

## M. THOMAS GAMMARINO

### Peter-or-whatever

The community had no need for Peter-or-whatever since he'd written the poem about feeling.

The poem had gone like this:

*Got an ice cream cone here*

*Haven't had one of these in years*

*I'm real excited about it*

*My dreams are dying*

Peter-or-whatever had stood before the committee to defend it. "It's not real feeling," he said, "It's poetic feeling."

"And how are the two to be distinguished?" the committee chairperson asked.

"The latter type occurs in a poem."

"We do not, as a matter of course, read poetry," the chairperson said. "So to us it is all one. Surely you don't mean to argue that we should reinstate feeling?"

"You know," Peter-or-whatever said, aware that what he was about to say would probably constitute high treason. "Maybe I do mean to argue that. Yes, maybe I do."

"Then this is no community for you," the chairperson proclaimed, and someone banged a gavel without any feeling.

Things had been tough for Peter-or-whatever after that. He couldn't get into the Tae-Kwon-Do class, even though he was next on the waiting list. Peter-or-whatever told himself it was no great loss. It wasn't real Tae-Kwon-Do anyway, what with the lack of feeling.

Peter-or-whatever even had a hard time buying groceries. People

blocked the way. "Could you please pass me one of those yogurts?" Peter-or-whatever would ask, but people would say, "Sorry, no English." Even Peter-or-whatever's English teacher insisted she didn't speak any English. "I have essayed for years to acquire the tongue," she told him, "but like a slippery piglet it continually eludes my grasp."

One time Peter-or-whatever asked a girl on a date. She had bronze skin, sinewy legs, bejeweled eyeballs. She delivered the newspaper.

"Did something happen yesterday?" Peter-or-whatever asked.

"I don't know," she said. "Usually."

"Would you like to have lunch?" he said.

She dropped the rest of her papers and took off running.

"I won't feel!" Peter-or-whatever called after her.

Then the ire came and Peter-or-whatever thought maybe he would feel. Maybe he would chase after her and catch her and feel for her and about her and just plain her.

But by now she was too far away. He went inside and read the stack of news.

When Peter-or-whatever's mom came home from the auto tags place, she sat him down and said, "Son, what are you going to do? That poem has been a real blight our household."

"I was expressing myself," Peter-or-whatever said, sculpting a pancake on the hotplate. "Should I have lied?"

"It sure would have made our lives easier if you had."

Peter-or-whatever flipped his pancake. "Is that all you people care about? Jesus, doesn't anyone care about the truth? There are people all over the world feeling. Right now. In fact, Mom, I'll bet you more people in the world are feeling than reading the Holy Manual."

"You were my son once," his mother-or-whatever said.

Peter-or-whatever feeled the door open and ran down the stairs of the building and feeled the front door open and ran into the street

and feeled and feeled. He feeled with one leg and while that leg was still feeling he feeled it with the other leg, and so on until he fell on his ribs and the wind got knocked out of him and he fell asleep there in the middle of the street, feeling.

When he woke up an airplane was passing by and Peter-or-whatever fantasized about being on it, being transported to a place where he could feel and write and write what he was feeling and feel what he was writing and write what he was writing and feel what he was feeling and feel that what he was writing was writing that was feeling what he was feeling he was writing, etc.

Peter-or-whatever was aware of what wasn't in his wallet, but he stood up and took to the Artery anyway, feeling that maybe if he could hitchhike to the airport, then he could feel about getting a ticket later.

He stuck out his thumb. People slowed until they realized who it was, then they sped up again. "Noooo Ennnnggggllliish," dopplered down the Artery.

By and by he arrived in a section of town he'd never feeled before, and which had never feeled him. Bearded men warmed their hands over oil drums. The walls were so thoroughly graffitied they might as well not have been at all. A man walked on stilts and tried to grab something from under the overpass.

"Hey, would you help me get this?" the man asked Peter-or-whatever.

"Sure," Peter-or-whatever said. "What is it?"

"The Constitution. It flew off the mayor's desk and got flung up there."

"There's only one copy?" Peter-or-whatever asked.

"To speak of."

"How can I help?"

"Maybe if you could just climb up here you could get on my shoulders and grab the Constitution. You see it flapping there, don't you?"

"Sure."

So Peter-or-whatever helped get the Constitution. As soon as he got it down, he held it over the oil drum and looked for article 4. There it was: "There is to be no feeling along the Main Artery." Peter-or-whatever took a pen out of his pocket and poised to make the emendation when the stilt man said, "What do you want to change that for?"

Peter-or-whatever told his story.

The stilt man plead with Peter-or-whatever. "You gotta understand, man, for some of us that clause there is the whole reason we're here."

Peter-or-whatever had never considered this side of the story. "You mean you don't want to feel?"

"Hell no," the stilt man said. "We're all feeled out around here. You let us start feeling again, how many of us you think are going to be feeling good feelings?"

"But maybe if you were allowed to feel again, you'd see how unjust your circumstances are. Like come on, why should you have to live down here when other people can live in penthouses and such?"

"Those are young person thoughts," the stilt man said.

"Befitting a young person," Peter-or-whatever said.

"Enjoy it while it lasts," the stilt man said. "Cause it doesn't last long."

"We'll see about that," Peter-or-whatever said, paper-airplaning the Constitution and taking off for the Artery. The stilt man dove for the document.

It was only twenty-one days later when Peter-or-whatever, skinny and forlorn, landed back on the Artery for good.