

ALL OF THE ABOVE

A Short Story by

ROB E. BOLEY

To properly support the head and neck, an effective pillow maintains a height of approximately five inches.

This is the first thought to go through Larry's alcohol-scorched mind on Saturday morning, and he has no idea where the thought came from. It's true, of course, and his pillow is anything but effective, proper, or supportive. In fact, right now his pillow is a running shoe.

He sits up and stares at his shoe. Rubs his aching neck.

Slowly, he realizes that someone is watching him. It's his nine-year-old son Patrick, whose attention is torn between what's on t.v. – Spider-Man beating up a giant lizard – and what's on the family room floor – Larry.

“Hey, buddy,” Larry says. “Daddy was just camping out on the floor. Practicing for, uh, camping.”

“Are we going camping?”

“Um. Eventually?”

“What about snakes? I'm afraid of snakes.”

“There are only about 8,000 venomous snakebites in this entire country, buddy, and no more than a dozen fatalities annually. That's .0025 of a percent of the population.” The stats and calculations tumble over Larry's tongue, and again he has no idea where the facts come from.

Patrick cocks his head toward his father, though his gaze is fixated on the television. “That doesn’t help, Dad.”

Using all of his available stamina and coordination, Larry walks into the kitchen, sits down at the breakfast table, and closes his eyes. The darkness there, normally comforting, is tainted by the unpleasant sensation that starved maggots are gnawing at the backs of his eyelids. Larry opens his eyes, his groggy vision settling on the already open morning paper.

Larry’s wife, Gail, stands over the stove tending to a pan of scrambled eggs. Not looking at him. “What time did you get home last night?”

Larry closes his eyes, preferring at least for the moment to face the hungry maggots. “Why ask when you know already?”

“Because I want to see if you were too drunk to know.”

“Fine. It was three o’clock.” She stares at him blankly.

“Four o’clock.” More staring. “Half past four?”

Gail turns back to the stove, stirs the eggs. “How much did you have to drink?”

“More than enough.”

“What if you’d gotten into an accident? What if you’d killed yourself, or someone else?”

Gail audibly grits her teeth, and he cringes. Not because he has a problem with teeth-gritting, but because Gail looks like her mother when she grits.

“You shouldn’t put milk in with the eggs,” Larry says. “It makes them burn. Use a bit of water instead.”

She stares at him, while the eggs behind her smolder.

“What? You’re the cook now?”

“Sorry. I guess I must have read that somewhere.” But did he? No. He has no idea where he picked up this random bit of cooking knowledge. He turns the page of the newspaper, hoping for an interesting article to change the subject. Instead, he finds a report about the renovation of a local building, which contains a fact – that the building was built in 1934 – that he somehow knows to be untrue.

What. The. Hell?

On the back page, he finds the crossword. Gail had entered three of the answers before giving up. He picks up a pen and stares at the blank little squares on the page. A five-letter word for trout basket. Creel. A six-letter expression of annoyance. Tsk-tsk. A seven-letter word that makes animals’ eyes shine in the dark.

“Tapetum?” he says.

“What?” Gail says, dumping the eggs into the wastebasket.

“Tapetum. It’s what makes animals eyes glow.”

“Uh-huh.”

A five-letter word for a dispatch boat. A ten-letter breed of dog. An eleven-letter Latin illogical conclusion. Aviso.

Rottweiler. Non sequitur.

On and on it goes until Larry finishes the entire puzzle. He moves on to yesterday’s crossword, filling in the answers while Gail whips up a new batch of eggs.

“Whoa, check out the brain on Dad,” Patrick says, standing behind Larry.

“Not bad, huh, kiddo?”

Patrick sits next to Larry, and Gail places a fresh plate of eggs in front of their son. She leans over Larry, mouthing the answers to the crossword.

“How did you know all of this?” she says.

Larry shrugs. “I just did.”

Patrick puts down his fork. “Mom, these are the best eggs ever.”

“Thanks,” she says, sighing. “I used water instead of milk.”

*

Later that morning, Gail stands over her husband. He’s sprawled on the couch, drinking a concoction that smells like rotten juice. Patrick sits in the recliner. Tension has rooted into her lower back, like those damn vines with the spade-shaped leaves that plague her garden.

She clears her throat. “We’ll need to drive separately to Mom’s. I’m bringing over that table from the garage.”

“That’s today, isn’t it?” Larry rubs the bridge of his nose.

“I figured Patrick and I’d go over early to spend some time with her. So you can wait until closer to dinner.”

“Can I go later with dad?” Patrick says.

“No, that’s okay,” Larry says. “I’ll just leave at the same time.”

Her back tightens. Larry must know that he’ll have a bad time at Mom’s, but he goes anyway, out of some retarded sense of duty to Gail. Yet he’ll spend the whole afternoon fidgeting and pouting and sighing like a baby.

She wrinkles her nose. “What are you drinking?”

He holds up the glass. “Pickle juice. Orange juice. Gatorade. Tomato juice. Hot sauce. Coffee.”

She asks the only reasonable question. “Why?”

“To cure my...” His eyes flick to Patrick, now flipping through the channels. “My cold. I’ve got a whopper of a headache.”

Patrick looks over. “I’m guessing all that drinking didn’t help your cold, Dad.”

Great. Gail picks up the drink and sniffs. It smells like something that would leak out of a casket. “And where did you get the idea for this unholy concoction?”

“It just occurred to me.” He sits up quickly and points at the t.v. “Buddy, leave it here a second.”

“*Fill in the Blank?*” Patrick says.

“Just for a minute.”

“Okay, contestants,” says the well-manicured host on the t.v. screen. “Welcome back to *Fill in the Blank*. It’s time for the

Final Blanks. Whoever gets the most correct answers, wins the round. Are you ready?"

The contestants nod.

"Blank predicted that Jesus was going to be born in Bethlehem."

"Micah," Larry says, before any of the contestants.

"Correct," the host says.

"BLANK contains all five vowels in reverse alphabetical order."

"Subcontinental and Unoriental," Larry says.

A second later, a female contestant says, "Subcontinental."

"Correct. We also would have accepted 'unoriental.'"

Patrick looks up at his dad, eyes and mouth wide open.

Larry glances down at his son and smiles nervously. Gail just shakes her head. Something's up. Larry isn't a stupid man. He's

remarkably clever, in fact, but he's never been good with facts. She can easily trounce him in Trivial Pursuit or Scrabble.

The host smiles. "In the nation of BLANK, the Indus River flows into the ocean."

"Pakistan." Larry turns to Gail. "How the hell did I know that? I couldn't even tell you where Pakistan is on a map." Larry closes his eyes. "Oh, wait. Yeah, I guess I can."

Gail shakes her head. She can't let this distract her from the topic at hand, not when she still has an ace in the hole.

"Instead of going to Mom's early," she says, "you could always finish painting the garage."

Larry shakes his head. "It's going to rain."

"If you don't want to do it, just say so. Have you been outside today? There isn't a cloud in the sky."

"It's going to rain. I'm sure of it."

“The paper said it’d be clear all weekend.”

“The paper’s wrong. Believe me. I read the whole thing, and I spotted several other bits of misinformation.”

“Yeah. I bet you did.”

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Later, Larry migrates to the recliner and watches a historical documentary about the Civil War. A famous actor – maybe Morgan Freeman – was going on about how the war was the bloodiest fought in American history.

Larry shakes his head. “Well, they got that part all wrong.”

“We’re leaving,” Gail says. “I’ll see you over there.”

“Do you need help with the table?” Larry spills himself out of the recliner.

“That’s okay,” Gail says, though her tone indicates that it clearly is not. She slams the side door just loud enough to rattle the windows.

Larry grunts. “God. Damn. It.”

He stomps to the bedroom and jerks himself out of his pajamas. As he slides into his jeans, he marvels at the fact that one bale of cotton can produce a whopping 215 pairs of jeans. The official birthday of blue jeans is May 20th, also the date in 1570 that cartographer Abraham Ortelius created the first modern-day atlas. The dye used most commonly for jeans is phthalocyanine, an intensely colored macrocyclic compound with low solubility in virtually all solvents. As potential cancer-fighting properties of phthalocyanine cells flitter across Larry’s consciousness, he clenches his teeth and growls. Takes a deep breath.

On his way out the door, he actually finds his car keys right where he expects them to be – an event that hasn't happened in years.

His Camry zips along the side streets of their neighborhood. Gail will take the highway, but the back roads will be faster. Veering the car onto County Road 19, he pulls out his cell phone and dials his friend Todd Leone.

Todd answers, his voice raw. “Why, man? Why so early?”

“Todd, did you know that your Italian surname is derived from the Latin *leonis*, a nickname for a fierce or brave warrior? Did you know that you share said surname with a Canadian businessman and criminal, an Italian long-distance runner, a food critic, a Canadian model, and a film director? Did you know all that, Todd? Because I sure as hell do. What the hell

happened last night? I can't remember anything after the nacho dip."

"Hold on, Wiki-Larry. What the hell, man? I just woke up."

"Just tell me what we did last night."

"I dunno. Got pretty crazy. We mixed a bunch of crazy new drinks with shit Kevin found in his freezer. We played online video games with strangers. We had a Dorito-eating contest sometime after midnight. Oh, and we microwaved Scott's broken iPhone. That shit was hilarious."

"Uh-huh. Anything else?"

"Think that about covers it."

Larry sighs. "Thanks, Todd. I'll catch you later. Hey, don't forget that the *Beverly Hills 90210* marathon starts at five o'clock."

“Thanks.” After a pause, Todd almost whispers, “Hey, how did you know that I watch *90210*?”

Larry clicks off. His car speeds past stretches of leafy trees and acres of cornfields. The long stalks blur together as Larry picks up speed. Each ear of corn has about 795 kernels in 16 rows. Wonderful to know.

Usually not one for excessive speed, today Larry knows exactly how fast he can accelerate into a turn without skidding off the road. As he zips around a bend at a swift seventy-two miles an hour, his head flashes with approximations of entry, apex, exit, weight, velocity, friction, braking point, and wind resistance.

Fat globs of rain strike the windshield, and he alters all his equations.

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When Gail pulls their squat CRV into her mother's rain-splattered driveway, her mouth falls open and morphs into a smile. Larry's Camry already sits next to the garage. Larry's still behind the wheel. She wonders how long he's waited there and why. Because he wants to see her face when she sees that he beat her there? Or because he hates being alone with his mother-in-law? Or because he wants to gloat about the rain? She assumes all of the above.

Larry steps out of the car carrying an umbrella in one hand and waving with the other.

"Dad, how did you get here so fast?" Patrick says.

"I took the back roads," he says.

"You?" Gail steps into the misty rain and waves away his offer of an umbrella. "You get lost going through the drive-thru. You never take the back roads."

“Well, today I did. I knew the way, and I knew it’d be faster.” Larry pauses. “And I wanted to help you with the table.”

She speaks through a grin that she can’t hold back.

“Thanks.”

Mom’s house, where Gail grew up, is the largest home in one of the older suburbs around town, a neighborhood built when it first became fashionable for the wealthy to live outside of the downtown area. It also boasts the most immaculate garden on the street.

“Hi, Mom,” Gail yells, as she and Larry maneuver the table into the house. Patrick holds open the front door.

“Careful with that,” her mom, Samia Belanger, snaps. Her blond hair is pulled up into a tidy bun. Heavy makeup covers her beautiful face like acrylic paint. “You didn’t use a blanket to move it? I hope it’s not scuffed.”

With that, Mom turns on her heel and returns to the kitchen. Larry and Gail exchange glances. Gail's struck by a gleam in his eye – something she hasn't seen since... Ever?

“Smells good, Mom,” Larry says, following her into the kitchen.

Gail notices her mother cringe at the sound of Larry using the word “Mom” at her. She stands over the stove and stirs a pot of vegetable soup.

“Thank you, Lawrence,” she says.

The kitchen is spotless. Even the presumably dirty coffee cup in the sink gleams.

Gail sits down at the kitchen table. “The garden looks great.” It will win neighborhood pride awards – yet again.

“Patrick,” Samia says, “why don't you go out to the garden and get some carrots for the salad?”

“Sure, Grandma.”

Gail grabs a piece of celery from the fridge and fills a glass of water from the tap. She pulls the ice tray out of the freezer and slams it hard on the counter. A few blocks of ice leap out of the tray, as if startled. She drops them into her glass.

Samia watches as Gail munches on the celery. “Are you still *trying* to lose weight, Gail?”

“I’d like to lose a few more pounds.”

“You know that’s just an old wives tale,” Samia says, refilling the ice tray and sliding it back in the freezer. “Drinking ice water doesn’t really burn calories.”

“Actually, that’s not true.” Larry holds up the water. “If you drink a sixteen-ounce glass of ice water, your system has to raise the temperature of the water from zero to thirty-seven degrees. To do that, you probably burn about seventeen calories.

Now, that might now sound like much, but multiple that by the eight glasses of water that Gail likely drinks per day, and it could be as much as 136 calories. That's about what she'd burn walking for a half hour a day. It's just shy of a thousand calories a week."

"Thank you, Lawrence. You're insight is appreciated."

Samia looks back at Gail. "That was the great thing about your father. He knew when to keep his mouth shut."

"Ben was a great guy," Larry says, "but he spent his whole life terrified of you. No matter what he did, it was never good enough. Right up until he had his stroke, he was just trying to do the impossible: to make you happy. And Gail has fallen into the same trap. She will always be too fat or too thin. Patrick will never be smart enough or well-mannered enough. And I'm never going to measure up to the husband that you sent to the grave."

A sickly sensation snuggles against Gail's spine. Her jaw clenches. She's mortified, though every word Larry says is true.

Still at the fridge, her mother grits her teeth, which is even more mortifying because Gail knows she does the exact same thing. Gail finishes her water and stomps out of the kitchen on shaky legs.

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"These carrots are huge!" Patrick says, walking into the kitchen with an armful of carrots, the first vegetable to be canned commercially. Native to Afghanistan, this biennial plant features a flowering stem whose flowers produce a mericarp, a type of dry fruit.

Larry smiles at his son, who naturally remains oblivious to the avalanche of silence that threatens to smother Larry and Samia.

He takes Patrick's arrival as a cue to leave. "Pat, help your grandma with the carrots."

Walking briskly out of the kitchen, he finds Gail in the upstairs bathroom. He doesn't bother trying the knob. He knows it's locked.

Instead, he knocks three times on the door. "Can I come in, babe?"

The doorknob clicks. He enters.

Gail stands at the sink, gazing at her reflection in the spotless mirror.

"I'm sorry," he says. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It was all true."

"Well, that doesn't mean it needed said. I'm sorry. I've been Mr. Know-It-All all day, and it kind of went to my head. I've been kind of arrogant."

She smirks. “Kind of?”

He steps behind her, wraps his arms around her waist, and hugs her tight. They stare at themselves in the mirror. They’ve been married for over a dozen years. They’ve eaten countless meals together (7,817, actually), rode hundreds of thousands of miles, watched weeks worth of television, and shared thousands of kisses – all together. The weight of these statistics blurs his vision. He squeezes his eyes shut and refocuses on her reflection.

He sees her – the truth of her, not the image of her that’s been carved and finished inside his head.

“You’re beautiful,” he says.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry about staying out so late.”

She pats his hand. “You can stay out all night and I wouldn’t care. I just don’t want you driving in that condition. Think about Patrick.”

“It was stupid. I’m sorry.”

“So, were there any hot girls at the bar last night?” She rocks gently back and forth, so that her backside rubs against his crotch.

“None as hot as you.” Somehow, this is both true and not true.

He kisses her lightly on the back of the neck. She cocks her head so that he can kiss her behind the ear – her favorite spot. He squeezes her waist and continues kissing. She cranes her neck to kiss his lips.

After three minutes and thirty seconds of kissing, in which they each burn 91 calories, use all 34 facial muscles, and swap

57 million colonies of bacteria, Larry drops his hand into the waistband of her skirt.

“Larry, this isn’t...” She gasps. “Don’t...” She moans.

“Don’t...”

Larry’s never been very good with his hands, but today is different. So different.

She lifts her skirt. “Don’t stop kissing my neck.”

*

Gail slips into the edges of dreamscape – a rain-spotted canvas of undulating bushes and quivering flowers – but the tremors inside her body snap her back to consciousness. She wakes with a wee gasp.

“You were snoring,” Larry says, now sprawled out on the bathroom mat with Gail’s upper body draped across his chest.

“Dammit. We didn’t use any protection.”

Larry pats her back. Those hands. Oh. My. God. Those hands. “You ovulated nine days ago, hon. No worries.”

Gail does some math in her head and smiles. “What’s gotten into you today? How are you suddenly so different?”

“I don’t know. I just know all these things that I didn’t know before. Like how to find Pakistan. Or your g-spot. I think... I think I know everything. I mean, not at once. But all day long, every piece of information I need, every question I have... it all just comes to me.”

“Whatever.” Gail bites his hairy chest. He tastes like salt and coffee.

Larry laughs. “I’m not kidding. Try me. Ask me anything.”

“Okay, what is the name of Jupiter’s largest moon?”

“Ganymede. But you wouldn’t have known if that was right or wrong.”

She elbows him, sits up, and grabs one of her mother's deodorants from under the sink. Her mother has three of everything in stock under there – toothpaste, deodorant, facial cleanser, and so on.

“Gail, no.” Larry holds up a hand. “I don't want you smelling like your mother.”

She shakes her head. “Okay, smarty-pants, tell me the ingredients in this.”

“Active or inactive?”

“Inactive.”

“Cyclopentasiloxane, stearyl alcohol, cyclohexasiloxane, PPG-14 butyl ether, phenyl-“

“Okay, enough.” Her eyes widen. What if something's wrong with Larry's brain – like a tumor? “How the hell did you do that?”

Larry shrugs. “It just came to me.”

“No, I mean how the hell did you know how to pronounce cyclo...” She squints closer at the list of ingredients.

“Cyclopenta...”

“Cyclopentasiloxane,” Larry finishes. “It’s an odorless, silicone fluid also known as cyclic pentamer. Melts at negative 44 degrees Celsius. Boils at 90 degrees.” He grabs the deodorant, runs his finger down the small print. “I know the same information for all of these. Plus a couple ingredients that conveniently weren’t listed here. Huh.”

“You’re starting to creep me out.” Gail pulls her panties on. “We should go back out there. God knows what my mom must think.”

“That we had hot, wild sex in her bathroom?”

“Exactly.” She smacks Larry’s thigh. “Let’s go.”

They rise and wiggle into their respective clothing. Gail considers the day's events and watches her husband put on his shoes.

She rests her hand on his shoulder. "Okay, here's a question. What's the meaning of life?"

He opens his mouth, as if to speak, but closes it again. He stares upward, as if the answer hides beneath his eyelids or at the fringe of his frontal lobe. "An organismic state identified with growth, reproduction, metabolism, and reaction to stimuli?" Larry shakes his head. "No, that's not what you mean, is it? I... I don't know."

"Ha," Gail says. "Guess you don't know everything after all."

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After an awkward but delicious dinner, Larry walks his family to the CRV and buckles Patrick securely. Gail kisses him on the back of the neck, her lips as light as thin layers of hardened protein called chitin covered with thousands of miniature scales and hairs called setae. In other words, as light as butterfly wings.

“Hey.” She smacks his butt. “Take those back roads and show me how you got here so fast, okay?”

“Okay.”

He climbs into his Camry and backs out of the driveway. Gail’s question tickles his brain. What’s the meaning of life? Butterfly wings. Tapetum. An atlas. Melting point. Snake venom. Water and eggs. Subcontinental. Ice melting in a belly. Dried fruit.

He shakes his head. It’s all connected somehow.

Several miles later, his Camry speeds down Country Road 19. Stalks of corn flicker past, now wet with rain and glistening like jewels in the bright sun.

“If I know everything,” he says aloud, “yet I don’t know the meaning of life, then it follows that life has no meaning.”

Larry pauses, taking in the full weight of this insight.

“Bummer.”

He checks the rearview mirror to make sure Gail still follows behind. She is. His eyes flick back to the road.

Three quarters of a mile ahead, a red pickup truck comes from the opposite direction. All last night and into this morning, the driver of the truck played an online role-playing game, slaying hundreds of ogres and orcs.

Larry knows this.

A half mile. The man's nodding off, snug in a ray of sunshine.

Larry knows this.

A quarter mile. On its present course, the truck will drift over the yellow lane and run into Gail's CRV. It's all physics, probability, and geometry – a seamless calculation of velocity, momentum, impact, weight, and measure. The truck will kill his family.

Larry knows this.

A hundred yards. He beeps his horn. The old and rusted Ford – its gnarled grill the final resting place for hundreds of bugs – keeps on coming. Its driver-side tires inch toward the worn yellow line. The driver's head nods downward.

Larry cuts hard to the left.

His Camry hits the truck almost dead on. The impact sends his car tumbling across the road and through a buckshot-riddled speed limit sign. His air bag explodes outward. Dust fills the air – cornstarch used to lubricate the airbag during deployment. The rusty metal of the sign tears through the car. It punctures the air bag and slices into Larry's gut.

The car finally comes to a rest sideways in a ditch on the opposite side of the road. Larry hangs downward by his seatbelt, which in this case means he's dangling toward the passenger side of the car. He watches his small intestine, twenty feet long, spill out of his body and onto the passenger's seat and door.

Duodenum. Jejunum. Ileum. Epithelial tissue. Mucosa. Plicae circulares. It takes about eight hours for food to pass through the stomach and small intestine. By a coincidence Larry

is only beginning to understand, that's about how long he's been awake today.

He tries calling for Gail, and that one syllable sprays chunky blood into the dusty air.

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“Stay here,” she tells Patrick. “Close your eyes.”

She slams the door before her son can respond and runs toward Larry's Camry now lying sideways in the ditch. The driver of the truck lies in the road directly in her path – and at the end of a trail of blood and gore. His arm looks like it has an extra elbow. Shredded skin covers his arms and face. He screams at her for help, his jaw hanging crooked like a door half off its hinges.

Her shadow falls over him. She pulls out her phone. No signal. She opens her wallet, though she's not sure why. “I'm...

I'm sorry." She drops her driver's license next to the man. "I have to go."

Even from several steps away, she hears Larry's ragged breathing, like someone sucking air through a damp sponge. When she reaches the ditch, she vomits bits of soup and salad into the wet grass. She wipes bits of carrot from her mouth and holds onto the Camry.

The ditch is deep enough that she's able to bend over the edge of the car and reach into Larry's broken driver's side window. Her husband stares up at her. Her heart squirms into her belly. Oh, God. So much blood.

He reaches for her.

"Larry." She grabs his bloody hand. "I'm here. I'm right here."

He stares at her with remarkably focused eyes. "Patrick?"

“He’s okay.” She squeezes his hand. “What happened, Larry? Was there an animal in the road? Did a tire blow? Did you lose control?”

“The answer is...” He closes his eyes and smiles. His grip tightens. He coughs and takes his last breath. “It’s all of the above.”

Larry’s hand goes limp, but she keeps squeezing. White dust and blood cover her husband’s face. Back in the road, the other man finally stops screaming. She needs to remember to get her license back. She needs to go to Patrick. She needs to tell him his father’s last words. She’s scared to death she might forget.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

A VERSION OF THIS story was originally published in *Clackamas Literary Review* in 2011. I submitted the story to CLR earlier that year. I received notification of its acceptance in May 2011. I was ecstatic, because CLR had previously published a story by my favorite author, Joe Hill. I promptly sent in my author bio and waited for official word of its publication. And waited. And waited. And waited still longer. Over the course of the next three years, I sent emails to CLR every few months, asking if it'd been published yet. Eventually, I gave up and started shopping *All of the Above* around to various publications. It got short-listed at some really top-notch journals, but never made the final cut. I guess that was a good thing because in July 2014—over three years after I'd last heard

from CLR—I got my contributor’s copy of the 2011 edition of *Clackamas Literary Review* in the mail. And yes, it did include *All of the Above*.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ROB E. BOLEY GREW UP in Enon, Ohio, a little town with a big Indian mound. He later earned a BA and MA in English from Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio. His fiction has appeared in several markets, including *A cappella Zoo*, *Pseudopod*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, and *Best New Werewolf Tales*. His stories have won Best in Show in the Sinclair Community College Creative Writing Contest (2013) and the Dayton Daily News/Antioch Writers’ Workshop Short

All of the Above

Story Contest (2012). He lives with his daughter in Dayton, where he works for his alma mater. Each morning and most nights, he enjoys making blank pages darker. You can get to know him better online by visiting his website at www.robboley.com.