



**Drive  
By**

**Shards & Poems**

*By John Bennett*

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## **A Rare Moment in Warfare**

The chieftain came  
riding out of  
the trees &  
across the  
corpse-strewn  
field in Germania,  
bareback on a  
candy-striped  
unicorn.

The Roman general  
raised an arm,  
& the archers  
held their fire.

## **Substitute**

When my father  
was one of  
six children  
& the  
bills were  
piling up  
his father  
walked out  
the door &  
never came back.

The new  
father was  
Irish &  
feisty  
had a  
strong sense  
of justice &  
no education.

He could  
lift a  
broom by  
its handle  
with  
ten books  
piled on  
the bristles

used the  
belt freely  
could not  
stand a lie  
was obeyed but  
seldom loved.

A pipe fitter  
by trade  
he spent the  
rest of  
his life  
in the  
bowels of a  
big New York  
hotel  
descending  
daily into  
heat &  
darkness.

He died  
one April a  
shriveled  
substance of  
gray the  
hospital  
window  
open  
trees &  
flowers in

bloom &  
the cries of  
stick ball  
on the  
street below.

The last  
thing to die  
was a  
question in  
his eyes  
answered by  
my father's  
tears his  
great head  
descending to  
the  
shock-white  
sheets.

## Death is Dancing All Around Me

I told her to call anytime of the day or night if she needed me, and she did. I rolled out of bed and threw on some clothes and drove over there.

He'd taken the oxygen tube in his nose for a catheter and wet the bed. She'd managed to get him up and into a recliner while she changed the bedding, but then he couldn't get up again--his legs just stopped working.

When I got there he was giving orders like he always does but he was also sliding in and out of different realities, talking to his father who's been dead for years, taking stock of his water supply and seeing that they needed to lay in a case of spring water from Safeway, calculating that what needed doing right now was to push the recliner across the room to the side of the bed, and from there he could pull himself up and in.

I leaned over him and said, "Better would be if I bend over and you lock your hands around my neck and I walk you to the bed."

"It won't work," he said, panic in his voice, his eyes wide, his skin gray and smooth as a baby's. "We need to get everything in place," he said. "I need to be sure it's right."

"It's right," I said. "We're good to go."

"Are you sure?" he said.

"Hell yes," I said. "So latch on now and let's do it."

"I'm in a lot of places at once," he said, and I said, "I know."

"That's right," he said, remembering, and he locked his hands around my neck.

I got him back in bed. I convinced him that he didn't have a catheter up his nose, how silly would that be? His wife gave him two pills, one for the pain and one to knock him out cold, and then we stepped back into the shadows of the dimly-lit high-ceilinged room, the walls covered with the art that he'd created over the years. She broke down then, cried quietly, and I held her and stroked her hair.

Death is dancing all around me, suicides and cancer, and just a couple of years ago I was right there where my friend is now, except he won't make it back. The most terrifying thing about being in that place is that people around you start thinking you've lost touch with reality, when in fact you're deeper into reality than they can possibly imagine. He'd seen me in that place, and the panic left his eyes when he remembered. He put his arms around my neck, and together we struggled across the room to his final resting place.

## I Don't Speak German

I ran into them at a party, a husband and wife team. He teaches German at one university, she teaches it at another. They hail from San Diego, but they speak flawless high German, all their declensions in perfect order.

The husband was going on about their recent trip to Germany, how he corrected the German of native speakers in Munich, Dresden and Bremen, waitresses and streetcar conductors and porters. They were speaking English at the party of course, but now and then they'd throw in a six-syllable German word to intimidate anyone present who thought they knew a little German themselves.

And then the woman I was with blurted out, "He speaks German!" She meant me.

The German-language professors turned their heads slowly in my direction, like cannon turrets on the Siegfried Line.

"Oh?" the husband said. "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"

I stared at him.

"Did you understand my question?" he said. "I asked if you speak German."

I lit a cigarette and blew out some smoke. "*Du bist ein Arschloch,*" I said, and his smile faded.

Everyone around the table was beaming. A real conversation in German was about to get underway.

"*Wie, bitte?*" the husband said. He couldn't believe his ears.

"You heard me," I said. "You're an asshole. You don't speak German, you speak German words. Talk to me after you've had to talk down six German riot police who've just kicked in your door. After you've done a ten-hour shift washing dishes in a Munich restaurant and are riding home on the *Strassenbahn* talking German with a Turkish co-worker, the only language you have in common. After you've picked up your four-year-old son from your parents in Newport News where you left him for a month, your son who's never spoken anything but German, and while walking to the corner and back with him, trying to explain how things got so fucked up and why you left him alone in a strange house in a strange land with strange people, he cuts you off and in heavily-accented English says, 'I don't schpeak German. Schpeak me in English,' and you can't say anything in any language for the lump in your throat..."

There was silence after that. And then the husband said, "Try saying all that in German. I'll bet you make thirty grammatical errors."

Everyone at the table looked down, except the man's wife, who was staring at him as if she'd never seen him before. "He's right, Carl," she said. "You're an asshole."

I got up from the table and walked out onto the patio and across the dark lawn, that lump in my throat from so long ago back again, as if no time had gone by at all.

## Hot Flashes of Life

So I opted for  
local anesthetic &  
an I.V. drip  
power-packed with  
Fentanyl &  
some high-grade  
Valium  
that zonked me out  
so heavy I  
may as well have  
been out  
all the way,  
except I did  
surface from  
time to time,  
& there  
as if in a  
dream was my  
elfish Irish surgeon  
bent over me  
& intent on  
his work.  
The blonde nurse  
from the  
prep room was  
there too,  
& even in such  
dire straits  
I got a  
sexual hit.  
Somewhere out of  
sight was the  
bearded rotund  
anesthesiologist

with a  
head-wrap bandanna  
that made him  
look like a  
Hell's Angel,  
& after lingering  
half conscious  
for a while I  
mumbled,  
“Kick it up a  
notch, dude.”  
& apparently he  
did, because the  
next thing I  
knew I was  
back on the  
pre-op bed,  
my ex taking  
pictures with her  
cell phone.  
I immediately began  
hamming it up,  
& within two  
hours I was  
out of there.

In the middle  
of the  
first night  
my body started  
jerking around  
in fits of  
pain that  
Percocet  
couldn't touch,  
& two days

later I was  
on the  
bathroom floor in  
more pain still,  
vomiting &  
self-administering a  
handy-pack enema  
from Safeway &  
swilling down a  
vile laxative  
concoction,  
admonishing my ex  
between groans  
thru the  
bathroom door  
NOT to call  
for an ambulance,  
hospitals are the  
8th highest cause  
of death  
in the country.

I went in today  
for a  
check-up,  
& when the  
surgeon  
stripped off the  
bandages,  
there was his  
handy work,  
a series of  
precision  
incisions.  
The reason the  
whole thing

took two & a  
half hours  
instead of the  
projected 45  
minutes is that  
when he  
got in there  
he found  
the work from  
the prior operation,  
done by a  
cardiovascular genius  
from India,  
in shambles--  
mesh bent over  
& torn loose  
so that in  
addition to  
sewing up two  
sizable hernias,  
the Irish elf  
had to open up  
everything old &  
start from  
scratch.

I'm on the  
hill now  
with my  
mocha &  
cigarettes,  
under instructions  
to do  
no more than  
feels comfortable,  
which, I'm learning



the hard way,  
means in my  
case one half  
of what  
feels comfortable,  
because I  
get these  
hot flashes  
of life  
like right now  
where I want to  
jump out of  
the car &  
dance along the  
cliff's edge  
blasting away  
on my  
blues harp.  
I want to  
rock every  
beautiful  
woman I  
lay eyes on  
in my arms &  
I want to  
rip into a  
new novel  
& I want to  
gather all the  
wounded people  
in my life  
around me &  
flood them  
with whatever  
this is  
that surges

thru me like a  
mountain stream  
rushing madly  
over rocks &  
thru gullies  
to be  
swallowed  
by the sea.

## **Madame Curie's Lap Dog**

I am Madame Curie's lap dog, a timid isotope in a kennel of isotopes, my nose to the chain link, my whole focus on the lab door, waiting for it to swing wide and the grand lady herself to pass through. I'm longing to be chosen, placed under a microscope, longing to be probed and split and split again.

Chain link, chain reaction, missing link--the universe of awareness is made up of inference and fusion and cagey connections, all of it leading to silence.

Madame Curie was on to us, so we made her glow in the dark and then vanish.

## **I Am the Walrus**

I am the walrus. You can be whatever you choose. A penguin, perhaps. Together we can learn to tap dance and join the Freaks & Oddities Show working its way north from Pensacola. We don't have to have sex. We can keep it platonic. Read the same book by candlelight lying side by side sipping red wine in our trailer. Let people talk.

I know I'm much older, but what's age to a penguin and a walrus? We know what's passed between us.

Years from now, after the novelty's worn off, we can adopt. If we're rejected, we can kidnap something--a partridge, a pheasant, a cockatoo. Birds of a feather, we'll stick together until the end.

This is what Joseph Campbell meant by follow your bliss.

**This is only a sample of the book.  
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*By John Bennett*

# Drive By Shards & Poems

“John Bennett—a great writer of no category—as if the soul and brain and heart and balls of Jack Kerouac, Maurice Blanchot, Paul Valéry and Elsa Lasker-Schiller were reincarnated as one. But even that constellation won’t describe the ineffable rise of the authority of his moral center, lifting like a central valley tule fog burning off into some golden angel of sun rushing across/toward the indescribable clownface of history.

**Edward Mycue, poet  
San Francisco**

“The thing that continually fascinates me about your writing is the trueness of it: not just a ‘write what you know’ kind of trueness, but a permanently immediate truth, something you could put in a time capsule and it would still be just fine in a thousand years.”

**Liz Druitt**



“John Bennett never f\*\*ks around and has sensitive, frank, disturbing things to say... he fills in the chinks in poetry-culture where the mice and owls live.”

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“Bennett’s books are tremendously readable... a kind of moral stamina alongside the capacity for sheer survival.”

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