

## Jack Phillips Lowe

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### Professor Seagull Meets the Barfly

Sometime in the mid-1940s, somewhere in Greenwich Village,  
the dictionary definition of a little old man  
shuffles up to a bus stop bench and frowns.

The old man sports a thick jungle of gray hair  
and a wild tawny tiger of beard. He has wrapped himself  
in a grime-colored trench coat that's one size too large.  
His toes peek through the toes of his worn, boxy shoes.

The source of the oldster's chagrin is the lanky form  
of a young man, much worse for wear,  
who happens to be sprawled across the bench.  
The young man's face is pinched and mottled with scars.  
The black of his feral crewcut betrays traces of early silver.  
Uneasily asleep in New York's damp October,  
the young man shivers from the beige thinness  
of his wrinkled summer suit.

The old man, indignant, knocks on the young man's head  
with a gnarled fist. "Sir! Pardon me, sir!"  
the senior citizen says through his nose.  
"You are in MY seat!"

The pock-marked kid stirs and pushes the senior's hand away.  
"Shove off," he growls. "This is public property."

The old man snorts, undeterred.  
"You impudent whelp! Clearly, you haven't the foggiest idea  
of whom you're speaking with. I'm none other than Joe Gould!  
Noted Village character, wit and raconteur!  
The subject of a celebrated *New Yorker* magazine profile!  
Valued friend of authors, artists and seagulls throughout the city!"

The kid sits up slowly and rubs his eyes.  
"I thought you were Little Orphan Annie. Clam up, huh? My head hurts."

Joe Gould leans over the kid and sniffs the air.  
"Aha! I thought so. Your breath reeks of whiskey!"

The kid sniffs a time or two himself.  
"And yours reeks of. . .ketchup. Now beat it, Grandpa—"

I got dibs on this bench, see?"

Gould pulls a pebbled school notebook from under his coat.  
"I'll have you know that I'm a historian—  
the author of the longest, as yet, unpublished book on earth:  
*The Oral History of Our Time*. Nine million words and counting!"

The kid scratches the stubble on his chin.  
"Big deal," he yawns.

Joe Gould's eyes blaze.  
"This bench is my office. The place where I commune with my muse,  
as I record the speech of our day for generations yet unborn.  
I'll not see it misused as a flop for a common sot!  
Vacate it at once, or I'll return directly with a policeman!"

The kid grimaces and sighs. With effort, he stands up.  
Abruptly, he reaches back to New Jersey  
and clocks Gould in the face with a left hook.  
The aged bohemian drops like a corpse to the pavement.  
He's out, cold.

The kid, glancing about, quickly searches Gould's pockets.  
He finds nothing, besides a pen and a bag of sourballs.  
He retrieves Gould's dropped notebook and uses the pen  
to scribble a message on a blank page:

DON'T TRY.  
*Sincerely yours,*  
*Charles Bukowski*

Bukowski tucks the notebook and the pen in Gould's  
coat pocket and walks off, sucking on sourballs.  
The candy is the first food he's tasted in a week.

## Return to Riverdale

Buchman placed his purchases onto the conveyor belt of the Kmart checkout stand.

The cashier, a twenty-ish girl with Buddy Holly glasses and a blonde and blue-streaked ponytail, considered each item she dragged across the scanner.

“How many kids do you have?” she asked, tapping the keyboard on her cash register.  
“I’m sure they love the show.”

“None,” said Buchman, rooting for his wallet.  
“Which show is that?”

The cashier’s nose wrinkled. “Then who’s this for?”  
She held up a digest-sized magazine with a candy-red cover.  
“Do *you* read Archie and Jughead comics?”

Stepping nimbly over the trampled carcass of propriety, Buchman swiped his Discover card and sincerely hoped it cleared. “Not yet,” he said, “but I will. I heard that John Prine reads Archie. If a mind like Prine’s can glean something from the A-Man, then I figured I’d better make a return trip to Riverdale.”

Shoveling the merchandise into a bag, the girl looked at Buchman like your dog would if you asked Fido to do plane geometry.

“John Prine,” Buchman repeated, as he signed his name on the little screen.  
“He’s a great lyricist. He’s written some of the sharpest songs of the past fifty years. I’m sure you’ve heard ‘Angel From Montgomery?’ ‘Sam Stone?’ ‘Jesus the Missing Years?’”  
Somehow, the titles became questions.

The cashier’s face said FILE NOT FOUND.  
She tore off Buchman’s receipt and forked it over.  
“Be sure to tell Veronica I said hi,” she giped, looking through him.

The dig cartwheeled down Buchman's back.  
"Will do!" he grinned. He walked off with his bag,  
wondering if John Prine, the strumming folk-poet,  
fancied Veronica's legs as much as he did?

## **The Happiest Husband in Town**

Grady was visiting his sister, Min.  
It was a pleasant-enough conversation,  
made even more so by the coincidence that  
Grady needed money. This time, Min said no.

“Hey,” Min said, after lowering the boom.  
“I exchanged messages recently with a lady  
I know on Facebook. It turns out that  
she works with a high school flame of yours.  
Do you remember Renata Russo?”

Before Grady’s mind’s eye, the name conjured  
a soft-framed image of a diminutive girl  
with olive skin, flowing black hair  
and firm, grapefruit-sized breasts  
that she’d rub against Grady’s back  
whenever they passed in the hall.

“Yeah,” said Grady, scratching his ear.  
“Renata was a nice kid.”

Min burst out laughing.  
“Nice? I seem to remember Mr. Helvey,  
the gym teacher, catching Renata and you  
under the bleachers during lunch one day.  
Your hands were up each other’s everything.  
It was the scandal of that term.”

Grady sighed. “Well, Renata was a friendly girl.  
Her hair was as soft as silk.  
She let me comb it for her sometimes.”

Min fished her cell phone out of her purse.  
“See how times have changed, my brother.”

Grady peered at the little screen. There displayed  
was a photo of the now-middle-aged Renata.  
She was still diminutive and her breasts,  
as far as Grady could see, had survived the ravages of time.  
Her hair, though, was now close-cropped and steel gray.  
In the photo, Renata held hands with a taller, heavier woman.  
The other woman, judging by her physique,  
was something of a gym enthusiast.

“Who’s the other chick?” asked Grady.  
“Your Facebook friend?”

Min flashed a mischievous smile.  
“Nope. That’s Renata’s husband—Diane.  
My Facebook friend says they married last month  
after dating, on and off, for several years.”

“Hmm,” said Grady, nodding. “My best to them both.”

Min’s face fell half a mile.  
“That’s all you’ve got to say? After discovering that  
your great high school love is a lesbian?”

Grady crossed his legs.  
“If Renata brings to Diane what she brought to me  
under the bleachers years ago, then Diane’s  
going to be the happiest husband in town.”

**Jack Phillips Lowe** is a lifelong Chicagoan. His poems have appeared in *Clark Street Review*, *Nerve Cowboy* and *Section Eight Magazine*, among other outlets. His most recent poetry chapbook is *Jupiter Works on Commission* (Middle Island Press, 2015). Lowe maintains that Zeppo was the most gifted of the Marx Brothers. Nobody knows why he thinks this; he just does. Go figure.