

FOREWORD

by Robin Stratton

Tim Gager is a lot of things: poet, novelist, magazine editor, director of the popular Dire Reading Series, and beloved mascot in the Boston literary scene where he contributes his energy to supporting and cheering on all his writing friends. He's talented, funny, charming, adorable, helpful, and a dozen years sober. During Covid, while the rest of us stayed home and watched re-runs of *Gray's Anatomy* and *Downton Abbey* and maybe dashed off a poem or two, he wrote an entire volume, Amazon's #1 best-selling *2020 Poems*. With the literary world basically shut down, he reinvented his reading series by becoming a Zoom host, and then uploaded all of the readings on YouTube. Of course he was also hard at work on his latest novel, *Joe the Salamander*, a sweetly-sad, funny and heartfelt story about a boy with autism.

It was during this time that I contacted him and asked if he'd be willing to let us publish a Best-of collection. Please understand how unusual it is for Big Table Publishing Company to solicit manuscripts. We get a lot of them, why do we go looking for more?

Because it's Tim Gager. It's *Tim Gager*.

When I started Big Table Publishing Company in 2004, it was a modest endeavor, primarily aimed at helping my writing friends get published. I under-estimated the excitement of a new indie press in the community, and was surprised that we were buried in submissions almost from the start. And as I became immersed in the scene, I kept hearing the name Tim Gager. *Have you met Tim Gager yet? You haven't? Oh, you have to meet him!*

In September 2012, I attended the "100,000 Poets" event hosted by Dedham's Poet Laureate, Christopher Reilley. As a fledging writer of poetry (I dared not refer to myself as a "poet;" I still don't) I was happy to see some of my writing friends, including two local favorites known as "the two Jenns"—Jennifer Jean and Jennifer Martelli. Chris tapped my arm and said, "There's Tim Gager," and I looked and sure enough, there he was: tall and lanky, smiling warmly. I said, "Oh!" He said, "Hi," and held out his hand and we shook. And that is how I finally met Tim Gager.

We became friends. I was over the top excited when he asked if Big Table would consider his first novel, *The Thursday Appointments of Bill Sloan*. It's about a fame-lusting psychologist who wants to have his own show, like Dr. Phil, and the disastrous consequences when he gets it. *Thursday Appointments* was Big Table's hottest seller in 2014.

Tim went back to poetry and short fiction for his next two books, both published by Big Table: *Chief Jay Strongbow is Real* (2017) and *Every Day There is Something about Elephants* (2018.) When we threw a book launch for *Elephants*, I did something I'd never done before or since: I asked him if I could read one of his stories. Such nerve! What if he was planning to read it? It didn't matter, I couldn't help it, I *had* to be the one to present that story to the crowd. "Jack" is a brilliant, tragic, sparsely, masterfully written story about a cop whose wife is murdered, and I love the last paragraph so much that it almost makes me cry:

Jack has nightmares of yellow tape he can't cross. Jack spends a lot of time on the sofa. It works like a handcuff. Friends bring dinner. There is food on the table. Jack takes off his hat. "Never marry a cop," Jack used to kid. Jack washes his creased face. He says, "Oh God, Oh my God."

Tim's next novel was *Grand Slams, a Coming of Eggs Story*. Loosely based on his own teen years, it's about an ill-adjusted, going-nowhere kid who winds up working at a diner. I loved the review on Amazon that called it "funny, tense, and tender."

Spreading Like Wildflowers was released just before the pandemic hit, the title sounding like the last breath of fresh air before the world stopped breathing, and in "The Miracles of Recovery," Tim asks himself with a trace of wonder,

Who would have thought salvation is no longer
found in the piss jars in old isolated bedrooms?

Then it was 2020. Tim, proudly sober at that point for ten years, was alone with his roommates (two rabbits: Alice and Bertie), and was deeply grieving the loss of his mother who had died just a few months earlier, and the decline of his father, who had moved to Maryland and because of COVID, was un-visitabile—a gloomy set of circumstances that made most of us reach for a second glass of wine at night. But the true poet embraces emotions, whether joyful or the shittiest time of one's entire life, and that's what Tim did:

If you're weak of mind
this poem is not a holiday;
it does not twinkle, nor

are its words lights from a city,
observed upon the descent—
each, a pushpin of hope.

Completing and securing a publishing contract for *Joe the Salamander* and then busting his ass promoting it didn't seem to slow Tim down at all, and when he submitted his *Best of* manuscript, I was amazed at how much new material was there. As always, I felt that tug of envy, and I am not ashamed to admit it. I especially love the way his chaotic thoughts make a solid landing in such a powerfully calm, insightful place in "God and You:"

Take a trip if you want to come up
to celebrate 6 AM.

It's been 20 years since
we stayed in Yellowstone,
and, yeah, I'm still struggling:
maybe nine months-six months-three months.

One month is when you're coming?
I love you even with *that* mouth.

Can you hear me at this distance

saying, *I don't need people*

I can stay in my room.

But I don't have to be that person anymore.

If the title "Christmas 2019" makes you think you are going to be reading about fluffy snowflakes and kissing 'neath the mistletoe...nope! He has something else in mind, this master of grabbing your heart; instead of twisting it, he releases it and launches it into a beautiful, sacred place:

Stunned awake by ring tone

—nothing good comes of—that

nurse asking if you'd like

to say a final goodbye

as your mother lies dying in a hospice bed.

Maybe they're only keeping her alive

so you can drive to Harbor House at

midnight, because hospice is respectful

the same way a neighbor will

later send you a sympathy card.

So, you tell the nurse, No

because you have said

goodbye every day

for the past two months,

sat there at the bedside, heard

her whisper she wasn't scared

of what comes after. She said,

you know, one time,

she smelled the scent

of roses in the dead of Winter.

Working with Tim Gager has surely been a highlight of my career as editor of Big Table Publishing Company. Being his friend, a highlight of my life. When you read this book, you'll understand. Because it's Tim Gager. It's *Tim Gager*.

Robin Stratton, January 2023
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