

Published by Missouri Review Books
357 McReynolds Hall, University of Missouri
Columbia, Missouri, 65211

Missouri Review Books is published by the *Missouri Review* through the College of Arts & Science of the University of Missouri, with private contributions.

Trouble in Mind: the Short Story and Conflict
Copyright 2018 by
The Curators of the University of Missouri
All rights reserved

This is an anthology of fiction. All names, characters, places, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. No reference to any real person is intended or should be inferred.

ISBN: 978-1-945829-18-5 (print)
ISBN: 978-1-945829-19-2 (digital)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2018960364

www.missourireview.com

Cover Image: "After the Duel," Antonio Mancini, 1872, De Agostino Picture Library, Gonella, Bridgeman Images

Cover design by Jane Raese of Raese Design, Boulder, Colorado. Interior design by Scott McCullough.

Special thanks to Associate Editor Evelyn Somers who edited the stories when they first appeared in *The Missouri Review*.

Instructions to the Living from the Condition of the Dead

Jason Brown

The door hinges creaked, and the thudding footfalls of his family shook the beams. What were they doing here today, the day before Thanksgiving? Voices, the crackling of grocery bags, firewood clunking in front of the hearth (because they thought he was too old now to carry it from the barn himself). They swarmed into every corner of the parlor and the kitchen with no thought to the most important question, the same this year as every year: Who had brought the goddamned cheddar? Indeed. Two years ago he'd put his foot down and said he would no longer provide! So this year would be the same as last year: crackers and hummus from California.

“Dad? Where are you?” called Melissa, his mealy-mouthed, psalm-singing sycophant of a granddaughter-in-law, a lawyer from California who always talked about the importance in old age of regular bowel movements. A sharp slap on the staircase, then another and another. Nowhere to retreat to except into his bedroom. Not safe! The first place Melissa would look. The bathroom, and once there, into the cast-iron tub? Forced to evacuate because these people had shown up on Isabel's birthday. His family didn't even know about Isabel and wouldn't approve if they did. Their

beloved Grandma Sarah departed, and here he was sneaking over to Isabel's house. Tut, tut, the old Heathcliff. No cheddar for him!

The slapping grew louder as he decided to stand his ground in the bathroom (they had just once, he and Isabel, lain side by side in her great bed, with their clothes on, and he had leaned over to kiss her). "Your wife was very pretty," Isabel said. "She is," he replied, and this would've been a good chance to explain (though he decided it was not wise) the overwhelming feeling that his wife was not dead but everywhere around him at all times.

He heard no sound for almost a minute, so he opened the door to the bathroom. Five small fingers rested on the top step. The scruffy blond hair. The blue eyes and tanned face of his great-grandson, William Palfry Howland (Will), resident of Ojai, California, a place, he gathered, where people lolled around in the sun like overfed housecats. Having summited the top step, his great-grandson sighed.

"Daddy wants to talk to you," he said and cocked his head.

"The grand one or the regular one?" John asked.

He heard his wife, Sarah, clucking in the air around him. She didn't need to tell him to leave the boy be.

His great-grandson frowned and pursed his lips. The smallness of his mouth reminded John of Melissa, the boy's mother, who measured her words like a butcher adding slices of roast beef on the scale. The more she spoke, the more he would have to pay. She'd actually been born in Maine, not California, but she was a Yankee in name only. Her branch of the John Gorham Palfrys suffered from dry rot, but none of that was the boy's fault.

"Ah, I don't know what dayyy wants," Will said and shrugged. Cocking his hip and raising his hand in the air, Will flashed that sly smile, head tilted. Were all the children from California born to sell insurance?

"Do you want to play a game?" John asked.

"No—." Will shook his head.

"Well, you're in luck because I have a secret stash of cookies. . . ."

"Why?"

"Why? So no one else will eat them."

This seemed to cause horrible confusion. Will put his palm up to the side of his head.

"I don't like cookies," Will said.

"Everyone likes cookies," John countered.

"Do they have sugar in them?"

"Do they have sugar? Of course. They're cookies."

Will shook his head sadly. As always, John had lost the battle before it even started.

“What the heck do you like to eat, then?”

“Mangoes. I like mangoes.”

“Would you like to do something for me?” He was out of tricks.

“Yes, I would!” Will’s eyes flashed blue.

“Go downstairs and tell your dad and your granddad—tell anyone you see—that you spotted me down by the river in back of the house.”

“But you’re not down by the river.”

John knelt in front of Will’s face.

“That’s the point of the game, Will. If I were down by the river, it wouldn’t be a game at all! Don’t you see?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I don’t see.”

“Well, you will someday. Now hurry up before it’s too goddamned late.”

“You swore,” Will pointed out, but he didn’t seem upset about it. He descended the steps carefully and, with a good deal less urgency than John would’ve liked, turned the corner to tell everyone that he had spotted his senile great-grandfather headed for the shore. John heard the side door slam. Everyone spilled out into the field behind the house and started calling his name.

Even on days when he managed a decent bowel movement, the narrow staircase was an iffy proposition (not recommended by Doctor Pingree or Janine, the attractive acupuncture woman, without whom he would never have a bowel movement). He grabbed his volume of Emily Dickinson, creaked down the stairs, stutter-stepped to the landing like a teenager, plucked his Irish tweed hat off the hook, and headed out the front door to his electric tricycle parked at the head of the drive. Didn’t need the motor going downhill. He slipped past the cars at the end of the drive, banged a left, and coasted toward Boynton’s Market. Couldn’t show up without a cupcake. She was only eighty-five—a younger woman! Flowers, too much. She always had flowers, anyway. How did she manage that in the winter? They hadn’t even taken away her license yet, so maybe she drove to Portland for them. A girl with a license. They’d taken his away, even though he could see an osprey pluck a mole out of the grass at a hundred yards. He pedaled along the flat on Water Street and rode up onto the curb in front of Boynton’s Market.

Charlie Boynton manned the counter today.

“John,” he said in his usual flat voice. Anchored there for twenty-five years.

“Got a house full of people,” John said.

“Happens this time of year.”

“Half of them seem to be from goddamn California.”

“Sure. Heard of it.”

“Ever been there?”

Charlie just looked at him with raised eyebrows. Course he hadn’t.

“They weren’t supposed to come ‘til tomorrow. Charlie, I need a cupcake. A large cupcake if you have one. Two. Do you even have cupcakes?”

“We have cupcakes.”

Thank god, and tremendous cupcakes they were. He bought one carrot with thick cream frosting and one double chocolate. Charlie fit them up with a box, no great shakes, tied with string, just right for Isabel. A no-nonsense Radcliffe girl, weren’t many of them around, and two books of poems to her name. Isabel Vaughn Bowditch, though everyone called her Bella Vaughn, because she was a Vaughn first, especially as far as the town was concerned. The last Vaughn still living in Vaughn. Trim and strong in her yellow slicker and Wellies, drove the old Volvo to the post office for mail at exactly 10:45 every single morning. Her grandfather would’ve been Henry Vaughn, the one who ran the mill into the ground. Not his fault. Her brother the one who turned it into a retirement center. Her husband, Walter Bowditch, bald as a harbor seal, dead five years now, a “fancy mechanic,” wanted to be a specialist in Portland, people said, but Bella said no, so he stayed in Vaughn and dispensed pills and cough syrup.

His own wife, Sarah, had grown weak around the ankles in her last years. John had to do the shopping and cooking and cleaning. Then one morning he woke with the light as usual, swung his legs out of bed as he shivered in the cold bite of the bedroom air, and said, as he always did, “Going to take the dog out.” Instead of saying, “Okay,” in her perfectly clear voice (she always woke before him and lay in bed waiting for the sun to come up), she said nothing. Made no sound. She lay on her back, mouth open, eyes closed.

Unsure that the half-charged tricycle battery would power him up the hill, he pedaled as far as he could before hitting the power switch and letting the motor take over. If he could make the next rise, he could coast the rest of the way past the Smalls’ and Nasons’ to reach Isabel’s driveway. She’d told him when he last visited . . . ten days ago? Said he shouldn’t worry about her birthday. “No big ship,” she said, using a phrase he’d heard on a trip to Nova Scotia in 1952 to deliver a schooner from Canso to Newburyport for a man named Rogers.

The motor on his trike started to whine a hundred yards from the crest of the hill. He pressed down hard on the pedals and, in the final stretch, stood up as sweat pooled on his brow. Over the top, he ran before the wind down the other side.

“For me, all that business with the body is over now,” Sarah’s voice entered his ear. “Go to her if that’s what you want.” Sometimes she spoke from above, high in the clouds, or from across the room.

He did want to smell Isabel’s hair and rest his lips on the nape of her neck. He wanted to pull her to him.

“What if I lose track of you?” he said to his wife.

“You won’t,” she said.

He glided past the Boynton house, the Wells house (someone from Massachusetts lived there now), the Coffin house with the windows shamefully fallen out of the cupola. The same was true of the Dill house, where Betsy had lived alone since her husband, Henry Dill, owner for forty years of Foot Wise Shoes in Augusta and active member of the Volunteer Fire Department, had stepped in front of the snowplow, either on purpose or not, according to what you believed. Having only recently sold the store, he had talked to John about buying an electric tricycle for himself (one, he thought, with a stronger battery). No person who wanted to own an electric tricycle could possibly want to throw themselves in front of a plow, but, as Sarah had pointed out more than once, why was the man out on Water Street at twelve midnight on a Thursday during a snowstorm? No one would ever know the answer to that question.

Second Street swept down to level ground. The sky began to clear, and the air, tinged with wood smoke, turned sharp in his sinuses and hard as a fist in his chest. The body mechanic Pingree had said he had emphysema years ago, yet he felt it was only yesterday when he first stepped up to Sarah’s parents’ house and asked to see their daughter. “No, you may not!” It was a Sunday, the father reminded this young man. No piece of information had ever seemed as trivial and funny as the day of the week. He told her father he’d come back the next day, the eighth day of the week. “There is no eighth day,” the father said, clearly baffled. “There is now,” John told him.

And there was, and there is, still.

He slipped right into Isabel’s driveway. The ground grew too rough and the ruts too deep, and he stepped off the trike. Eager to reach the black front door, he forgot the box of cupcakes and had to turn back.

“You should’ve brought flowers,” Sarah said.

“She has flowers already,” he said.

“But that’s not the point.”

He knew she was right, and he stood in front of the door wondering if he should turn back to Boynton’s. For the past two months he’d called Isabel before sleep each night, and they read Emily Dickinson to each other as they both gazed out their bedroom windows at the moon hanging over the twisting current of the river.

*I had been hungry all the years;
My noon had come, to dine;
I, trembling, drew the table near,
And touched the curious wine. . . .*

After more than sixty years of marriage and almost a century on earth, he could now feel himself pushing against the front of his pants like a schoolboy. He wanted to

touch Isabel today, before the sun went down, before his family realized he'd abdicated his post the day before Thanksgiving (who would cut the turkey, light the plum pudding, start them off singing *We gather together to ask the lord's blessing . . .*)

He pounded the brass knocker and listened with his ear to the door. For a moment, when he heard nothing, he stopped breathing. Then the house creaked under her light step. Those old pine floors with loosened rosehead nails, the horse-hair plaster itself as alive as the hide of an animal.

"You would have been better off with her, John," Sarah said, and he shook his head. His father had said more or less the same thing when he first brought Sarah home: "Are you sure, John?" But what had John done with his life? A schoolteacher, correcting the spelling of the town. No great shakes. Sarah had risen to rule the school board. He hadn't deserved *her*.

The knob turned, and the door swung open. There she stood, trim in her white blouse and gray bob, a cup of coffee poised in her right hand. Her eyes jumped away from him, slid off his shoulder, and came to rest on the granite step. He didn't understand; there was no reason for her to be embarrassed. They'd done nothing that they couldn't take back. He could explain; he just wanted to come in, to not be outside.

"John," she said, and his patience gave out.

"Please, can I come in?"

"Of course." She bowed slightly and stepped out of his way, and he entered the foyer and then the cool parlor. The threadbare oriental, the portrait of her grandfather, old Henry Vaughn, his chin like a rifle butt. He set the box on the sideboard and started to undo the string. She'd understand when he showed her the cupcakes. He struggled with the tape on the edge of the box and finally took out both cupcakes and placed them on the sideboard. The sight of them seemed to make her sad. He knew she liked chocolate.

"For your birthday," he said. How could anything be more simple than that?

"Today," she said slowly, "is not my birthday, John. It's next week."

Next week! He looked from the cupcakes to her. He'd spent so many afternoons looking right into her green eyes. She smiled out the window toward the brown straw of the field. At the end of the field the barn, and beyond the barn a scattered veil of pines partially obscuring the river.

"I was going to call today and invite you to supper next week," she said.

He took *The Collected Poems of Emily Dickinson* out of his pocket and rested it next to the cupcakes.

She smiled and moved the cupcakes to the kitchen table. She would be right back. When she returned from the pantry, she carried a bottle of wine, her last bottle of Bocksbeutel, she said, from a case she and her husband had brought back from a

trip to France and Germany in the late 1980s. He hadn't seen one of the distinctively round bottles of the Franconian wines in fifty years. She pulled the cork and filled two glasses. He toasted her birthday, and they both drank.

He lifted the book he had brought and was about to open to the poem "Hunger," when she sighed and told him that her favorite town in the wine region had been Tegernsee, and he set the book down on the table.

"Tegernsee?" he said, and she nodded. He asked if the wine in front of him had come from this town. She nodded and lifted the bottle to pour him more.

"It was such a beautiful village, with those old hotels right on the lake and the mountains in the distance." She leaned forward, still smiling.

"We almost destroyed Tegernsee," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"It was the war," he said.

"Yes, of course," she said. "I didn't know there was a battle there. When we visited, the residents said none of the buildings had been destroyed. That there hadn't really been any fighting there."

She was right. His company commander, Bill Spears, had spared the village because of a man named Heinz Shaeffer, a wounded German tank commander who walked toward them across a field with a bandage around his head and his one good arm raised in the air.

John had never spoken to anyone about the end of the war, not even Sarah. Now as he talked, he began to search, like a man in a dark room, for an excuse to shut his mouth.

"We were chasing an SS unit down from Munich. They stopped in Tegernsee and started to shell us. So my commander told me to get on the phone and call for artillery. It was May 3."

"But then this man, a tank commander, walked out of the village?"

"He told us the village was full of 12,000 unarmed German soldiers who were not SS, and war refugees, and that the war would be over in days, and he was right—we knew that. The war ended five days later."

"So then it was a good thing you didn't destroy the village," she said, still smiling.

"But the armed SS unit was there, too, and they would get away down the back end of the valley into Austria. We didn't want to let them escape."

"But the war was almost over," she said and leaned forward to lay her hand on his forearm.

"We didn't care. We planned to execute every last one of them," he said.

"I don't understand. Why would you kill them if you knew the war was about to end?"

“Not kill—execute. Two different things. Because of the goddamned mess we found at Gardelegen and Kaufering, that’s why.” She tilted her head and squinted at him, and he lowered his voice. “Because of what we found.”

“Oh, I see,” she said and leaned back in her chair, the afternoon light turning to liquid in the reflections of her eyes. The corners of her mouth tucked in like the wings of a bird folding against its body. “Come now,” she said and quickly shook her head.

The words might have come from his own thoughts—he couldn’t be sure—and he spoke to argue with himself.

“A thousand burned bodies inside one barn in Gardelegen,” he said, “and that was nothing compared to Kaufering and Dachau . . . and all along the roadside to Tegernsee.”

“Dachau?” Isabel shook her head with her eyes closed. “No, John,” she said.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I shouldn’t be telling you this.” After they’d failed to attack Tegernsee, he and the others in his unit had never talked about what they’d seen.

“It’s nonsense, John,” she said, and she placed her hand back on his arm. He looked at her hand, at the Dickinson, at the cupcakes, then at the walls of the kitchen with pictures of her family: her late husband, her only child, Katherine, who lived in Boston, and other Vaughns, most of them gone now, the descendants of people who had, along with his own ancestors, started this town.

“But I was there,” he said quietly, not to her, and now he was forced to picture the man who had wedged his head under the wall of the barn and died with his eyes open to the sky. Had he seen that? The others they found in smoldering piles by the doors. Following the trail of the destruction south, they found more charred bodies inside the barracks at Kaufering. Skeletons with blackened skin stretched as tight as the heads of snare drums. Between Dachau and Tegernsee, more bodies in the woods and along the side of the road. Then they reached Tegernsee, and the tank commander with the bandage over one eye and another around his chest begged them not to shell the town where the murderers hid among the innocent.

“The SS is still there,” John had said to the CO, Bill Spears.

“And a hospital and 12,000 people without guns,” said the tank commander in perfect English. Dried blood flaked off his dirty neck. John remembered the German tank commander’s hazel eyes, the chip in his tooth, the feel of the air, the impossibly blue sky as John held the handle of the radio in one hand and the crank in the other. Bill Spears raised his palm and shook his head. Later, they walked into the town with the tank commander. The SS had left already, and thousands of people, many of them children, mothers, grandmothers, wounded soldiers, all the people they would have killed, came out to greet them. Many people were dying in these last days of the war, Germans and prisoners both. Hundreds of thousands in the camps died of typhus before and after they were rescued. Many German villag-

ers not killed by the constant Allied firebombing committed suicide just before the Americans or Soviets arrived.

“I know,” Isabel said, “we are all supposed to think . . . Walter and I, we just never believed any of that—at least not in the way we were told it happened.”

He realized she meant Kaufering, Dachau, and similar places. She looked him in the eyes. They had grown up in the same town. He’d known her as a girl until she left for Dana Hall and college. When he saw her after she returned already married, she wore the same warm expression when she shopped at Boynton’s store, chaired library committee meetings, and read her own poems in public. He was married, and she was married, of course.

“It’s Thanksgiving tomorrow,” he said, and when she nodded, he looked at the floor. The deep blues and reds of the worn Persian carpet. When he stood, he focused on the dark oil portraits of her ancestors down the hall. He needed to be out of here, and he pushed himself from the table and limped (his knee aching again) down the hall past the door to the study. All those leather-bound volumes, her father’s and her grandfather’s books from Harvard, which she’d read as a girl on summer afternoons when her mother propped open all the windows and the breeze from the river billowed the curtains and stirred the leaves of her father’s newspaper resting on the arm of his wing chair. In the last year she’d painted him a picture of her whole life.

She touched his back. “I’m sorry, John,” she said, and for a moment he thought she would take back what she’d said. “I am sure you saw many horrible things.” Her hand on his seemed to weigh more than any man could lift.

He nodded and limped as quickly as he could out the door. Not the first time he’d run for his life. On the granite landing, his heart jumped but didn’t stop. He jog-hopped with his bad knee toward his tricycle, but when he turned the trike around, he realized the battery was dead. He’d never be able to pedal—or walk, for that matter—up and over the hill to the house.

He hobbled around the edge of the woods. His breath seized every time a dry branch snapped under his boots. He had left the Dickinson in her kitchen, but he didn’t think he would read any more Dickinson in the time he had left.

Isabel kept an old wooden rowboat down by the river for when her daughter and grandchildren visited. He spotted the upturned blue hull, made of plywood, half its paint gone. He flipped it over and found the gray oars rotting but still solid. Larry had pulled the dock for her already. With his back to the river, he tugged the boat a few feet at a time to the marshy shore. The tide would pinch any time now. He waded up to his knees and pulled the boat in after him. Sensing Isabel watching him, he tried to climb quickly into the boat, but he couldn’t raise his feet. He dove headfirst over the side and used his arms to right himself. When he craned his neck, he spotted her halfway between the river and her house and moving fast on her springy legs.

“John,” he heard Sarah say in his ear, “why did you never tell me what you saw?”

“I just wanted to forget it,” he said.

“John . . .” Isabel, calling his name. Though he’d launched himself into ebb tide, he did have the wind in his favor. Before he could set the locks and oars in place, he’d already drifted out of Isabel’s view and traveled fifty yards, maybe seventy-five. Rowing, he picked up speed and felt the satisfying whoosh of the oars and the bow cleaving the water. He had rowed this stretch as a boy many times, and now all he wanted to do was get home to Sarah.

The three-story shops lined the waterfront. Behind their sagging roofs, the square captains’ houses and church spires of town stretched up the hill toward the top of the valley, where his Puritan ancestors had arrived hundreds of years before to claim this shore—the farthest upriver into the belly of the state a deepwater vessel could travel. What had he done with the life they had prepared for him? Running around a field with a whistle, parsing lines of poetry for children who could think of nothing but chasing each other around outdoors.

The men from the SS unit—five hundred, maybe—slipped into Austria, and from there he never knew what happened to them. Some might have been caught. Others must have escaped. John had been killing Germans since D-Day, and now his commanders told him to stop. Just like that.

The boat was leaking. Up to his ankles now. Nothing he could do but row harder. The rotten oar cracked, and his shoulder seized with pain. He sighted the field in front of his house and gave an extra hard tug. A small person stood at the shoreline, shielding his eyes. His great-grandson, Will, shouted, “Grand, grand,” over the water. “What are you doing?”

John thought he would save his wind and attempt to answer the question later. The technique he’d used with his children and grandchildren, of putting them off until they forgot their questions, never worked with Will, who remembered everything and had a backlog of unanswered—and frequently unanswerable—questions that he brought to bear with a tax assessor’s persistence. Will’s mother, the lawyer, had placed a stick in the ground to mark the spot past which her son should not venture closer to the water. Will leaned against the stick like a ballplayer leaning on his bat.

The boat nudged into the grass. The water had come to within six inches of the gunnel.

“There’s a problem with your boat,” Will observed from the safety of his position on the bank.

John stood in the shallows of the river and looked up at Will’s blue eyes and unruly California hairdo.

“I wish I could ride in the boat with you,” Will said sadly. He pursed his lips. Despite his California origins, possibly Will had inherited a tendency to look at all boats, even this boat, with longing. “My mother thinks I’m going to the bathroom.” Will turned his miniature hand palm up. “I *was* going to the bathroom, but then I looked out the window and saw *you* in the river. In that boat,” Will said.

When John tried to trudge through the mud, his boots stuck and wouldn’t move. He undid the laces and pulled. The socks stayed with the boots as he freed his feet and fought the reeds to solid ground. The bank remained, and his right knee and now his hip had stopped working altogether. His back, his neck, his ribs—his whole body ached and burned and resisted taking one more step. He stumbled, turned his ankle and scraped his forehead on a root.

“You didn’t make it!” Will said, more thrilled than troubled, it seemed to John.

John grabbed the branches of a bush and pulled and crawled his way up the slope. At the top, he collapsed, wheezing, in front of Will, who looked from his face to his wet trousers and bare, sliced feet.

“You have blood on your head!” Will said. He leaned close to John’s face and frowned. In California—and especially in Will’s little genius private school where they taught astrophysics to eight-year-olds—people didn’t get knocked around. They didn’t make emergency landings on hostile shores. John touched his forehead, and his fingers came away bloody.

“Here they come,” Will said, pointing to the side of the house. The family had spotted him and started across the field. They would surround him.

“Stay here,” Will said. “Take a time out. I will go tell them you’re sleeping.”

The black soles of Will’s shoes snapped as he sprinted through the pale grass.

“Sarah?” John said and looked for her in the apple trees his father had planted along the shore, in the windows of the house at the head of the field, in the rowboat, submerged to the gunnels and turning in the current, and in the faces of his family waving to him from halfway across the field. They would want to know where he’d been. “Sarah,” he said, no longer recognizing the sound of his own voice, “what do I tell them?” He closed his eyes to listen for her answer and heard only silence.