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The Vitriolic Megaphone

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Abstract

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Cover Page Footnote

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July 1, 2016

The Vitriolic Megaphone

Fiction by Joe Sacksteder

It was our town's second school shooting in as many years.

Well, technically, the first shooting occurred outside the city limits, but the shooter was one of our own. Gordon Ogden, his name by now a blight. It was a major incident that attracted national attention. The second shooting was a minor incident that attracted national attention, primarily because of the dubious distinction it granted our town. Cameron Nanus was a disappointment to us all, only managing to kill one person before turning the gun on himself.

At the gym or at work the media fanfare of the latest school shooting assaults us, and the news networks unfurl their graphics and cycle through whatever images they have wrestled from the scene. It's as if an orgy had broken out right there among the ellipticals or cubicles. Even though most of us would push the button to eliminate school shootings forever, if that button existed, we find ourselves secretly cheering the death toll. **REPORT: ONE STUDENT SERIOUSLY WOUNDED**, a fuckable orifice suddenly materializing in a day previously humdrum and neutered.

But at the town hall meeting that was called in the wake of the second shooting, I found myself feeling sorry for even the white trash. I could have patted them on the head. They were subdued and quiet, seemingly willing to consider a countywide

relinquishment of firearms. It struck me that we'd hit upon a national solution. We just need to wait for multiple school shootings to occur roughly everywhere.

We halfheartedly glossed the typical culprits: violent movies, violent video games, hateful song lyrics, honest books, religion, no religion, the dissolution of the family, the rock-star status conferred on shooters by the media. The usual solutions, as well: metal detectors in schools, armed teachers, mandatory mental-health screenings for all young people. Absent, though, was the bravado that usually accompanies the flaunting of convictions. Everyone was very tired.

A murmur passed through the auditorium as the packed house parted to admit three figures. Though Maggie Nanus confirmed many of the stereotypes we expected from the single mother of a school shooter, Dr. and Mrs. Ogden were as unlikely of candidates as their son had been. Another writer might use such words as upright and churchgoing to describe them. Though of course we couldn't help our faces falling into sympathy or suspicion whenever we saw them in public, and though we semi-privately speculated about how culpable they might be for their sons' poor decisions, our town had generally been pretty decent to this dazed trio. The media, in their attempts to diagnose anything other than themselves as the problem, had not. Despite what these three parents had in common, it was disorienting to see them standing in solidarity, their chins up, their eyes determined. Our murmurs were not rude. We would hear what they wanted to say, longed for it. Longed for an answer.

"There's no answer," Mrs. Ogden began. "At least not one that applies to every situation."

"We have to get used to this idea," Maggie added.

We wouldn't, the electricity in the air crackled our reply.

"Also," Dr. Ogden spoke up, "school shootings will keep happening. Simply put, your kids aren't safe."

Unacceptable! we made known—but listlessly. We'd left our pitchforks and torches at home, and we detected that there was more to their message.

It wasn't their idea, actually. It was Gordon's, remembered by a friend from a revealing-in-retrospect conversation they'd had a week before Gordon shot up the cafeteria.

*

Before the meeting adjourned, we'd already started putting their plan into action, electing three officials to oversee the "3 A's," the audio, anatomical, and architectural aspects of what we'd decided to call the Vitriolic Megaphone. Luckily, the ideal location for the fixture was on public land, the plaza at the base of the tallest building in town, the Mercantile One. Arthur Miklewski, who owned Mercantile One and whose son Adam had been shot four times by Gordon Ogden, donated an empty penthouse office suite to the effort.

The fence was the first visible sign of progress—not a forbidding, chain-linked, barbed-wired affair, Maggie had urged, but rather a simple railing that needed only to prevent anyone from *accidentally* straying into the drop zone. Maggie had recommended a white picket fence, that synecdoche of the American Dream so many of our teenagers confuse with a nightmare. But in the end it was decided that symbolism was less important than matching the Brutalist aesthetic of the Megaphone itself.

Next we saw the outer wall of the Mercantile One penthouse office vanish, a hole twelve stories above the plaza from which a concrete platform, the "Tongue," soon extended. We were invited to tour the office, but, as planned, there was little to see. Little to distract the afflicted from the task they'd set themselves, just bare concrete walls, a slate floor, a microphone, and a simple panel that allowed for recording, rewinding, rerecording, saving.

Just as Overture Audio was installing the actual megaphones, pointing outward from the four corners of the fence, the first signs of the structure itself began taking shape. First, construction workers used a backhoe to dig out a circular expanse of plaza brick. After they'd shaped and smoothed the concavity, it was laid with a durable, non-porous tile that would be easy to pressure wash and wouldn't break with the impact. A drain was installed.

On the day the structure itself arrived, the crowd's curiosity slowed its progress considerably. In consultation with Dr. Ogden's team and the engineers at Ritzinger, Kidd, and Seay, the Megaphone was built by a reluctant Nastassja Royse in her metalsmith studio on Fort Mountain. Wrapped in brown paper, it was brought through the fence by a forklift. When Mayor Brinkmeyer tore the paper off, nobody had the audacity to ooh or ahh, to clap. It was an impressive sight—poised on four legs above the drain, a series of barbed, corkscrewing spikes were affixed like turrets to the black central spar—but the device/sculpture's function and future were too sickening for anyone to risk showcasing any public approval. It was like a fountain frozen by a volcanic blast.

I myself stayed home for the unveiling, which was officially termed a Day of Testing to vacuum any air of festivity from the event. I knew the plaza would be packed with spectators hoping to witness the weighted dummies thrown from the Tongue to the Megaphone below. The event, I read in the *Gazette*, was indisputably a success.

*

Introducing our children to the idea—also given a more appropriate / less appropriate unofficial name, the Just Kill Yourself Campaign—produced a universal sense of unease, of course. The script was written by a team of adolescent therapists and delivered by an actor whose gravelly compassion would be immediately familiar to any watchers of daytime television. The gist:

Your family, your neighbors, and your educators want you to feel comfortable sharing any pain and anger in your life—about your peers, about conditions at home, about the adult world—before the situation seems so dire that violence is your only refuge. You'll note that we've quadrupled our staff and resources countywide to make sure there are professionals on hand to listen compassionately and to give you advice. However, should your pain and anger reach such a zenith of violence, we have devised a method by which you might express such feelings to the world without physically harming any bystanders. A method by which the world will be forced to listen to you. You've probably heard rumors already, and you've no doubt noticed the commotion in the plaza. You have seen the edifice, though you probably have not guessed its purpose: the impalement and display of a falling human body.

The lobby door of Mercantile One will be open twenty-four hours a day. A guard will be present, but the guard will not question you should you choose to take the elevator to the top floor, locate room 1207, make an audio recording of your final words, and throw your body from the platform.

There will be a video camera in the room, but only to ensure that the suicide is voluntary. Except in the case of extreme weather, our engineers have assured us that your body will land on the main spike or one of the sub-spikes of the Vitriolic Megaphone, which has been designed to rend and contort the suicide victim as grotesquely as possible, whereupon your audio message will immediately begin playing over the loudspeakers at a volume nobody will be able to ignore. Your body will be left in place for forty-eight hours, during which time a citywide ordinance requires that all residents twenty-five years or older pass through the plaza, holding a minimum of a five-minute observance.

Thankfully, this idea will seem totally bizarre to all but maybe an unfortunate fraction of you.

*

The unofficial name for this five-minute vigil became Witness Duty.

We waited with, I admit, something like excitement.

One might expect or hope that the unveiling of the Megaphone would turn the plaza into a sepulchral ghost town. As part of a failed and costly downtown rejuvenation project, little attenuation in the plaza's traffic would have been required for such a transformation. Already we scuttled cheerlessly past the empty storefronts, eyes on the ground before us, when some demoralizing task made our presence downtown a necessity. A trip to the DMV, for example.

We disapproved when a local entrepreneur chose the plaza as the location for Kurt's Carts, a food car courtyard that debuted with four vendor-owned options: El Manantial, B2 Wood-Fired Pizza, San Street Asian Street Food, and Marcy's Cart ("eclectic, organic, local"). Yes, we disapproved wholeheartedly, so much so that Kurt's Carts was a wild success. Soon they added Hut-K Chaat's "Nutrilicious" Indian—I liked the pav bhaji—and a beer garden.

Nor did business plummet after the Megaphone was first put to use by seventeen-year-old Berndt Lemforder. He flung his body from the Tongue at 2:07 a.m., so the only witness was Carla Staub, the night watchman. Her interview later appeared in the *Gazette*, and it was impossible to completely edit out the trauma the event had caused her. "He was resigned. He gave me a little smile as he passed by, a shrug. I wanted to reach out to him, detain him by force if necessary. But my instructions were clear."

A number of residents in neighboring apartment buildings were woken up when Berndt's audio recording began to loop. I didn't know about the death until I received a text message from an unlisted number later that morning when I walked out to fetch the newspaper: AT 2:07 A.M., THE MEGAPHONE FACILITATED IT'S [sic] FIRST VICTIM: BERNDT LEMFORDER. WITNESS DUTY (it was the official name by now) HAS COMMENCED AND WILL CONTINUE UNTIL 2:07 A.M. WEDNESDAY MORNING. But somehow I'd already known; the power lines had hummed to me that this day would be different from all the rest.

What was supposed to be a five-minute obligation was protracted by the length of the line that stretched down Orange Street, and all the while we were subjected to Berndt's final words: "My name is Berndt Lemforder. I get bullied every day in school, physically and verbally. I've chosen not to give the names of the bullies because it would take forever. They know who they are, and probably even they will feel bad about this. I don't know if I would have school shot, but I definitely won't

now. Things are bad at home, too. I guess I don't need to name names there. I know why," and here there was a hitch in his voice, "I know why the free bird smacks into window glass full speed and, falling to the ground, lies stunned . . . My name is Berndt Lemforder. I get bullied every day in school, physically and verbally . . ."

The city did notice its logistical error regarding the crowds, and it adjusted pretty quickly, opening a second then third gauntlet of folding tables to accommodate the masses. Did they not know the population of our town beforehand? ("I don't know if I would have school shot, but I definitely won't now . . .") What they maybe didn't anticipate was the number of citizens who seemed willing to linger longer than the required five minutes. ("I've chosen not to give the names of the bullies because it would take forever . . .") Even after I showed my license and had my name highlighted on the paper copy—paper!—of all our town's residents, I was still not very close to actually seeing anything more than the Tongue casting a shadow on the plaza from far above. ("I know why the free bird smacks into window glass full speed and . . .") Kurt's Carts would remain open for the entire forty-eight-hour observational period. (" . . . falling to the ground, lies stunned . . .")

But I got there eventually, and the thing had done its job. It was the first dead body I'd ever seen outside the confines of a funeral home, though it was scarcely distinguishable as a human. ("My name is Berndt Lemforder . . .") His body had missed the central spar, but several of the auxiliary spikes had made cactus flowers of his ribboned remains. ("I know why . . .") The blood drained into the drain just as planned. ("They know who they are . . .")

The city had also failed to take into account the existence of flying creatures who depend upon dead things for survival. ("Please cover your ears;, an officer will fire a blank into the air in three . . . two . . . one . . .")

Despite the gruesome nature of the spectacle, I realized that I wasn't the only one experiencing a sense of calm. Berndt's clichés confirmed ours, and here was one less we had to worry about.

*

Carla Staub was replaced by a host of volunteers who were better trained to handle their Charon-like duty of overseeing the victims' passage from one life to another.

There were few empty storefronts along the plaza anymore, but the city filled one of them with an extensive system of makeshift risers that could be quickly pieced together and would allow more citizens to complete their Witness Duty at once. Stadium standing.

I will list the next victims off one by one, which will make it seem as if they happened close together. This is not true; the suicides were relatively infrequent. Relative to what, I don't know.

“My parents are strict,” Remy Watkins’s suicide message announced, and— knowing Remy and his parents—we could have written the rest of it. “I want to be an actor, but my father insists I go to business school. He found out I’d auditioned and gotten a part in a school play, and tomorrow he was going to send me off to a military academy.”

It was the exact plot of a popular film approximately as old as Remy.

Charlie Lin was a carbon copy of Berndt Lemforder, which he immediately acknowledged. “My difficulties are much the same as Berndt’s, but unlike him I have decided to name names. In health class with Mr. Lambertucci, several students—Brad Leger, Max Gorheim, and Matt Schuster—would punch me in the shoulders and back every time Mr. Lambertucci turned to the chalkboard. Even worse was James Evelyn, this super religious kid who would tell them to stop. I know that will only make sense to an unfortunate fraction of you. I’m sorry, but I’m just . . . *awash* with violence and hatred. I wish I wasn’t. Fucking bumper stickers. I wish I could be comforted by heartwarming movies. But the world for me is an awful place, and I want you to look at my guts for a while.”

Though Mr. Lambertucci was reprimanded, no official action was taken against the implicated other than court-ordered therapy. This was part of what we’d all agreed to during the town hall meeting. The exposure would be the punishment.

“Calling these suicides voluntary is ridiculous, of course,” James Evelyn’s voice broadcasted a couple of months later. “My decision doesn’t really have anything to do with Charlie. I tried to help, it didn’t work, and I wish him peace. He took the plunge for hatred, but I’m taking it for love—which is maybe pretty similar. There’s someone close to me who I’m obsessed with. He’s all I think about, and it makes my stomach boil. And jealous, jealous of the food he eats, his shoes, his _____.” Most interpreted this word as *handiness*, but I still assert it was *handedness*. “I thought I might make it to college and escape. I told myself so many nights in the mirror: ‘Survive. That’s the only thing you have to do in life.’ But there are problems without solutions, at least no polite ones.”

Left-handed Sam Andriessen, purportedly the object of James’s affection (James’s superficial journal entries neither confirmed nor denied this assumption), did not wait until the end of James’s forty-eight-hour observational period to add his body to the mess. He too had removed his clothes beforehand, and the subcommittee in charge of mortuary accommodations had a great deal of trouble sorting one boy from the other.

Sam's was the first death witnessed by a large number of people; because he'd leapt in the middle of the day during Witness Duty, the spectacle was intensified, as were any lingering reservations about our decision to build the Megaphone.

Several of the past few suicides were linked, and we worried that we'd set off a chain reaction. But there were no more suicides for five years—no more school shootings, either—and we began to think that our teenagers had come to associate the Megaphone with homosexuality.

Though the apparent motive behind the next eventual suicide, Rose McCann—both the first female victim and the first non-adolescent—was not homosexual in nature, her words did nothing to dispel the Megaphone's connection to “misdirected” sexual urges. “There's a breed of boy with skin that always looks tan. Dark eyes, hair that ripples from blond to brown with every change of light or movement of his head. His parents are plain, pale. There should be a name for this breed of boy, but species-wide we're terrified of what the existence of that word would admit to. Picture right now the most beautiful boy you've seen and tell my corpse its soul was mistaken.”

We did not care much for Rose McCann's message, nor did we talk much about it. Was there some way to say-without-saying that the Vitriolic Megaphone was only for potential school shooting adolescents? We'd thought this was already crystal clear.

Nor did we care for the decision by Peter Bugel, Tech's star shortstop, to repeat Rose McCann's suicide message word for word when he took the leap a week later.

Another chain reaction, another rash. Had the recording not obviously been in a male's voice, we probably would have questioned whether there'd been a technical glitch.

Which is exactly what we did think when no message at all accompanied Jenny Malmstrom's suicide. Occurring on Founders' Day, it too was a very public demonstration. This was the only suicide for which I was present in the plaza. When the body landed, we onlookers waited for the audio like farmers in a drought petitioning a cloudless sky. It wasn't long before voices began calling out to check the footage from the camera in room 1207 (since nicknamed “the Grotto”).

It was the distracted Bill's Biergarten employee overflowing my pilsner who yelled, “No, listen!” The plaza obeyed the command with surprising unanimity.

And we heard what the video would soon reveal. It was nothing, but it was *recorded* nothing. The air crackled with absence, with wordlessness, with a refusal to obey the tidiness of our town's sanctioned sociopathy. It was all over the news that night, Jenny

pushing the button, standing there for a minute, facing the camera so we could see that her lips didn't move, hitting the stop button, and calmly walking to her death.

Ryan Bluglass.

Ozzie Field.

Tricia Horgan.

*

Various trends among our town's teenagers coincided with the rise in silent suicides. Having discussed the matter with distant friends, I have confirmed that the trends were entirely local—that they were, perhaps, not trends at all.

First off, we noticed that they began wearing their school uniforms, voluntarily, during afterschool hours and on weekends. And neatly—absent were the rolled skirts, cigar ties, and all the other little touches with which they'd formerly attempted to individualize and flout their uniforms. They abandoned the usual diversions of movies and sports and partying. Posters disappeared from the walls of their bedrooms, earrings and earphones from their ears. They began to excel in school, performing whatever work the world thrust at them stoically and efficiently. But they spurned the pride with which we tried to greet their accomplishments. If forced to go to church, they sang loudly—"City of God," or "Hosea," or "Tree of Life"—and in tune, but somehow with an intonation still full of censure. Worried that our youth had simply become savvier in their subversions, we joined the most popular social-networking sites only to find out that our children had already departed from them. Marketing representatives appeared in our town to ascertain why flip-phones had become so popular. Our children worked increasingly longer shifts at their afterschool jobs, and we began to nervously joke that we were in competition with our own children for our own positions. They began to amass significant capital, to buy up the mountains around us even, and soon their credit scores eclipsed ours. As if possessed of a hive mind, they scorned charity—first the receiving of it, then the giving—but would work together deftly to achieve mutually beneficial results. When high school released them, most of them disappeared from our town. Not to college, but to enclaves they'd formed in cities larger than our own, carrying whatever our town had infected them with.

Leaving behind: us. We started drinking more, staying up later, watching more TV. In those numbed, distracted states it was easier to convince ourselves that our children were still capable of friendship, empathy, art, and hatred. That, in secret, they were

staging increasingly bizarre theatrical productions. That they were thinking terrible thoughts and writing tortured journal entries. Full of words, terrible words.

Joe Sacksteder is a doctoral student at the University of Utah. His album (as [The Young Vish](#)) of Werner Herzog sound poems is forthcoming from Punctum Records; tracks can be found on [Sleepingfish](#), [textsound](#), and [The Collagist](#). He's the new media editor of *Quarterly West* and a film reviewer for *The Rumpus*. His story, "[Nepenthe](#)," appeared in *Booth*.