



Charles Farrell © 2010 All Rights Reserved

## Dead President

So I'm in slot on the sports desk of the *Tallahassee Democrat*  
on the Friday night when Nixon dies. The AP alert crawls  
in shimmery green across the top of eighty Atex terminals  
and on the other side of the room the news editor,  
a tall guy named Mark Pudlow, only everyone calls him "Pud,"

with a carrot-colored ponytail halfway to his belt and a gut  
like a sack of bowling balls, an honest-to-god ordained minister  
of the church of something or other, he married my friends Rodney and Jolene,  
after which I considered (briefly) whether I would make  
a good minister myself, though I don't even have a nickname,

slams his palm on his desk and roars *GODDAMMIT*  
not because he's especially a Nixon fan or even for all I know  
a Republican, but because it's an hour to deadline  
and he has to take the paper up four pages, which will piss off  
the press room guys. What can you do? There's a dead president to consider.

In sports, we're instructed to get out of the way ASAP and help  
read Nixon copy, so I ram through a no-quotes story on the Braves  
losing their third straight and put the section to bed early.  
Doing this has the feel of patriotism, of duty. Contributing.  
I'm coding a Nixon timeline in agate type for the jump page

when I remember this joke I heard when I was too young to get it,  
I mean, I was 3 when Nixon told us he was not a crook,

4 when he resigned. This timeline makes me hope wire services  
see fit to chart my life's chronology. *World Series MVP at 30*  
(which gives me five years to learn to throw a knuckleball).

*At 40, won his first Pulitzer Prize for his fine work on ...* Or perhaps  
my death will inspire an argument about art,  
like the one between Pud and the copy chief, Mark Hohmeister,  
only everyone calls him "Homie," who wants to fill A1  
with five columns of Nixon boarding a helicopter,

fingers splayed into confident V's that belie the stomach-roiling doubt  
he must have felt, that anyone feels when they learn the lie  
they've lived with so long they've come to think it true  
is only a lie after all, while Pud fights for a more contemplative photo,  
an image that hasn't become a parody of itself. Something dignified.

I crop an archive shot of Nixon shaking hands with Elvis  
for the jump page. Deadline comes up fast. The back shop crew  
cuts, waxes, pastes, and we're looking for inches to trim,  
quotes to cut. The timeline is two items over. I blue-pen  
a 1969 meeting with Ceausescu, a summit with Franco in '70,

keep the Elvis encounter so the art makes sense.  
Jimmy the composing room supervisor flicks his scalpel,  
shortens a life to fit the available space. I ship the page to camera.  
Jimmy checks the clock, waits for Pud to OK the front page  
and I see a chance to tell my joke: Why did Nixon see *Deep Throat* so many times?

Before I get out the punchline, Pud roars *GODDAMMIT*  
which for a second I interpret as an indictment of the joke  
until he chugs back into the newsroom ranting  
*WHO WROTE THIS GODDAMN OVERLINE,*  
*DON'T YOU KNOW THERE'S NO E IN MILHOUS?*

This saddens me. I've never sent troops to Vietnam  
or met The King, any king, but I've had my name misspelled.  
I didn't think anything was at stake for me here —  
Braves lose, Nixon dies, it's all just copy  
— but what if I was wrong, what if this is my life?

After 15 years as a reporter and editor, Amorak Huey recently left the newspaper business and teaches writing at Grand Valley State University in Michigan. His poetry has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Subtropics*, *Oxford American*, and other journals.