

# The Leap From the Bridge Is Ungainly

Charles Tuomi holds these truths to be self-evident: That Tom Waits is a genius; that video games do more harm than cigarettes; and that speculative fiction readers are just plain cooler than 'normal' folk. If given one wish by an unbottled genie, he would have a hard time deciding between everlasting world peace and a World Series for the Boston Red Sox. Charles' work has appeared online in Chiaroscuro and Flashquake. He lives, works and sometimes even writes near Boston, Massachusetts.

Charles has always loved airports, train stations, even hospitals — any of life's way stations, where change is the rule and the objective is primarily to, well, move on. "The Leap from the Bridge Is Ungainly" may be a reflection of this interest, as it toys with the idea of transitional states, emotional, cosmic and otherwise. It also explores the dogged persistence of grief, and expresses Charles' profound puzzlement as to how tragedies of a certain magnitude can be coped with psychologically.

*"The strange  
voice mentions  
only the one  
death.  
Apparently  
they do not  
count fetuses,  
James thinks,  
whilst tallying  
the imaginary  
deceased."*

**T**he leap from the bridge is ungainly. It is not at all the elegant diver's pose he has envisioned. It is a clumsy fall with pinwheeling arms. One moment he stands on the ledge, and in the next he simply steps off, steps out,

drops down...

With his stomach floating somewhere several meters above him, James squints into the wind, focused on the rapidly approaching river.

Things begin to happen.

For instance:

The phone rings. Rang. Whatever.

He lifts it from its cradle to find an unfamiliar, queerly accented voice occupying the other end of the line. Speaking slowly, the voice tells him a story, about an accident on Route 26 that could not have occurred. About a wet road, and a fictional eighteen wheeler with bad brakes. About (after an awkward pause) a death. The strange voice mentions only the one death. Apparently they do not count fetuses, James thinks, whilst tallying the imaginary deceased.

A long time after the odd voice on the other end of the phone has stopped its foolish talking, James lets the telephone drop to the kitchen floor.





He is about to die.

The river rushing to meet him teems now with human figures, clothed in white and floating like buoys tethered to the bottom: a host of green-white faces raised in his direction; tangles of serpentine hair wafting like seaweed; small round mouths open as if in hymn. Some of the faces are familiar: his mother, his father, a coworker whose name he forgets.

And of course Kim. She floats a little above the rest, her pixie face pale just below the surface, arms opened wide as if preparing an embrace. Her emerald eyes sparkle. A familiar smile curls her lips.

That's when James realizes the bungee cord will not hold. It's either too long, too loose, or it will snap.

He squeezes his eyes closed, bracing.

Vacuuming their living room for the first time after the funeral (again), he pulls the loveseat out from the wall, and a small paperback slips predictably from somewhere, landing on the carpet with that same soft *thunk*.

James (re)reads the cover: *Gateways to Other Realities*. One of Kim's books, one of the myriad New Age pseudo-mystical texts lying, half-read, around the house at all times.

He sits cross-legged in the middle of the living room floor, opens to the bookmarked page, and the passage he reads, through vision blurred by tears, imprints itself on his mind so vividly that he will conjure it up later (for instance, now) word for word:

"In Tibetan Buddhism there is bardo. Literally, the 'in-between'. A transitional condition or state, as may occur during meditation, or during the moment of dying, or in the gap between death and rebirth. Also sometimes during dreams. Pivotal moments, all, those upon which the direction of our lives, however many they may be, largely depend...Certain forms of meditation are used to reach this threshold, as are some hallucinogenic drugs. The point seems to be to go to the brink of death, or perhaps a little beyond, returning with the ability to walk between worlds. To bridge realities. To glimpse behind the curtain into the next room."

And so it would and does occur to James, eventually and now, again: That there is, that there might be, a Way. And that he might just try or have tried it.

He has perhaps two seconds left to live by the time he re-opens his eyes. His bones, all of them, will snap like brittle twigs when they hit the water at this speed.

The faces are close to the surface now. They rise to greet him, holding out their arms and smiling. Kim is positively beaming. She might be crying. It is hard to tell. It all happens so fast.

James smiles, too, and opens wide his arms.

There are costs to his border walking. Physical and otherwise.

After-effects, he will find, include dizziness, vertigo, and a confusing mixture of oddly combined tenses that leave him increasingly disoriented in his everyday life. He will also experience vague inexplicable limb pain, spatial disorientation, and her smiling face beneath a floppy white sun hat, specks of black potting soil dotting her

"The strange voice mentions only the one death. Apparently they do not count fetuses, James thinks, whilst tallying the imaginary deceased."



"The strange  
voice mentions  
only the one  
death.  
Apparently  
they do not  
count fetuses,  
James thinks,  
whilst tallying  
the imaginary  
deceased."

pink nose and cheeks like

*freckles.*

Kim walks up the steps of their back porch, small and sunburned in a blue tank top and shorts. The glittering lake and the late afternoon sun is at her back, and she is, oh my god wasn't she beautiful.

They kiss(ed): Lips gritty with dirt, sun-warmed faces, the exhaustion of a hard day at work in the garden melting away. He touches, touched the softness of her cheeks; breathes, breathed in the scent of her, deeply: damp earth, sweat, new life, and her hair, like berries.

She pulls back at some point, gently, big green eyes expanding. He had never seen eyes like this, before hers; perfectly round, huge, open.

Kim's eyes.

"They," she whispers, had whispered, always whispers, cupping her comical little pot belly with two small hands, "were going to love this house."

James knows this is wrong. Kim had said, dammit Kim says, "are". But he smiles and agrees, agreed anyway. He always agreed, agrees.

Then she dances awkwardly there on the porch, in the red-pink glow of the sun setting across the lake, and he was dancing too and laughing, at the two small dirty handprints on her blue tank top, on either side of her pregnant middle.

She is, was Kim: His very own, a pot-bellied gorgeous miracle with soft tiny hands and enormous eyes and a smile that went, goes on forever.

The bungee cord holds.

It does not snap. It is not too long, and it is not too loose. An instant before he hits the seething river, James feels a hard jerk on his ankles.

There is a fraction of a moment then, a bardo, an in-between, before the tautness of the cord begins to pull him upward. In that measureless span of time, he is close enough to feel the river's icy spray on his cheeks, mere inches from Kim's face in the water below. Reaching out for her, he feels the river swallow his finger tips. She stretches her hand toward his.

It is as if she is his reflection. Literally his better half.

Then he is being taken away again, yanked upward violently. His body begins to spin and just before he loses sight of the river, Kim, her round face small now, purses her lips and blows him a kiss.

"Once not enough fer ya, huh?"

A lanky, suntanned kid takes a little blue ticket from James' hand. Spitting a mouthful of chaw over the side of the bridge, the boy shakes his head and grins, like he just knew it, like he had this guy pegged from the beginning. As he fastens the gear to James' ankles, he turns to his coworker, a girl collecting money and doling out tickets a few feet away.

"Hey Joanie. I think we got ourselves another addict here," he yells, gesturing at their latest repeat customer with a long thumb. He winks conspiratorially at James, gives him a hearty slap on the back. "You're all set."

James nods, steps onto the ledge, and takes a deep breath, looking straight down



## The Leap From the Bridge Is Ungainly

---

into the river. Sunlight glances off the dark, moving current like the twinkling of stars. There's nothing unusual, no one else in the water; not yet.

"Hey I's just joshin' ya man," the kid calls from behind him. "We all know the feeling, bro."

No, James thinks, as he steps out,  
off,

down.

*I didn't, don't think that you did do.*

*"The strange  
voice mentions  
only the one  
death.  
Apparently  
they do not  
count fetuses,  
James thinks,  
whilst tallying  
the imaginary  
deceased."*