stop asking to be loud
Or cry out to the crowd
Riding your limousine cars
Down impossible boulevards*

*Just keep flowing down to the sea,
You and the river and me.*

(Long instrumental interlude)

*Stop asking the world
Its banners to unfurl
In some new and wonderful way
So you can observe a more glorious day.*

*Stop asking if we can achieve
That miraculous dream,
Stop asking the day to break
When it's already broken...*

*Just keep flowing down to the sea,
You and the river and me.*

*Stop asking the sky to be blue,
Stop asking for something new,
Stop asking me how it should be,
Stop asking me how to be free.*

Despite all this drama, by the end of year two, the fact that Red Peters was still breathing in some secret nursing home somewhere had ceased to be a subject of great interest, even to his fans. (Actually, the nursing home was in the medium-sized town of Elizabeth, New Jersey. Corky had Red quietly moved close enough to his office in Manhattan that he could keep tabs, but far enough so he wouldn't feel guilty about not visiting so often.) Red's mother had died of complications related to lupus. Corky had stolen most of his money. By the end of year three, his Stratocaster was hung in the Grammy Museum above a sad plaque. Occasionally a talk show would host a round of "Should we pull the plug?"

As for Red himself? After the first year, his only steady visitor, aside from interested doctors and lawyers, was Katherine Louise McPherson, aka Crystal, who had moved to Jersey and found a part-time job in another Walmart.

When she heard that Red might or might not have periods of consciousness, and maybe or maybe not could sometimes hear people, Crystal decided she would personally try to keep him from going mad. So she made a routine of visiting as many as four times a week, sometimes staying for hours. She would chat for a while about anything that came into her head: concerts, albums,

her childhood, bad recipes she had learned or invented, her life, whatever.

If Red was indeed listening, he would have learned not just about her part time work at Walmart, but how, back in Chicago, she had reluctantly slept with the dorky bellhop from the Hyatt, Tom Donkins—or as she called him, now that she loved him, “Tomkins.” Red would have discovered that when she got pregnant, she actually married Tomkins, who had followed her to New Jersey and was presently working at a Hyatt in Newark. Already, they had a little girl, whom Crystal often brought with her to visit — at first nursing the child by his bedside, then letting her run wild in his nursing home room.

After these chats, Crystal would carefully place earbuds in Red’s ears and work a portable media player. She played the great Red Peters anything and everything. Mostly head-banger stuff, of course, as she figured that’s what he liked best, but also nearly everything else she knew: oldies, folk, country, news, sports, talk shows, speeches, comedy routines, radio dramas, whatever — the incessant song and chatter of millions for hours every day.

Her random audio hodgepodge may have seemed like a lot for an unconscious man to absorb, but the total input of song and chatter was probably not much more than average for a modern

human. In fact, likely she provided no more than the same amount of song and chatter we all absorb every day.

Though, of course, Red could not fight back.

For Red, the first three years of his coma were literally Hell. What had been hinted in his terrible 20 minutes of dreaming after the concert now extended for 1,576,800 minutes. Hell is like that: always wanting more. The dream began where it had left off, in the overcrowded antiques shop: the repository of all the useless and unwanted effort of humankind. The stuff in the shop was discarded and ignored, *but still shouting for fucking attention all the time*. All our desperate, inspired efforts at art and beauty—which taken together, includes 99.999% crap, from kitsch to worse—were collected together to shout at poor Red, who in the past, was privileged to be *the guy doing the shouting*. But no more. Now Red's consciousness drifted darkly among a broken jukebox, a cracked chandelier, a porcelain pig with a smile, a worn and unsmiling Miles Davis record cover without the vinyl inside, a lit neon Pepsi sign looking cheerful, Abraham Lincoln's portrait mysteriously painted red and looking grim, a clock decorated green with towers like Oz, a clock decorated brown and stitched like a football, a clock decorated like a wedding cake; and a billion other objects in the infinite inner space of the antiques store, including rhinestone-decorated horseshoes, two sets. Then, thanks to the audio player

and the earbuds provided by Crystal: CNN, CNBC, Fox, CSPAN, talking heads, shithead nasty political commentators, crying women, screaming refugees, dark predictions, dark productions, heralds of dark outcomes, and well, everything else dark and light, but mostly dark.

Somewhere in the back, and for years, the same three middle-aged women were speaking at the same time, and still incomprehensibly, possibly in Spanish, but probably not Almodóvar. Somewhere nearer by, perhaps from the dusty jukebox, several strains of music played ever simultaneously and with increasing volume, slowly rising over the three years of pure Hell: a mix of rock and country and world and Incan bells, not to mention oldies like “Tubular Bells.” All that music and radio and talk and talk and talk allowed the terrifying “everything of everything”— yes, provided unwittingly by well-meaning Crystal—to crash any last gates poor Red’s unconscious mind could erect. He was helpless before the onslaught, as into his brain, unfiltered and unresisted, came rants of politics too broadly stated, lyrics of songs too well known, pointless speculation on topics too well discussed, unhinged claims about things too well promoted, bawdy jokes about body parts not well washed, along with the arguing and triviality of everything that jangled and

buzzed from childhood to adulthood and into senility without the hope of death.

As a result, Red Peters served yet a new purpose in the world by becoming the unwitting repository of modern life. The world no longer *asked*, it *took* his mind as it pleased: just as it had always wanted to do to us all. The result was terrifying, and naturally in his dream state he began to run. At first, he ran down crowded chasms of New York City, then down crowded chasms of Hong Kong, Dubai, Singapore, Adelaide, Houston, Downtown L.A., Chicago inside the Loop, London near the river, and the uglier parts of suburban Paris, mostly toward the north.

He had a lot of time to run.

Never once for three years did Red respond to any of Crystal's efforts, even when she massaged his sex — though sometimes this produced a cluster of spikes on the brainwave monitor. At such moments, she'd run and get the nurse, but the nurse would reliably smile at the foolish girl, and write the event in Red's chart, where it would be forgotten. Her sexual efforts to revive Red were duly reported to her husband, Tom Donkins, who did not mind in the least. After all, he was a big fan.

In fact, Donkins would sometimes come and stand beside the bed with her, and stare at the unmoving star, aware of the sound of both the patient's breath, and his own. Over the years,

he came in better and better clothes, as he advanced from bellhop, to front desk, to shift manager. But it made him uncomfortable to see the iconic Red Peters reduced to this state, aging soundlessly before his eyes, and he did not come often.

Fortunately for Red, in year four of his coma, Crystal decided she needed help in her sanity campaign. Corky had long since stopped returning her calls, and the band had long ago dispersed to other gigs. She had friends who still listened to Red Peters, but they weren't people she particularly liked. Most of them were, like, hung up on *Stop Asking*, as if it said it all. Plenty of times she thought about telling them the truth about that phrase, but she honored her commitment.

At last, desperate for an ally, she decided to track down Red's old choir director, Miss Tomlinson.

Everyone else just seemed so useless.

It wasn't actually that hard to find the old lady. Crystal had remembered the name of the East Lawrence School from her fateful night at the Hyatt, and the school had no issue in giving her contact information for Crystal's "favorite old music teacher," the now retired but ever-wonderful Miss Tomlinson, "whose first name I can't say I ever knew, but who gave me my love of music."

Crystal decided not to call in advance, but just to show up at the woman's house one afternoon, a modest colonial out in Morristown. It seemed like fate that Miss Tomlinson had retired to Jersey, just like Red.

Miss Tomlinson (not Ms.), now seventy-seven, answered skeptically. Before her stood a thin young woman of twenty-five or thirty-five with streaky green hair and eager eye, dressed like a streetwalker and leading a ragged three-year-old by the hand: boy or girl she couldn't be sure, as it had so much hair.

"Hi," said Crystal.

"Sorry, I am not going to give you anything," said the old lady, making to close the door.

"Are you Miss Tomlinson?"

"Sorry?"

"Who used to teach choir?"

The door hesitated. "Why do you care to know?"

"Who was Red Peters' teacher?"

Long pause as the universe shifted again. "What?"

"I'm Red's girlfriend... um, ex-girlfriend. Still friend, though."

Another moment passed. In fact, two moments passed. "Sorry?" asked Miss Tomlinson.

At this point we must mention that Miss Tomlinson was not just an old lady, but a bitter old spinster. Her retirement, eight years earlier, had been forced. She had never progressed beyond middle school choir teacher at East Lawrence. She had never married. Once upon a time she'd been religious, but now she thought all religion was bullshit. Instead of reading Dickens and Trollope as she once did, going to the theatre, or listening to great music as was once her wont — she now watched a great deal of television. In fact, mostly stuff on the rerun channel from the golden age of TV. Out of sheer depression.

The framed but unsigned publicity photo of a much younger Red Peters, pounding his guitar and singing in full glitter beneath strong spotlights, stood on her mantel among the photos of her dearest relatives. It had stood there for many years. She also had a newspaper clipping with the *Stop Asking* selfie photo lying face up, but unframed on the mantel. Just a scrap of paper, really.

Twenty-eight years had passed since the great moment when young, promising Red had willfully violated a madrigal under her baton, and ten years had passed since the last time she had tried to contact him. Like Red, she often thought about those forty seconds on the steps of the Met. They had brought a vision from another realm: a place of dangerous meaning which she could not comprehend, but to which she could not help but be

attracted. It was a place as out of a dream. She had followed Red's career closely. Though she hated his loud, trashy music, she nevertheless obsessed over it, marveling at its mysterious popularity. She wondered:

Why do people love darkness?

She had not wanted to contact Red merely as a form of self-aggrandizement or self-justification, but because she had wanted to talk. She had wanted to truly understand the meaning of those forty seconds at the Met. Not that she ever had any exact idea what she would say to the great and dangerous Red Peters if she actually tracked him down; only that the conversation somehow needed to occur. It frustrated her how he didn't know that they had both understood something important that afternoon. Yes, that was it: they needed to compare notes. Her life, too, had been changed, though not in a good way. Some of the joy had gone out of it in that fateful moment. Satisfaction had mysteriously departed. Over the years, however, Miss Tomlinson had come to accept an inevitable lack of closure. Just as she would never fulfill her dream of sex with a good man, a meaningful conversation with Red Peters would never occur.

But now, here stood this woman in her doorway. With a child.

“Come in dear,” she said to Crystal. “Have a seat while I make some coffee.”

Crystal sat on an overstuffed sofa and looked around the old-lady living room, noting the baby grand and the thirty or so group photos of kid choirs hung above it. Years and years of kid choirs. Of course, she also noted, on the mantel among the pictures of nieces and nephews and visits to cathedrals in Europe, an ancient publicity still of Red—probably from around the time of *Loud Animal*. Crystal pulled out a bag of blocks and scattered them on the floor for the child to play with.

“How is it possible you are here?” asked Tomlinson. “Red told me about your choir. He had fond memories.”

Miss Tomlinson let this sink in. Then she replied:

“Isn’t Red Peters still alive in a coma somewhere?”

“Over four years in a coma. He told me... he told me about you right before he went under. In fact, just before. Like minutes, probably. Now he’s in a home in Elizabeth, about a half-hour east of here. He’s still out.”

Miss Tomlinson stared at her. “I tried for years to contact Red Peters. He never replied.”

“Maybe he never got the message.” “And you? What’s your name?”

“Katherine,” said Crystal, surprising herself. She hadn’t used that name for years, but the old lady reminded of her mother, who totally hated the name Crystal.

“Okay, Katherine. I never read about you...and I’ve read pretty much everything about Red Peters.”

“Yeah, somehow the reporters missed me. Or actually, I avoided them like the plague. The police helped. So you’re still a fan of Red’s?”

“I never liked his music. Not my style, but I—” The old woman hesitated.

This sounded wrong.

Crystal raised her eyebrows. “I guess everyone has their own taste.” “I’m sure I just never understood it. I thought he might explain it to me.

Or at least— you see when he was a boy, he loved everything classical. He listened to Haydn. Sang Bach beautifully. He had a sweet, wonderful voice as a boy.”

“Wow. I guess he would have.”

“I do have all his albums, though.”

The two women sipped coffee as this sunk in. “Listen,” said Crystal. “I have a favor to ask.” Miss Tomlinson merely raised her eyebrows. “It’s kind of crazy, maybe,” pursued Crystal. The eyebrows went higher.

“Red is still in this stupid coma. The doctors say he doesn’t really, you know, have consciousness, like, *per se*. But I don’t believe it. I mean, he’s basically asleep, right? And when you’re asleep you’re not entirely unaware. You can still hear things, right? So I think either he’s bored or sad. And I—” She hesitated, then drove forward in a rush. “Well, I go to the nursing home and I play him stuff two or three times a week, when I can. To maybe keep him sane for when he wakes up. That is, if they don’t, you know, pull the plug on him.

They might, though there really isn’t a *plug*. It’s more like they’d stop feeding him. They’ve talked about it, for sure. I play him the news and music and everything. But I don’t really *know* much about music, only like the current hits, and of course his stuff and other metal from the big years. I don’t know anybody who has much taste.” She paused to consider this last remark, then forged ahead. “But anyway, like I said, he remembered your name — and I thought you might, well, bring some classical stuff for him to listen to. Or other stuff too. Do you know like good jazz? You seem like an educated person. And maybe you have time. And it’s only a half-hour drive.” She looked the woman eye to eye. “I’m basically asking for help.”

Only rarely is anyone offered the chance to grasp the lost thread of their life's meaning. Miss Tomlinson hesitated only long enough to save face.

"Of course. More coffee? I probably have some cookies for the child, too." "Her name's Honor."

The girl turned at her name.

The Riviera Nursing Home was a squat, depressing, one-story affair, crowded between a gas station and a 7-11 on a busy boulevard in an uninteresting part of town. It was painted green and had a faux mansard roof, painted the same green. Miss Tomlinson arrived on a Tuesday at 1 p.m., just after lunch. Beside her on the passenger seat sat a battered NPR tote bag holding a large stack of old-fashioned CDs and a small, by-then antique CD player. Just parking in the lot and exiting the car proved a surreal experience.

After all, this place was less than thirty minutes from her house, and he had been lying right here for four years.

Was she really about to see Red Peters?

Crystal had not yet arrived, and at the front desk, Miss Tomlinson hesitated only a moment before asking if she could go in alone. Just knowing Crystal's name seemed to establish her *bona*

fidēs, and besides, Red was no longer hassled by unstable fans. That had ended a good while ago.

A CNA took Miss Tomlinson down a hallway of old wood paneling painted over in chilly white. She could hear the traffic on the boulevard every time you passed a room, accompanied by the buzz of old florescent light fixtures and the babble of TVs.

The door to Room 17 was open, and *there he was*, lying alone on a narrow hospital bed. The window was up, the glare of summer entered freely, and like the other rooms, this one rattled with traffic. At first Miss Tomlinson wasn't sure the man on the bed even *was* Red. Then her eyes traced the familiar nose. The famous pointy chin. He appeared horribly thin and pale. The famous scarlet hair had been cut ugly and short. He was sleeping, but not peacefully. He looked older than his forty-three years and decidedly *bound against his will*. Not a rebellious child, but a prisoner. You could not say that any expression actually appeared on his face, yet his face showed a grim restlessness. A clear unhappiness.

Not surprising, since Red was still in Hell.

The CNA left, and Miss Tomlinson sat in a hard, wooden chair next to the bed. It proved fortunate that she had time alone with Red Peters, for when she laid her hand on his, she became his new mother. Indeed, by the time Crystal arrived, and very

much like a mother, Miss Tomlinson had saved Red from Hell. It wasn't that difficult: she had carefully placed headphones on his ears, and she was playing him Mozart's Piano Quartet in E-flat major, K. 493.

Four years after his first visit, Heaven still looked like Tuolumne meadows, high in Yosemite National Park, on a sweet and sunny afternoon. The air tasted fresh with altitude. Again Red Peters walked along the north fork of the Tuolumne River in the grassy field. Only now, in addition to the baby grand pianos placed at pleasant intervals along the banks and beneath great mountains, he found cellists and violinists, even the occasional violist or oboist in neat folding chairs, spaced into the vanishing distance. All the musicians played Mozart with the same sense of joyful inevitability he now recalled with mounting excitement. He himself was thirteen years old, with his sense of wonder just peaking.

“Mozart,” he reflected, with all the happiness of revelation, “represents eternity itself: ever the same, yet ever occurring anew.” He leapt atop the nearest piano, his boy-face shining in the sunlight, and began to sing along, *la, la la*. But then, remarkably, he improvised his own melody above the melody. His own lyrics. It was a counter-tune – chaotic, separate, but

necessary. He caught the eye of the pianist and they played off one another, back and forth in sympathy and laughing syncopation. The music became visible, Disney-like, as if built of color or birds. And when at last the sun set and the meadow became dark, Red Peters climbed down into the long grasses of the warm night and curled up to look into the stars until he became twenty-one, and a woman appeared by his side, and she said she loved him.

Then it was the next afternoon at around the same time, and Mozart returned.

And Red was again allowed to create beauty.

And then again and again, the next and the next day.

And lo, within this rhythm he realized that *the only thing human beings truly desire is creation. To be fruitful and multiply.* “That’s what it means that we are made in the image of God,” he said, as if aloud. “It’s just that simple. Like God, humans also wish, ceaselessly, to create. Not just children and art, but fields, food, houses, buildings, machines, moments, music, politics, emotional crises, you name it.” He wanted to explain this to someone, so he said it to the beautiful, if nameless woman who appeared beside him: “Sometime go visit an antiques shop jammed with bric-a-brac from the ages, all of it created for some unknown purpose by some eager craftsman, and you too will understand spoons shaped like shepherds and lamps shaped like tubas, gorillas flying tin

planes around model Empire State Buildings, artificial flowers painted like the flags of the nations. Humans will create anything and everything, just to build *something, anything* to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.”

And here he paused a moment to complete coitus with the woman. Surely, he thought, there would be a song in coitus.

“My friends were all wrong to say that Heaven is dull,” reflected Red afterwards. “Why, for Heaven’s sake, would God allow Heaven to become dull?” He saw the full truth. He saw how all of history and all ideas and all creation wanted to re-enact itself through him, just because he was alive. To use him as their vehicle into the future. He saw that all information, all beauty, all music, all organisms, all microorganisms, even the inanimate wishes to persist. Bach, Haydn, Hendrix had their strategies. And even forgotten songs find a way to survive, through their echoes in later songs.

“But to survive,” he reminded the woman and everyone and everything that wanted to exist, “everything requires destruction and re-creation. By God or by man. Death and rebirth. That is to say, Hell and Heaven, Heaven and Hell, Hell and Heaven again. In riffing off Mozart atop grand piano after grand piano, his job was to destroy and to create Mozart, again.

And then he awoke.

When he opened his eyes, Red Peters saw two women watching him in surprise. He found them strangely familiar. Through a window, he heard the sound of traffic. Above his head, he heard the hum of cheap florescent lighting. The room was unfamiliar but very bright, and he blinked uncomfortably for a bit. Strangely, it did not seem to be a hotel room. He opened his mouth and tried to speak, but his throat hurt and would not make a sound.

Both the women's eyes opened wider. He tried again, and managed to form the word "who?" Though it came out more like "ew."

He knew that a great deal of time had passed.

"It's Crystal," said the younger of the two women, who was dressed in modest professional clothing. "And you are Red."

Both were strange words, and he wondered for a moment whether they came from Heaven or from Hell. Crystal was like Heaven. But "Red" came from Hell. He saw red flames, and his eyes began to close as he felt himself slipping back into the image-stream of his dream.

"You wanna wake up, Red? Red?"

The word “Red” kept sending him back to Hell, and he might have been lost forever if Crystal had not by chance changed her line of attack:

“Hey there, mister. Wake up for me. Wake up for me.”

Better, she reached out and took his hand. For Red, it was the strangest sensation, this physical touch. It short-circuited the memes and the histories and the philosophies and the music and the art and pull of both Heaven and Hell.

“Eeww?”

Sitting on the other side of the bed, Miss Tomlinson felt very odd. For a moment, perhaps, she hoped he would not awake. These last two years had been very comfortable and fulfilling. She had been happy just coming to the nursing home for a couple hours three or four times a week as the sun declined along the boulevard. She had been happy to play Mozart and Haydn, Vivaldi and Handel for Red Peters – to what? To stem the tide? It was odd, but for some reason, she had never ventured past the eighteenth century. Something about the calm, the control of the neo-classics had seemed necessary. Rather than the Romantics.

And never mind the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Out of the question. “That’s Miss Tomlinson. Do you remember? She was your old choir teacher. Miss Tomlinson.”

And lo again, to Red, it seemed the most natural thing in the world that Miss Tomlinson should be at his bedside, aged and wrinkled. Almost, but not quite, beyond recognition.

“Yes,” he said, managing now to articulate the word quite clearly.

Crystal still held his right hand. Miss Tomlinson now took his left. Crystal was as close as he would ever get to a wife. Miss Tomlinson was as close as he would ever get to a mother. It was enough.

With the considerable logistical help of Tom Donkins, who moved through the world as a man of increasing competence, the two women brought Red to Miss Tomlinson’s little house in Morristown. Or, to be more accurate, they brought him to her home after weeks of physical therapy, two lawsuits against Corky for malfeasance, a countersuit, a court order, global headlines, and general pandemonium. Not to mention renewed sales of Red’s whole catalog and several days of *Stop Asking* demonstrations outside the nursing home (location leaked by the press), from people who thought that Red was being detained or exploited or woken up against his will.

In the end he had to leave the facility by secret midnight ambulance and police escort. Tom even flew to L.A. to pick up the Stratocaster from the Grammy Museum – a personal triumph.

For a time, a pleasant routine fell upon them all: Miss Tomlinson fussing about breakfast, a little annoyed when Red didn't rise 'til noon. Crystal coming by nearly every day with her child, and often staying over (chastely). By now she had become expert in handling the lawyers and the press through a variety of ruses to hide their new location.

Everyone fell into their proper roles and fulfilled their necessary jobs on Earth; except, not yet Red. Crystal began using the name Katherine full time. Her professional clothing grew increasingly expensive. Tom advanced to convention services manager at the Hyatt.

Honor grew.

And yes, finally one afternoon, out in the back yard under her large oak, Miss Tomlinson traded notes with Red Peters about that fateful afternoon on the steps of the Met, now thirty-one years before. Given everything at stake, it was a remarkably brief conversation.

“I did it because I *could*,” explained Red, who rightly thought this explanation enough.

“Of course,” said the old lady, with a smile. “I see that now. And I could do nothing to stop you. None of us could. It’s like that with all children. Why didn’t I understand that before? *Exactly like all children.*”

He returned her old-lady smile with his by-now-famous mean little boy smile.

She said, “The cut worm forgives the plow.” “What?”

“Never mind, sweet Red. Now you have made me happy.”

He looked up at the banal suburban sky and was, for a time, like his new mother, happy also.

It wasn’t easy to play the guitar again: his fingers had become so soft and his arms so weak. But about six months after he awoke from his coma, Red wrote a new song. News of his location leaked to the press, so the first time he sang the new song, he took a folding chair out on the front lawn, just a few feet from the sidewalk.

A considerable crowd of fans and gawkers and media had gathered, leaning forward with phones and microphones and cameras. The crowd was held back by police standing just inside Miss Tomlinson’s little white picket fence.

Red played a few chords of intro, and then the song went like this:

The Productions of Time

by Red Peters

*Baby, come close to me,
Hold me bucking and free,
Come ride this sweaty steed
Into the future.*

*Don't give a single damn
Who you are or what I am,
Let's the two of us scam
Into the future.*

(Change-up to rapid rhythm)

*We'll see DNA clocks and galaxy rocks,
Happy new juice and Superman socks,
Moebius news and laser cocks,
Pretty ghost planes and astral games,
Collapsing digital old man canes
Littering lost country lanes,
All the far fucking away
Into the future.*

*Kickin' an' screamin' babe
Kickin' an' screamin' babe
Into the future.*

*Nobody said it would be okay.
Just make it go on they say,
Just make it go on and on,
Into the future.*

You and me babe, sweaty mare and steed,

*Will buckin' together make a child who'll cry:
Please daddy, mommy, please,
Let me take you with me...*

*Kickin' an' screamin', hey!
Kickin' an' screamin' hey!
Into the future.*

*"Listen daddy," says our child,
"Listen mommy, wait just a while..."*

*"I'll invent driverless stares,
Solid silhouette airs,
3D holographic gears,
Virtual fears, designer tears,*

*Hophead stocks and black hole
Walks To rev my darlin's
atomic box...
Mommy, daddy, just you wait,
'Cause it will never be too late,
It'll never ever be too late
Into the future.*

(Back to opening rhythm)

*Baby, come close to me,
Hold me kicking and free,
Come ride this fresh young steed
Into the future.*

*Here on the sea of dreams,
Ain't no sweet whipped cream
Without you and me, babe*

*Ridin' a fierce riptide
Into the future.*

*Kickin' an' screamin' babe
Kickin' an' screamin' babe
Into the future.*

*Heaven applauds our kind,
Angels sing our longtailed vibe,
Ours not to wonder why,
Ours but to birth and die.*

*See how it has to be?
Got nowhere to flee,
Gotta buck till it rhymes,
Till it finally, finally friggin' rhymes, because...*

*Eternity's in love with the productions of time
Eternity's in love with the productions of time
(then slowly, almost spoken to the
final chord)
Eternity is in love with the productions of time*



Marc Porter Zasada has had many careers: among them newspaper editor, high-tech marketing executive, theatre and classical music reviewer, and radio essayist at NPR station KCRW-LA, where for six years he was known as The Urban Man. As a book reviewer, he was one of the founders of the Bay Area Book Awards. “The Bright Forest” will be part of Marc’s soon-to-be-published story cycle called *The Impossible Shore*. You can read more from Marc and learn more about that work at www.impossibleshore.com.