

M. Thomas Gammarino

M. Thomas Gammarino has an MFA from the New School and is working towards his PhD at UH. He was lucky enough to get here a couple of years before Ian's retirement and regards it a great honor to have fallen under the master's tutelage. Uncharacteristic of him, he means that without a hint of irony.

"Bum Deal" first appeared in *Word Riot* circa 2007.

BUM DEAL¹

In March of 2003, while most of the nation was mourning the loss of megabestselling short-story writer Timothy Lipshitz, publishers were lining up at Lipshitz' mother's door, scavenging for any unpublished work he might have left behind. Mrs. Lipshitz turned them all away, claiming her son had burned everything in the oven just prior to putting his head in. Even if that had been the case, Lipshitz' contribution to literature would have been Homeric.

But then last month, a young woman approached our offices, carrying in a paper bag what were allegedly two stories written by Lipshitz in the weeks prior to his death. The woman did not wish to identify herself, but it didn't escape our notice that, not unlike the love interest in Lipshitz' brilliantly understated masterpiece "I Would Not Necessarily Be Averse to Fingering Your Insides," she was endowed with "eyes like ice cubes drowned in absinthe," and a "widow's peak you could split your perineum on." We offered to pay her for the stories, but she declined, so long as we promised to run the stories. "He would like to have seen them published," she told us.

We hired a team of literary scholars and linguists to go over the stories with fine-toothed combs, and so far everything seems to check out. The story printed here, and the one we will run in the next issue, both appear to be genuine, otherwise we would not have published them, but we'll leave the final verdict up to our readers. On the off chance that it turns out this story was not in fact written by Lipshitz, we will not be sorry to have published it. As far as we're concerned, anyone who can ape genius this consummately deserves to be published in his/her own right.

¹ Reprinted with permission from the publisher. This piece originally ran in *The Yankee Doodle Monthly*, August, 2005.

And so, without further ado, we unveil to the world a new short story very possibly written by the late, great Timothy Lipshitz.

Enjoy.

-ed.

A Fine Day at the Office by Timothy Lipshitz (1978-2003)

Jimothy wakes up and there's a knot behind his sternum, a boy scout knot he doesn't remember how to untie. He got the badge, but he's forgotten. Sheepshank? He could still make a tripod if he had to. No time for a snooze this morning. He's trying something new, moving the time back twenty-seven minutes instead of snoozing three times. He thinks maybe he'll sleep sounder that way. So far, all evidence is to the contrary. He feels twice as tired as he did when he went to sleep. What a bum deal that is. Eight hours for nothing. It won't feel like nothing once he's had his coffee, but why can't we be more like machines? Turn us on and we're on. Of course the copiers at work need a little time to warm up, and his computer boots up, which takes way longer than it should. A bum deal, that. He rubs his eyes with his wrists, stretches orgiastically, closes his eyes and counts to thirteen, like that's gonna help. He deliberates for a while and decides to count to thirteen again and to spring up on thirteen or else have bad luck all day. He gets to thirteen and breaks it up into quarters and finally springs up on the downbeat of fourteen and hits his head on a passing mosquito.

He stumbles into the bathroom and into the shower and he's still kind of dreaming. He's got the word "claw" in his mind for no reason he can think of and he keeps repeating it and words that rhyme with it. Claw, daw, law, gnaw, raw . . . ; He towels off. His towel smells like ass—donkey and posterior both. He always washes his ass, but the towel still smells. As if that made any sense. A bum deal, that. He could eat, but it would make him feel nauseous, and anyway he doesn't leave himself time for that. The house smells like fucking socks. He can hear his dad in the basement watching the news. Even with his hearing aids, he has to turn it as loud as it'll go, all thirty of the green bars standing on edge like scared forearm hair. The whole house booms. At least it's just the news. Sometimes he hears women moaning and he feels sick. "Dad!" he'll scream, and the old guy'll say, "Sorry, Jimothy" and kill a couple of the bars, but only a couple. He doesn't care. Dying is a process, and he's halfway gone already. Jimothy brushes his teeth and goes to catch the bus, and no adventure there, he catches it. The driver's an asshole, white guy who doesn't like

white guys. Fuck him. Jimothy used to have a car. One day Jimothy got in it and a homeless guy popped up in the rearview, and Jimothy did a double take and realized this fucking dude was *inside* the car, sleeping on the back seat! Jimothy apoplexed. "What the fuck? Get the fuck out of here," and the guy started to explain, but Jimothy just said, "No, get the fuck out of here right this second." The car smelled like homeless guy after that, but that wasn't why he sold the car. He sold the car because he couldn't afford it anymore. His job paid like shit and someday he hoped to marry a girl. So he gets to the station and from the station takes the tram and from the tram walks a few blocks to the office. He drinks some acrid coffee from the new coffee machine, drizzles in a little parmelot, which is fucking disgusting. He goes in his office and checks his fucking e-mail and it's the same old shit and he's not up for doing it today, he really fucking isn't. He just had his annual review and it was gold stars all over the place and he got his two-percent raise and he continues coming to this fucking hole so that he can keep financing his coming to this fucking hole. What a bum fucking deal. He drinks more coffee. He likes the way it makes his head feel, like it's crammed full of dogshit. He *likes* that. Oh man. This fucking blows, sitting here, six more hours to go. Nothing real to do. He fucking gets up. No one will miss him. He fucking walks over to publicity and he walks up to this girl he's never seen before and he says, "Hi, do you know where I can . . ." and then he fucking goes crazy and palms her head and twists her fucking neck. A few other publicity assistants are there to witness it, but they don't move, and he says, "Don't you fucking move." Then he walks down the hall to marketing and finds some fucking dude, for balance, and he asks to borrow some masking tape and the guy hands it over and Jimothy tapes up the guy's mouth and nostrils so the fucker can't breathe and then he fucking bashes in his head. He feels so fucking awesome. He goes and gets some more coffee. By now someone's called the authorities. He can hear the sirens, so he figures he's got like two or three minutes left. He's on a fucking rampage. He's run amok and he feels fucking better than he ever has in his life. He knows where he's headed. He goes down to his boss's office. Bobert, the nicest guy in the world. "Hey, Bobert, I've been wanting to ask you if . . ." He's got Bobert's attention now and he jumps on the desk and punts his head. Bobert plays hockey on Wednesday nights, however, so he recovers and body checks Jimothy and puts him in a full nelson and pins him to the ground. Jimothy fucking foams at the mouth and he's like this is fucking ridiculous. The cops take him away and then there's a trial and there's years of fucking jail and shit, and some reporter asks him if he regrets any of it, and he's like "No fucking way do I regret it. That was the only awesome thing I ever did in my life." And the whole fucking

country bands together for a giant flinch.

About the Author (For those of you who've been living under rocks)

Before his untimely death at the age of twenty-five (and what suicide isn't untimely?), Timothy Lipshitz was without contest the finest practitioner of the short story in North America. In an age when critics eulogized the written word and videogames outsold novels ten-to-one, Lipshitz appeared like a deus from the machina to breathe new life into American literature. In his short, too short, life, Lipshitz produced just one collection of stories, but there is little doubt its reach will extend for decades, if not centuries. *If I Could Just Open My Mouth a Little Wider, I Do Believe I Could Swallow My Head* was the first literary book in history, so far as I know, to ascend to the status of required reading for every American, independent of age, race, class, or religion. Only the cave dweller will not remember the frenzy that began with the book's publication in April of 2000. For the better part of two years, and in some ways ongoing, one could hardly go anywhere without hearing talk of stories like "Uckfay Ouyay"—in which the reader, by the very act of reading, is implicated in the intellectual rape of the story's hero, which, as compared with the rape of the body is, "as madness to whooping cough"—or AEIOU, AE YOU OWE ME—the 63-poem cycle in which the English poet A.E. Houseman, is repeatedly gored by unicorns—or the now oft-anthologized "Hitler's Testy(cle)," the heart-rending insanity plea of the apocryphal dog who bit off millions of potential heirs in the form of Hitler's left teste when the antichrist was yet a boy.

Lipshitz' work is a study of the hieratic soul crashing against the shores of contemporary American reality. With inimical perspicacity and legerdemain, Lipshitz captures the essential tiptoe of the modern condition, braiding the modern malaise with the human need to belong. His protagonists, dehumanized by the fundamentally hostile systems they are forced to operate in (Lipshitz was an avowed Communist), invariably lash out in acts of existential meaning-making. Oftentimes they are forced resort to violence, and if it feels disingenuous, that is precisely the point. Critics have praised Lipshitz' work for all manner of felicity, but above all, the work is a bitter indictment of America, and beware anyone who tells you otherwise. On the other hand, Lipshitz doesn't promote violence outright. As in *A Fine Day At The Office*, Lipshitz' protagonists never get off scot-free. Always there is an idealized anti-villain—the projection of all Timothy wishes he could be—to stand between him and the achievement of his objectives (the reader gets intellectually castrated, the dog gets away with only one teste, the unicorns get corralled). Many critics have proposed that this anti-villain—

variously named Robert, Rob, Robby, Robin, Roberto, Roberta, Rubina, Bobert (as in "A Fine Day at The Office"), Bub, Boob, Rodney, Rod, Rube, Ruben, Rudy, Roger, and Rog—might be a stand-in for God. It will be obvious to anyone who does a modicum of research that this archetype is in fact based on myself. I knew Timothy well, we were friends, and in suggesting that Timothy Lipshitz would not be where he is today without my influence, I don't believe I'm saying anything he wouldn't have gladly said himself.

Shall we have a personal remembrance then?

We shall.

We were in high school. My cohorts and I were all gathered by the fire telling ghost stories. It was the afternoon and the sun was still flying high, so nothing we said felt particularly scary. But then Timothy Lipshitz came over after his lute lesson behind the other tree and an ominous feeling came over us because the lute music was no longer there for background. He said, "Hi guys," and we said, "Hi, Timothy Lipshitz. What're you up to?" and he genuinely scared us then. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out a pocket comb and took it to his nipple and began sawing at it, and we were like, "Timothy Lipshitz, what the fuck do you think you're doing?" but he just kept on sawing away at his nipple until he had it detached and dangling from his finger, dripping blood. The hole in his chest where his nipple used to be spouted blood like a hydrant and we were all like, "Jesus, Timothy Lipshitz, stop that." I pulled the cork out of the wine bottle and it made one of those inner cheek sounds and I thrust it into Timothy Lipshitz's chest, and the relief we all felt was palpable.

"Timothy Lipshitz," I said, "I believe you need to have a talking to. You just got our attention, so pat yourself on the back if that's what you were after, but you see, Timothy Lipshitz, there are these things called limits, bounds you see, and we want you to respect them. That's how you can please us best. We know you're younger than us and that to impress us seems like a worthy pursuit, but trust us there are fitter ways to spend your time. You could have dehydrated on us, don't you see? You could have turned yourself into an empty vessel right before our eyes. We don't require that of you, Timothy Lipshitz. You're a gentleman, Timothy Lipshitz, a gentle person, and we like you as you are."

Here Timothy Lipshitz spoke up, "I have many flaws, I don't deny it, and it's true I wanted to fit in because eating lunch alone in the corner is a lonely lonely business. The vending machines hum and I hum back and no one even makes fun of me for that because no one is in earshot. I keep telling myself the same jokes and I do crazy things, I elbow macaroni, and nobody is there to tell me to stop it. So I just thought if I sawed off my

nipple with a pocket comb, then maybe . . ."

I didn't see any point in letting him go on. "Timothy Lipshitz, we get it, but you could have really hurt yourself just now. What if we hadn't had a cork handy? Would you have any humors left in you now? Or would you be some sort of sack gaping on the ground, waiting for us to insert something in you and tote you around? I don't know how much blood you have in you, Timothy Lipshitz, but I do believe it's a finite amount, unlike your feelings, which we know to be infinite, and we're sorry if we haven't always acknowledged that. I think I speak for all of us here"—they nodded—"in saying that we want you to feel that you are not being persecuted by being left alone in the cafeteria, but rather that you're being given a gift to develop a talent. See, Timothy Lipshitz, while you sit there alone in the corner of the cafeteria, you are no doubt concocting all sorts of stories, and we want to hear them, under a tree like this one day, but those stories aren't ready for us yet, they lack *edge*. We do too. We are young yet and not terribly discerning. In the meantime, you see, Timothy Lipshitz, we can't have you physically harming yourself. We will require you, see. You might not believe it right now but there will be a day when we come home from a long day of work and our spouses want us to take them somewhere and it's to you we go and it's you we thank for the relief you offer us because we offered you the chance to see deeper into things when you were young yet and thought you wanted friends. Timothy Lipshitz, this is our gift to you. Go from us now and be alone and help us in that way."

Timothy Lipshitz said, "I don't know why I should trust you, Bob, but I do. I will put on my walkman and go and I will listen to whatever song happens to be playing and position myself inside its wider moments like a boy in a forest and I will fend for myself there and conquer serpents and one day we will all live in a mayonnaise world, a frothy cholesterol-free mayonnaise world. And I will sit with you guys and you will sit with me. You can entertain me then if you like, on the flipside, but I don't think I'll make you. Because I'll be happy then, won't I?"

"Of course you will," I told him, and he began walking away like in an American happy ending, and as he did, I took a super-duper rubber band out of my pocket, aimed, shot. It hit Timothy square in the occiput and he wheeled around and said, "What the fuck, Bob?" and I could see his glasses fogging up with tears.

I winked. "It's for one of your stories."

Timothy Lipshitz thought for a moment and said, "Oh . . . right." He thanked me then, and we all had a good laugh at his expense.

Of course the last laugh was his, wasn't it?

Timothy Lipshitz, R.I.P.

-Robert Slattery, Esq.,

M.D., PhD