In Fifty Words

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MICROFICTIONS

Bob Thurber

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The characters and events depicted in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental and not intended by the author.

*A man can get a reputation from very small things*. —SOPHOCLES

**DEDICATION**:

For the broken boys…

…and the women who love them.

CONTENTS

Rapunzel’s Routine 2

Piercing Arrows 3

A Poet Laureate’s Death (3/15/19) 4

Classic Two-handed Shove 5

Company Picnic 6

End of the Hike 7

Season Greetings And Untimely Departures 8

Dead Stonemason In A Mayonnaise Jar 9

Dizzy Spells 10

Crossed Lines and Broken Vows 11

The Summer of Sweet Mary (circa 1972) 12

The Appliance Guy Wonders Who Delivered The Chair 13

The Eyelid Artist 14

Another Misadventure of The Broken Boys 15

Side Effects of Radiation Therapy 16

A Dozen Irons In The Fire 17

Snake Food 18

Midnight Visit to The Highest Hills 19

Make No Mistake Where the Master Waits 20

Grand Theft 21

The View After the Climb 22

The Birth of a Legend 23

The Night the News Came 24

Everything you need to know about my wife’s Gaelic-green/Irish-blue eyes 25

The Night I Fell Off The Curb On A Street Corner At The End Of The World & Landed In A Painting 26

Lasting Impressions 27

The Cat Lady 28

Midnight Curfew 29

Legally Blind 30

The Pretty Personal Assistant 31

The Midnight Ramblings Of Rumpelstiltskin 32

Balancing Act 33

Easter Brunch at The Inn 34

My Father, the Strongman 35

The Incurable Agnostic 36

Milk Carton Kids 37

Home Movies 38

Poor Kid’s Post-Christmas letter to Santa 39

The Echo of The Oracle 40

Buried in the Meadowlands 41

Thanksgiving Toast 42

Catholic Schoolgirls & Bad, bad Boys 43

The Moon in Decline 44

The Breathtaking Stink of This World 45

In The Custody of The King 46

Facts of Considerable Importance 47

Mind Your Own 48

The Leaking and the Legacy 49

Three Boys and a Widow 50

Guillotine Guys 51

The Stench of a Lifetime 52

Inside the Walls of Troy 53

The Father of the Bride & the Open Bar 54

Baby Sea Turtles 55

A Rope Thick as a Baby’s Arm 56

Her Last Autumn Evening 57

Pins and Poisons & Good Reason: A Halloween Mystery Solved 58

Day at the Beach 59

Coup d’État 60

These Things Are Yours 61

The Last Time I Saw My Father 62

The Week The Circus Came To Town 63

The Things We Preserve 64

Easter Tuesday 65

Grandiose Copyright Notice 66

Vigil For An Estranged Father 67

After the Honeymoon’s Over 68

The First Time I Gazed Into My Wife’s Eyes 69

The Mapmaker’s Calligraphist Daughter 70

The Talking Fingers of My Great Greek Grandfather 71

Famous Last Words 72

Word Perfect (For C.) 73

Fair Question While Packing 74

Our Last Night Together 75

My Father’s Miraculous Mechanical Solution for Grieving 76

Daily Sustenance 77

Hospital Visit 78

Early Morning Hike 79

Another day of Missing Her 80

The Alienators 81

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Nearly all of the selections in this collection first appeared on the literary website Fiftywordstories.com

A number of selections were later published in Pulp Literature and other magazines.

INTRODUCTION

Bob Thurber’s excellent microfiction has been regularly gracing the digital pages of FiftyWordStories.com since his first contribution appeared in June 2014. His third entry, *The Mapmaker’s Calligraphist Daughter*, came a few months later and subsequently won the first ever “Fifty-Word Story of the Year” award, still standing today as one of the best pieces I’ve ever had the fortune to share with the site’s readers.

The main hallmark of Bob’s work is its emotional and thematic complexity. He can offer up a nuanced comment on spirituality, like in *The Summary of Sweet Mary (circa 1972)*, or paint a portrait of the lasting effects of family conflict and parent/child relationships, like *These Things Are Yours*. Authenticity runs through his writing, with even the lighthearted stories containing some element that suggests that it *means something*, that it is personal, and that Bob has invited you to share in something special.

Bob has a unique gift for using subtle phrasing and well chosen vocabulary to draw readers into larger worlds, deeper characters, and more refined conflicts, plot points, and thematic explorations than a fixed length of merely 50 words seems like it should ever allow. It requires no hyperbole or special boldness for me to assert that Bob Thurber is the best author of 50-word stories on Earth.

Tim Sevenhuysen

FiftyWordStories.com

In Fifty Words

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MICROFICTIONS

Bob Thurber

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Rapunzel’s Routine

The upkeep was never-ending: it took a week to wash, a week to dry, a week to comb, a week to braid; just so she could dangle it out the window for an afternoon, like a fishing line among the thorns, a temptation to witless princes spying from the brambles.

Piercing Arrows

They had one thing to do, no words to waste. Time flew. They labored. Days fell away. Fragments landed at the edges of dreams, where factory workers in hooded cloaks weaved memories into light, wearing masks made from shadows, peeping through slits, breathing in, sighting targets, stringing bows, aiming steadily.

A Poet Laureate’s Death (3/15/19)

William Stanley Merwin passed away earlier today and tonight there is something seriously wrong with the sky.

The moon is misaligned, hung crookedly low, a cockeyed smile, and all around there’s something the matter with the stars — those that shine, those that hide, and those that blink like signal flares.

Classic Two-handed Shove

Instead of returning home like a normal person the old witch blew the door off the hinges, cackling as she swung her cloak, wafting the cape while twisting about.

But on this night the boy was ready, and the girl was ready, their tripwire taut, the oven door wide open.

Company Picnic

Their spouses’ corporations had merged.

*Wow*, she said, blinking.

*How embarrassing is this*, he said.

*I’m having flashbacks*, she whispered.

He smiled shyly.

*Remember falling*, she said, *into one another’s embrace? Remember holding on for dear life?*

*Youthful mistakes*, he sighed.

*Perhaps it’s time we made them again*, she said.

End of the Hike

At the edge of the woodlands we came upon a group in a field.

We took turns spying with the binoculars. No one said anything.

When it was my turn I saw the casket was unusually small.

There were three women and any of them could have been the mother.

Season Greetings And Untimely Departures

Every Christmas has unique vibrations.

2010 was tremulous.

Our grandchildren were three and four. They didn’t know their mother was dead.

I imagine they held to the hope she’d surprise them with a last-minute appearance.

There was more chance a fat man in a sleigh would land on the roof.

Dead Stonemason In A Mayonnaise Jar

Every summer we haul grandpa’s ashes down to the beach and listen to the crashing surf.

The roar reminds us of grandpa’s grumbling groans after a long day’s work.

When the tide recedes, the shoreline resembles a long stretch of freshly poured cement, waiting to be troweled, skimmed perfectly smooth.

Dizzy Spells

My father called from somewhere.

He needed to sign some important documents and he’d forgotten his name again.

I asked where he was, I asked where he’d been.

I asked if he was alright, if he was wearing shoes and clothes.

He said, Just spell my name for me, son.

Crossed Lines and Broken Vows

We’d met in group, where we’d learned how to support one another, how to listen and comfort with gentle words.

We often chatted by phone about our spouses. Eventually we discovered we were practically neighbors.

Lenore’s house is just a short walk over the town line. Technically we’re adulterers now.

The Summer of Sweet Mary (circa 1972)

That summer the churches stopped selling religion. You had to know a guy who knew a guy.

I was living by the ocean with a sea captain’s daughter. He brought home boxes of the stuff.

We shared holy communion. We wept through miracles. Her and me. Us and the sea.

The Appliance Guy Wonders Who Delivered The Chair

We were hugging in her kitchen beside her new stove and refrigerator and I could see down the hall to the dining room and beyond to the den where her blind husband was sitting in an electric powered recliner, a contraption like something NASA produces for space missions to Mars.

The Eyelid Artist

*(For Trey, with everlasting love)*

The last time the boy slept at grandma’s house he told her that portraits of her face had been painted on the inside of his eyelids, so that’s what he got to look at every night while he waited to fall asleep. He pinched finger to thumb. “Brush this big.”

Another Misadventure of The Broken Boys

In a place with no trees the boys built a forest of stone.

They chiseled and stacked, erecting one here, one there.

They carved branches and engraved leaves.

In daylight the fake trees looked ridiculous.

But at night, when the moon rose, forming long shadows, the world felt like home.

Side Effects of Radiation Therapy

Ellen’s cat got out. He finally figured out how to open the screen door. His name is Whiskers. He’s friendly for a cat. Always rubbing against people’s ankles. He’ll answer to his name. I haven’t told Ellen yet. We live on Longview. The traffic’s heavier since they widened the road.

A Dozen Irons In The Fire

Every day was the same.

Soon as Mom got home they started.

Back and forth they went.

Around and around they went.

The volume of their voices fluctuated, depending on which room they were in.

Dad wasn’t working, wasn’t looking.

He talked about the life-changing phone calls he was expecting.

Snake Food

After paying in cash so there would be no paper trail, after sneaking it in under his shirt, after hiding it all weekend in the back of the freezer, after thawing it in the microwave while she bathed, he put the dead mouse under her pillow, and then he waited.

Midnight Visit to The Highest Hills

Late into the night, the child returned. She slowly unclenched her fist.

There, in the palm of her little hand, lay a radiant star.

It was no bigger than when it had hovered in the sky.

But it was brighter now, as luminous as the glow intensifying on the horizon.

*Author’s Note: For Sydnee, with love.*

Make No Mistake Where the Master Waits

Every night the master sleeps with his head resting in the groove of a guillotine, the blade elevated, notched by a lever. Lanterns illuminate the narrow chamber.

All any disciple need do is enter and release the blade.

Each night the master dreams of the wisest, purest, most devoted assassin.

Grand Theft

Eventually the man who’d been our son-in-law remarried.

Regrettably his new wife didn’t want us in her life.

She connived and conspired, influenced her husband to keep our grandchildren from us.

Despite this extreme cruelty and betrayal, grandma remains no less “grand.” Defined by her enduring love, she waits patiently.

The View After the Climb

In the morning she takes fresh bearings,

assessing the terrain, gauging the distance. Night rain has left a low-lying mist distorting the landscape.

Maybe there exists, just beyond the farthest hill, something else, something more to view than lowland haze hiding steep rocky hills.

The wind blows right through her.

*(For C, of course.)*

The Birth of a Legend

The young witch dreamed what the child would be.

She tried to hide her concern when the older witches gave her slanted looks.

One day, deep in the woods, she said, “A boy? What do I do with a boy?”

“You begin by naming him Merlin,” said the oldest tree.

The Night the News Came

We talked for hours, while making lists of people to call. Halfway to morning we went to bed. We were shattered. Before we fell asleep the wind picked up, gusting snow off the trees. As the branches lightened, they scratched against the windows, like something asking to be let in.

*Author’s Note: For Sarah Kate 1980-2010*

Everything you need to know about my wife’s Gaelic-green/Irish-blue eyes

We were stoned. Bowie was singing about Major Tom.

It wasn’t our first kiss, but it was our first nose-to-nose lingering stare.

Up close her eyes looked like something you might see through a telescope.

At the center, a sapphire sun floated in the diffused light of undeniable, lasting warmth.

*Author’s Note: For C, of course.*

The Night I Fell Off The Curb On A Street Corner At The End Of The World & Landed In A Painting

The diner was a clean, well lighted place, open around-the-clock. I was working the counter the night Edward Hopper stopped in. He asked me why I wasn’t wearing a paper hat.

I shrugged and said, “The cook wears a hairnet.”

“Well, I’m giving you a hat,” he said, sketching feverishly.

Lasting Impressions

Every time the spacebar sticks or a letter key jams, I remind myself I was not always a ghost with no voice, though I honestly cannot say I remember a single moment of any life when I was not constantly beating an old rusty typewriter to haunt an empty house.

The Cat Lady

Mom locked grandma up after the landlord found stacks of newspapers, books and miscellaneous junk, floor to ceiling in every room. Diagnosis: Hoarder disorder.

But in truth, she was a Cat Herder, a proud breeder of kittens, and those walls were the pens, corrals and stalls of Grandma’s Kitten Ranch.

Midnight Curfew

Daddy was waiting. I saw the TV flickering. I held my breath. I’d already removed my shoes. If I slipped past the doorway I could creep upstairs undetected. Once in bed he couldn’t do anything. No matter how loud he screamed I’d squeeze shut my eyes and fake dead-to-the-world sleep.

Legally Blind

Grandpa holds my hand. He taps his cane. His hearing aid emits a horrible hum. His dead eye looks like a winter moon. His right eye, which works well enough for him to manage, glints like crumpled tinfoil in direct sunlight. Whenever he bangs into furniture he spits out sparks.

The Pretty Personal Assistant

We had been going at it over a year before my wife found out.

She’s truly a remarkable person: compassionate, bright, dignified, highly restrained.

She said, I believe it’s time we let you-know-who go. I’ll answer your calls, do your bookkeeping, schedule meetings. It’s high time I managed your affairs.

The Midnight Ramblings Of Rumpelstiltskin

Every night on a crag a half-day’s climb above the foothills, a crooked little man dances by a campfire, whispering “Guess my name,” and the echo carries across fields and valleys, streaming into the dreams of children, who grow to believe they’ll someday be able to spin straw into gold.

Balancing Act

Children shrieking, she bumps open the door, backing out with a stack of dirty dishes, her fingers pinching the rims of four plastic tumblers decorated with Disney logos, the plates rattling, the cutlery clinking in one of the cups. She says breathlessly to the ceiling, Where did my life go?

Easter Brunch at The Inn

*For the Babies*

Ten of us ate and ate, then ate some more. The bill was more than reasonable, considering the impeccable service, excellence and variety of food. The neat thing about dining at the inn was the nostalgic feeling of being at grandma’s house before the war. Stuffed, content, yawning with happiness.

My Father, the Strongman

Naturally, he insisted on digging his own grave. He barely had the strength. I brought wine. We ended up drinking it out of the bottle after he pushed the cork through with his thumb. Each time I chugged I watched that cork drifting around like a boat in a storm.

The Incurable Agnostic

The hospice nurse used an eyedropper to slip more morphine beneath his tongue. The whole problem was God. God’s absence throughout. That summed it up. God at the beginning, pressing dimples into your chin. God at the end, sliding his hand over your eyelids, saying, *Shush. That’s enough for now.*

Milk Carton Kids

At each corner, she read the street sign. She studied the shops and houses, examined the faces of passersby, searching for someone or something that looked familiar. She squeezed her brother’s hand. He was too young to remember anything except their mother. Maybe the next one, she said each time.

Home Movies

The morphine soothes. Death is fairly quick, ultimately painless. Your spirit ascends like an explosion playing out. Turns out that there is a God, and She’s pissed. A projector clacks, images flutter. And not even your slippery silver serpent’s tongue is going to talk your way out of this one.

Poor Kid’s Post-Christmas letter to Santa

Dear sir,

Here’s the thing. I was good. All year. Check your records. Consult your list. Check it a third time. I minded my manners. I was consistently polite, even when I wasn’t in a particularly cheery mood. And not once was I nasty.

So what happened? Weren’t you watching?

The Echo of The Oracle

The elders tell us the first inquiry was carved into a slab of stone heavier than a hundred men and carried to the entrance of the oracle, and upon this giant slab a sacrificial fire was built and a bull slaughtered, and the god’s reply, which was incredible and inspiring, could be heard warbling, snapping, crackling, blistering bright.

Buried in the Meadowlands

After the last mourner left, the wind picked up. The sun had slipped beneath the horizon and the moon was a phantom in a sky the precise color of anger in a grieving mother’s eyes. Gusting wind swayed the high grass as though an army of ghosts were marching through.

Thanksgiving Toast

Yesterday I went hunting for wild turkey and met a bear. Big, brown, monstrous.

He lifted his head and snarled at me across a narrow stream too shallow to float a canoe.

He could have splashed across in two heartbeats. Mercifully, he was already eating something on the other side.

Catholic Schoolgirls & Bad, bad Boys

Imagine a leather strap looped from neck to ankle. Their beauty and magnificence hobbled us like that. When they spoke about marriage we surmised their words had more to do with things we didn’t know, things we were incapable of learning, than with anything they were prohibited from telling us.

The Moon in Decline

*(For Sarah’s Babies)*

Once we discovered every crater was a childhood wound, a leftover pockmark of despair, we conferred a diagnosis of major depression and put the moon on suicide watch, monitoring its position every fifteen minutes. All night we watched the moon creep and wane. Winking stars and chirping crickets didn’t help.

The Breathtaking Stink of This World

I asked my father what he’d miss most and he spoke about the odors of men, and the fragrances of women, about the distinct aromas places held all the while you were in them — crowded rooms, vacant houses, city streets after a thunderstorm, country roads during a heavy, heavy snow.

In The Custody of The King

Since I was a small child, my friend Merlin, having experienced his life backwards, would recite stories of my future, relating events he had witnessed, advising me accordingly. I miss Merlin’s insights. These days he barely speaks, being just a toddler, soon to be an infant, and then who knows.

Facts of Considerable Importance

The elephant in the living room

led us to the skeletons in the closets

so we overturned the rug

finding all the things you’d swept there,

and in the backyard

beneath a bed of twisted thorns

from which a single rose had bloomed

we dug up every truth you’d buried.

Mind Your Own

My daughter lives thirty minutes away. She’s got two children now. We haven’t spoken in twenty years. The last time we were together we hunted Monkey Bees in the backyard, turning things over, looking for a Monkey Bees’ nest. It was a made-up game. There was no way to win.

The Leaking and the Legacy

One day Big Balloon said to Little Balloon, “Shush. Listen. Hear that hiss?”

Inflated from the same tank, though years apart at different carnivals, each wore the same drawn-on smile beneath unblinking dotted eyes.

“Don’t let my deflation go to waste,” Big Balloon said, steadily leaking. “Inhale. Breathe me in.”

Three Boys and a Widow

They showed up at dusk on Mother’s Day with cake and ice cream. Three greasy-haired boys. The handsome one said, “Our own mothers are dead. We hope you don’t mind.”

Mind, she thought. What was there to mind? Death, cake, inconsolable boys?

“We want to celebrate your life in reverence.”

Guillotine Guys

The guillotine guys handed out silk neckties and scarfs to the men and jeweled necklaces to the women. These items had belonged to previous prisoners. To the families they sold Band-Aids and iodine, steel needles and surgical thread, all in a boxed set with a pamphlet full of bad advice.

The Stench of a Lifetime

The scent of my father lives in the walls and permeates the air. The oddly sweet aroma is strongest in his office.

From a wall packed with books I can select any volume and, just by opening it, smell his hands, his breath, feel his eyes reflected off the page.

Inside the Walls of Troy

They froze when they realized the dust floating down, piling up all around, was ash from the city’s funeral pyres. “Don’t breathe,” someone commanded. Rather impractical advice for tired, bloodthirsty men. They tore Helen’s dresses into strips, wrapped their faces in the fine linen, and became featureless, rampaging, insatiable ghosts.

The Father of the Bride & the Open Bar

I never called them stupid for marrying. That wasn’t in my speech. I was drunk but I remember exactly what I said before somebody yanked the microphone away. I said he was a couple rides short of a carnival and that her sewing machine had obviously run out of thread.

Baby Sea Turtles

After the storm we walked the shoreline, sifting through mounds of brown-green algae, looking for survivors. The wind does such cruel tricks, tossing hatchlings onto their backs, offering them up to sun and birds. We left each right where we found it, after turning them over and setting them straight.

A Rope Thick as a Baby’s Arm

Breathless from her climb, Lisa straddled a high branch and gently rubbed her belly. She watched the elm’s shadow creeping across the church’s stained-glass. When the preacher said “Whoever has reason that these two should not be joined,” she would grip the tire-swing’s rope and leap, swinging out, shattering everything.

Her Last Autumn Evening

*(In Memory of Kay, 1923-2015)*

The plan was to shut all the windows after the first drop, but the clouds passed over us and no rain fell. The wind driving the storm left a crinkling silence in its wake. The air stilled, the curtains stopped moving, and it was like the house had stopped breathing.

Pins and Poisons & Good Reason: A Halloween Mystery Solved

My grandfather admits he originated the practice of handing out contaminated treats. Razors in apples. Pins and poisons in full-sized candy bars.

The risk of being struck by a car is four times higher on Halloween. He hoped to persuade paranoid parents into keeping their little darlings off the street.

Day at the Beach

We rolled up our trousers and walked barefoot. Dad was cheerful, almost jolly. He laughed repeatedly between long, knee-gripping coughing fits. He was 59; I was 27.

It took me years to understand that it wasn’t a real laugh so much as a genuine imitation of a dying man’s chuckle.

Coup d’État

After the queen died of consumption, we smothered the old king in his sleep and condemned his son for the murder.

We then put in place to rule our territory the speechless blind prophet who always wore a crown of sparrows, their tiny talons tangled in his coarse filthy hair.

These Things Are Yours

My good-for-nothing mother came back from the dead wearing a different dress than the one we’d buried her in. Her hair was dyed ruddy rose. In her cupped hands she held all my rage, all my grief.

She winked, spread her fingers, dropped all that old sorrow at my feet.

The Last Time I Saw My Father

Sometime after midnight a flame flared outside my window, momentarily illuminating his face. He had a cigarette clenched between his teeth. His eyes mirrored the flame, creating three distinct points of light, which all vanished at once, leaving only the orange tip of his cigarette dancing like a bumbling firefly.

The Week The Circus Came To Town

Sunday I spotted an elephant destroying my cabbage garden so I shot the monster dead. Moments later, six clowns in midget cars bumped onto my lawn. They were armed with rainbow parasols.

“I’ve had this dream,” my wife said.

I cocked my rifle. “How’s it end?”

“Not good,” she said.

The Things We Preserve

After admiring the specimen, I forced a pin through its middle, then delicately bent back the wings. I used tweezers to gently manipulate each wing flat, because butterflies get pretty brittle after they’re dead.

My granddaughter was noticeably unimpressed. Her scream remains, pinned to my heart, framed in my brain.

Easter Tuesday

That spring, after a winter-long surge of solar flares disturbed Earth’s rotation, throwing calendars out of whack, Easter fell on a Tuesday. And my mother, months ahead of her oncologist’s calculations, began to rapidly decline.

“Fetch my wig,” she said from beneath her comforter. “God won’t recognize me like this.”

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Vigil For An Estranged Father

His breathing sounded like stones rumbling in a blender.

Twice, a nurse came in to take his pulse and make adjustments to the morphine drip.

Though his hair had turned stark white, his whiskers still grew in grey. I counted the wrinkles in his face, simply to pass the time.

After the Honeymoon’s Over

I woke from my nap soaked in sweat, shivering. I felt chest pain.

In the kitchen my wife had my heart on a cutting board. I watched as she jabbed a fork in and sawed with a steak knife.

“Whoa,” I said. “Easy there.”

The whole marriage was like that.

The First Time I Gazed Into My Wife’s Eyes

*(For C.)*

What I saw was breathtaking: a vast, complex maze of high stone walls enclosing intricate, overlapping passageways containing sharp turns, hidden traps, and secret doors that looped back to the starting point. And at the center: a large kite, strong enough to carry a man to freedom. No strings attached.

The Mapmaker’s Calligraphist Daughter

Between measured strokes and subtle flourishes the mapmaker’s daughter dips her quill, carefully blotting the tip before proceeding.

Each night she obediently transcribes the names of fictitious landmarks —phony towns, nonexistent roads, unreachable waterways — her over-protective father designates along longitudes and latitudes that suitors unwittingly follow to God knows where.

The Talking Fingers of My Great Greek Grandfather

On each fingertip Papou penned dots for eyes, lines for mouths. He cut strips of colored paper to make caps, bonnets, pullover suits, and dresses. Despite his dense accent each character’s voice sounded distinct. It was amazing, magical stuff. Whenever we visit, I march silent shadow puppets across his gravestone.

Famous Last Words

After we’d unloaded the snowmobiles from his truck, my father pointed toward the lake. Someone had driven a blue Volkswagen Bug onto the ice and just left it there. “What did I tell you? Ten feet thick,” he said. “You could drag a house out there and not break through.”

Word Perfect (For C.)

If your memories are like mine, you’ll recollect on the night we met the wind was fierce, so we inked a kite and wrote poems on clouds.

But that wasn’t the fantastic part. The fantastic part was when the moon recited those poems back to us thirty years later. Verbatim.

Fair Question While Packing

Am I coming back? Wow. Bluntness at last. Good for you. And about time, I must say. Imagine if we had always talked so openly, so directly. I wonder where our conversations would have led us, where we’d be right now. Not here. That’s a fair assumption, don’t you think.

Our Last Night Together

She pointed at the moon and I said what and she said look how big and I said it really didn’t seem any different and she said but look at that glow and I said nothing for a long while because it was no use, neither her nor the moon.

My Father’s Miraculous Mechanical Solution for Grieving

He described the contraption as a hand-cranked device, sort of like a pinwheel mounted with glass prisms. Except, instead of light, the prisms reflected joyful memories. He claimed it worked like a dream, an absolute dream, revealing us all together, all alive, running around the backyard, leaping puddles, hopping rainbows.

Daily Sustenance

We prayed each night at dinner for everybody in general.

Mom sometimes mentioned someone by name.

Unusually the special someone was really sick or near death, or in such a mess of trouble only god could save them now.

Dad called it Mom’s ‘break glass in case of emergency’ prayer.

Hospital Visit

One time we sneaked in a dozen birthday cupcakes.

The nurses smiled. Grandpa ate the paper part. I watched him reach for another.

I said, You can’t eat the skins.

He gagged and choked. He was just being a goof. That was grandpa.

He’d eat paper to get a laugh.

Early Morning Hike

*(Another Misadventure of the Broken Boys)*

On the slope to the river a deer leapt across their path. Barely ten feet in front. Everyone froze. A big buck. Graceful, nimble, terrifyingly quick. Some of the boys lost their breath. They had all seen. Yet nearly half didn’t believe. Very often the forest dreamed its own dreams.

Another day of Missing Her

Some days the heartache was worse than others. He swallowed various pills to make himself sunny, but within hours the dark clouds returned. He practiced his breathing. Meanwhile, actual clouds, gray and big as mountains, bumped against the window. Some kind of wild bird was constantly cawing in the trees.

The Alienators

The two eyewitnesses were an eight-year-old boy and his ten-year-old sister.

Everyday they overheard more than they could comprehend.

Why was daddy so angry?

How come they had to call this new woman “mommy?”

They missed their real mother.

Why did “new mommy” get to decide who they could love?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bob Thurber is an old 'unschooled’ writer with no degrees in anything, no academic credentials, and no formal training. Born in 1955 and raised in abject poverty, Bob graduated high school by the skin of his teeth, then spent his early adult years working menial jobs while reading obsessively and studying the craft of fiction. He served a lengthy apprenticeship, writing nearly every day for 20 years before submitting his work for publication. Since then his stories have received a long list of awards and citations, among them *The Marjory Bartlett Sanger Award,* and *The Barry Hannah Fiction Prize.* Selections have appeared in over 60 anthologies, and appeared in hundreds of publications including *Esquire*. Bob is the author of *Paperboy: A Dysfunctional Novel* and three collections of stories. He resides in Massachusetts where, despite vision loss, he continues to write every day.

Visit his website at BobThurber.net