



John Laue

Interview with a Modern Lazarus

Scene: The studio of radio station KYME. Two men sit at a table in front of microphones, Mike Shurley, the interviewer, a large ruddy-faced man, and Jack Trent, his guest, a man of about 35 with a blue shirt.

*Theme music could be Gene Autrey singing **Back in the Saddle Again** or something similar.*

Mike: Good morning Folks. It's eleven-O'clock, time for the Mike Shurley show. And here I am, your favorite host. Today I interview a rare bird, a guy who claims he came back from the dead. Jesus brought back Lazarus, but so far as we know, there's no one who can do that today, So listen in, see if you can tell if he's sincere, or just trying to con us. Say hello to the audience, Jack Trent. Tell us why you're here.

A. I'm here to share---

Q. (Breaking in) The mike won't bite you! Get closer! My audience wants to hear!

A. I'm here to share what I learned from dying. It's unusual I know, and most people it happens to don't talk about it. I'm telling my story because I want to dispel some myths. There's tremendous fear and stigma around such experiences that I hope to reduce. If my observations help just one person, my appearance here has been worthwhile.

Q. So you believe you're here for a good purpose. I applaud you for that. But isn't death absolutely final? How can you make such a claim that goes against everything we know?

A. In 2001 I had an apartment in a converted orphanage near Dolores Park in San Francisco. My body was consumed in a fire. I saw my ribs stick through the charred remnants of my chest.

Q. Oh really? We've investigated and the building you refer to is still standing. There's no evidence of a fire there---ever. How do you explain that?

A. It was either a spiritual fire or in a parallel universe. My essence did survive although I died and dwelt in hell for several years. You'd probably say it was my soul that saw me through, but that has religious connotations. Some of us are spiritual without religion.

Q. You're fooling yourself! Without believing in God, you can't be spiritual. But you said before that hell was San Francisco. Don't get me started about that city. San Francisco is flat-out weird, with all the -- excuse me for telling it like it is -- nuts, fruits, and hippies, the crazy homeless, and heaven only knows what else feeding at the public trough. I think they should get rid of most of them, but who listens to me? If that's what you mean by hell, I agree. But this hell you're talking about, tell me more. Was it like the city we know today?

A. There were a million changes, some so subtle you wouldn't be aware of them, others gross, enormous. If you'd seen and felt it, you'd know.

Q. Okay, I'll bite. It sounds off base to me, but my audience might want to know -- what was this San Francisco like? Give some examples.

A. I could feel the gravity of buildings, especially larger ones. They pulled and tugged at me. I stayed away from downtown just because of that. It's wrong to make buildings so huge they

overshadow people's spirits. Even being on the ground made me feel heavy and depressed. Most of the time I felt as if I could never do a positive thing again. In spite of all my college work and plans to become a Poet in Residence at some university, I thought the best I could do was take tolls on the Golden Gate Bridge.

Q. This is interesting. I'll give you some more rope. Were there other differences?

A. The houses changed their faces every day; street signs displayed a number of levels. Haight Street made me feel horrible; Folsom Street was like the prison, Mission Street -- I discovered my mission there. And talk about déjà vu -- this was the reverse -- nothing was the same when I saw it twice. People had no constancy either. I saw the same people day in, day out, yet they weren't the same: some seemed to put on and take off masks; others made crazy faces at me. All the knives were pointed at me, the forks also.

Q. Suppose I'd been there. Do you think I'd have changed? I'm always the same, totally normal and proud of it, just a little smarter every year.

A. Some had the faces of red devils like you; others were white as hungry ghosts. It was as if their inner ugliness and emptiness were suddenly on the surface.

Q. Oh come on now! Wasn't there anything you saw that you'd call positive?

A. A few were incredibly beautiful too. They seemed to glow like I imagine angels might, but most looked gruesome and ferocious. I believe that's the true condition of many human beings.

Q. Tell the truth now! You were loony tunes, completely crazy. Will you admit to that?

A. I've been accused of being schizophrenic, borderline, and paranoid. I accept these labels. Still I believe there's validity to such experiences. It's almost as if I saw the world and people for the first time as they really were.

Q. So you say your hallucinations were legitimate, not just products of a mind gone round the bend? Will you swear to that?

A. Sure! It took me a while to separate the illusions from the real, yet I learned some truths and had important visions.

Q. Truths? Important visions? Give me a break! Do you think you're Bugs Bunny? I half expect to hear you say, *What's up, Doc?* Excuse my French, but I think what you're gushing about is a pile of crap.

A. You're trying to intimidate me and I don't appreciate it. I'm telling you the truth of how I saw things. If you didn't want to hear it you shouldn't have had me on this program.

Q. All right. Go ahead and spit it out. You're entertaining even though you're also driving me a little crazy.

A. I learned to be aware of what you'd call my subconscious. The darker half of my spirit became more available to me. I can accept myself better than I could before. And there's nothing like having a benchmark so low that the ordinary seems like heaven!

Q. About this dying thing. Do you still insist you died and something brought you back to life? Did you say some magic words, Abracadabra or something? My audience wants to know. (*Sarcastically*)
Maybe they can bring back dead relatives and friends.

A. Not something magical -- I accomplished it myself with help from those who've been there. You might say I moved from one world to another. There are others who've done it but of course you wouldn't know them.

Q. I don't for a moment believe in your fantasies, but suppose I did. Is there any advice from la-la land you'd like to share with the members of my audience?

A Hell's not so bad as Dante described it. Still, it's a fearsome and terrible place. Don't go there unless you absolutely must. But if you have to, try to keep your wits and make the most of it. Then if and when you're able to return, you'll be at least as old as your age.

Q. You may be sincere, but I don't believe your story any more than I believe in fairies and mermaids. "As old as my age!" You talk in riddles. How old do you think I am?

A. You seem to be in your early forties, but when I listen to you closely, you're more like twenty-five or younger. Eventually you may be ready for some good relationships. You remind me of --

Q. (*Interrupting*) Do you see this aerosol can? This is my famous BS repellent. You've earned a dose of it!

(*He sprays him.*)

A. What's in that can? Are you trying to poison me?

(*He jumps up, begins to walk toward the door.*)

Q. It's not mace, just water vapor with a little *eu de skunk*. I use it to make a point: You're here to talk about yourself, not about me. And you're all wrong anyway. I'm forty-five with four popular, intelligent kids I visit on weekends. I've been married three times, but it wasn't my fault that two of the women were -- you know what I want to say -- it starts with a "b". The other was nicer, but an emotional wreck. I'm seriously wondering if you should be locked up; some of your notions may be dangerous.

A. You won't understand this but I'm actually a lot less dangerous than you.

Q. Listen Buddy, I may have been a bit harsh, but it's my job to bait you in order to get at the truth. You'd better understand that I carry a gun for protection at all times and won't hesitate to use it. Do you get my drift?

A. Of course and I understand that you enjoy the baiting and the whole game of harassment and intimidation. But that's no matter. I can stand heat; I think I've proven that.

(*He exits.*)

Q. Well, folks, what can I say about such a nut job? The writing on the wall says, "*non compos mentis*", but what do you say? Is he sincerely crazy? Should he be put away? Or is he a con man trying to gain bizarre celebrity status? Decide for yourselves and meanwhile don't forget to tune in next week when I visit a carnival to interview a modern day American "Elephant Man." This is Mike Shurley, your host with the most, saying goodbye for now to you Mr. and Mrs. America and your high achieving kids. God bless you! And remember, no matter how weird you think you

might be, don't worry! I've got the real weirdos here, nuts so far gone they don't even know they've lost it.

Theme music fades as he sits silently at the microphone as if lost in thought. Then he pulls out a hip flask, takes a long swig.

*John Laue, a former teacher, editor of **Transfer**, and Associate Editor of **San Francisco Review**, has six books of poetry to his credit plus one of prose, **The Columns of Joel Mobius**, a guide for people with psychiatric diagnoses. Besides editing **The Monterey Poetry Review**, an on-line journal, and coordinating a long-running reading series for **The Monterey Bay Poetry Consortium**, he has served as Co-Chair of the **Santa Cruz County Mental Health Advisory Board**.*