



# **Bagatelles**

**Life studies**

**Anne O'Connor**

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OldNaughtyDog.com  
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paperback ISBN:

## Contents

Introduction.....	1
Fiction .....	2
Crossroads.....	3
Roller Derby.....	5
Traditions .....	8
Dew Nogood – aspiring supervillan.....	10
Poem .....	13
Bones .....	14
Play .....	17
Graveside Service .....	18
Nonfiction .....	23
Conservatory .....	24
Days of Past Glory .....	27
JFK.....	30
A New Millenium .....	32
Asbestos.....	34

# Introduction

As almost everyone who thinks she is a writer will do, I started a novel. With a nonfiction history/memoir book behind me, regretting a job decision that took me away from a career as a reporter and trudging through the morass of the pandemic, what else was I to do? With a goal of writing 500 words a day, after a long day in the coal mines at the aforementioned horrible job, I rewarded myself by installing one light on a Light-Brite after each writing session.

Things changed, as they are wont to do, and I went back into the newsroom. Writing the novel was backburnered for a bit and I came to a shit or get off the pot moment, as we said growing up. So, I joined a local writers group that mainly wrote to prompts. I was in my glory. No stranger to writing quickly, you know – daily deadlines, I jumped in, writing poems, fiction and memoir. Most of what I created was pretty rough initially, but a few floated to the top.

I got the novel done and no agent wanted it, so I started Old Naughty Dog Books, meant to help folks get their books ready to self-publish. Then, brainstorm! Maybe I had some usable material written during the New Dawn Writers Group for a short tome.

This collection is the result. A bit of this and a bit of that. Enjoy.

Fiction

# Crossroads

Flash Fiction



*Library of Congress, Carol M. Highsmith.*

The devil didn't steal Robert Johnson's soul at the crossroads. Nope. The devil made an offer; he made his best pitch. Devil said, "Robert, I can make you the best damned guitar picker in the Delta. All you got to do is hand me over your soul."

Robert Johnson's soul came on in the kitchen and looked around some. Soul said, "Bobby, boy. You gonna get hungry, you don't ditch that guitar."

Robert Johnson looked around the kitchen in the raggedy shack near the crossroads along with his soul. He looked at his guitar leaning on a chair: the fretboard worn, the

strings hitched together with knots, the slots in the bone nut sliced almost through to the wood.

Robert Johson said, “Soul, you right. I’m dying. I’m gonna get hungry. My guitar is crying.”

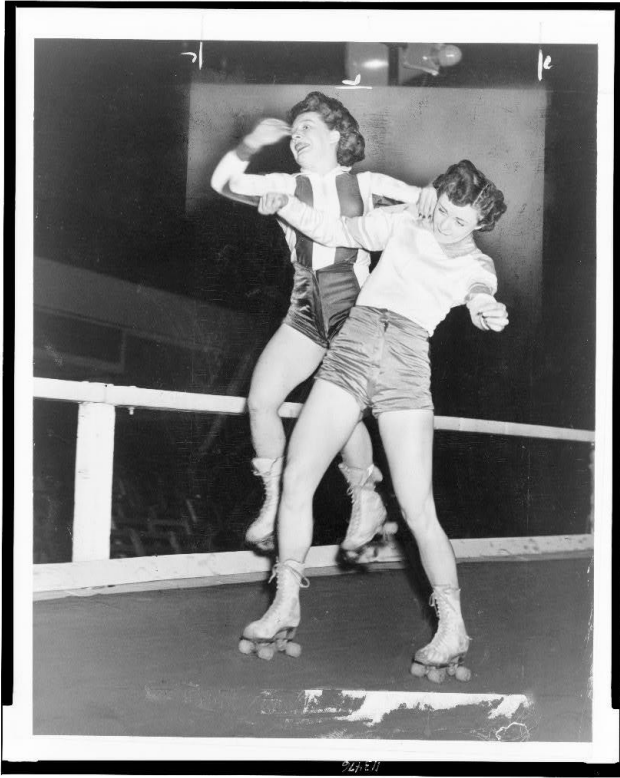
Devil said from the doorway, “This is my last offer. Your soul or your guitar.”

“Take the guitar, devil. I ain’t gonna be hungry no more. Nope. I’m gonna call myself Al and I’m gonna open me a little store. A little store, right here in this raggedy shack by the crossroads. I’m gonna sell cards. Greeting cards.”

Soul said, “Betcha gonna meet some fiine ladies that way, Bobby.”

# Roller Derby

Flash fiction



*Library of Congress, "There goes Toughie!" World-Telegram photo by Al Aumuller.*

"Move your ass over, bitch," Elaine muttered and jabbed Kathy in the ribs.

"Oh, knock it off, Elaine. There's nothing you can do to get that hair under control."

“I’ve got to,” Elaine declared as she pushed in front of the mirror, bobby pins and hairspray clutched in her left hand, a comb and elastics in the other.

The two teammates soon shrugged off their pregame nerves.

“Pin it up good,” Kathy recommended. “I heard that big blonde on the Gunnerettes is brutal. She just about tore the ponytail off one of her teammates during practice.”

“She don’t stand a chance,” Elaine declared. “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.”

“Tighten my arm guard, then I’ll get yours,” Kathy said, handing the gear to her teammate.

The Queens of the Rink were packed into the ladies’ room at the Queens Skating Rink in the New York City borough of the same name. The five members of the starting lineup shared three large mirrors, others used smaller mirrors behind locker doors. Tough women, tall and short alike, primed and preened, making sure their uniforms fit just so – snug enough not to be pulled off but revealing enough to lure the local men into buying tickets. The women relied on their share of the gate to put food on the table. Their fans were not in the stands to look at nuns.

Roller Derby was one of the few contact sports women could play and they took no prisoners. Coach kept wraps for sprains, needles and thread for ugly cuts, and a bucket full of ice on the sidelines. At larger competitions, a nurse and an ambulance stood at the ready, whisking damaged competitors from the arena.

Today, the Queens had the home team advantage over the Gunnerettes, who were down from the Colt Armory in Hartford. The visitors were relegated to the men's room, at least until 15 minutes before the whistle blew. Then, they had to vacate for the paying customers.

"It sounds like the place is packed," Kathy said as the visiting team was ushered to the side of the rink, teetering over the rough floor on roller skates. Jeers greeted the Connecticut girls.

Elaine and Kathy were the first out the door as the announcer proclaimed "Now welcome our own Queens of the Rink. Put your hands together for these beautiful ladies who take NO prisoners." The Queens strutted to their bench, their walkway somehow much smoother than what was provided for the visiting Gunnerettes. The New York girls pumped their arms, blew kisses to the cheering throngs and treated the visitors to a good view of their silk clad butts.

"Take it off, baby! We love ya! Show 'em how tough you Queens girls are!"

"You bet we'll show 'em," Elaine said and the jam was on.

# Traditions

## Flash Fiction



*Kseniia Chunaeva, vecteezy.com*

Mom had a favorite string of Christmas tree lights. The big, round bulbs worked, usually, but took lots of effort to get going. They belonged to her father, she said. The thick, fabric-covered wire sure looked like it came from the dawn of electricity.

This year, it was the middle child's turn to plug in the holy lights. He got down on his belly and commando-crawled under the tree stuffed between the fireplace and the television. He reached for the outlet, the strange round plug grasped in his right hand.

“Do you see it? Do you see the outlet?” Mom wanted to know.

“Yes. It’s right on the corner here, on the other side. I got it,” the middle child said, kind of offended that she would even ask such a silly question.

“We’re all waiting to see the lights,” she reminded him.

“Okay, here we go. It’s a little awkward. Last year the tree had more space. I gotta stretch,” he said.

“Plug it in.”

He did. Electricity arced out of the plug, the fabled string of lights flashed brighter than they ever had then burst into darkness as he shrieked, his hand bit by the arc.

As he yelled, he jolted upward into the tree, knocking it and its pan of water onto the slate floor and brick wall of the former three-season porch. Two of the precious, irreplaceable globes burst into smithereens, dusting his blonde hair with faintly pastel shards of extraordinarily thin glass.

Mom turned and went into the kitchen to retrieve her gin and tonic. “You kids ruin everything.”

# Dew Nogood – aspiring supervillan

Flash Fiction



*Carnival Ride Fun Free Stock Photo isorepublic*

Raising a supervillain was no picnic, no walk in the park, if you will. “You’re not going to wear that out in public, are you?” Mrs. Nogood chided her son Dew who had gotten dressed for work.

“What’s wrong with this, Ma? It’s got a pocket for my lockpicks and a belt where I can stash the rappelling equipment I need to get into the ladies supermax,” Dew

Nogood replied. "I have to free Reilly, you know, Reilly Rotton. They sentenced her to three years, but we gotta do this now. We're gonna bust up the rides at the City Fair. Then, the organizers will give us lots of dough, but not the fried type if you know what I mean, to make the rides work so all the precious little kiddies can spin around and around then upchuck on their parents."

"Dewey, that's all fine. I know that. Didn't I pick the belt out at the sporting goods store myself for you? I did. It wasn't cheap neither."

"What's your problem, then?" Dew Nogood demanded.

"Those tights." She pointed at his crotch.

"What, everything's hidden. I told you."

"It's not that. It's yourself. It's embarrassing. What if my friends see you?"

"They won't say nothing," Dew declared.

"Not to me, they won't. They wouldn't dare. But they'll be gossiping, those old hags."

"What is the problem?" Dew asked, even louder.

"Your package. Your junk."

"What? Like I said, it's all covered."

"It's not that. You, well, you look deficient."

Dew looked down, his face reddening.

"It's what I got."

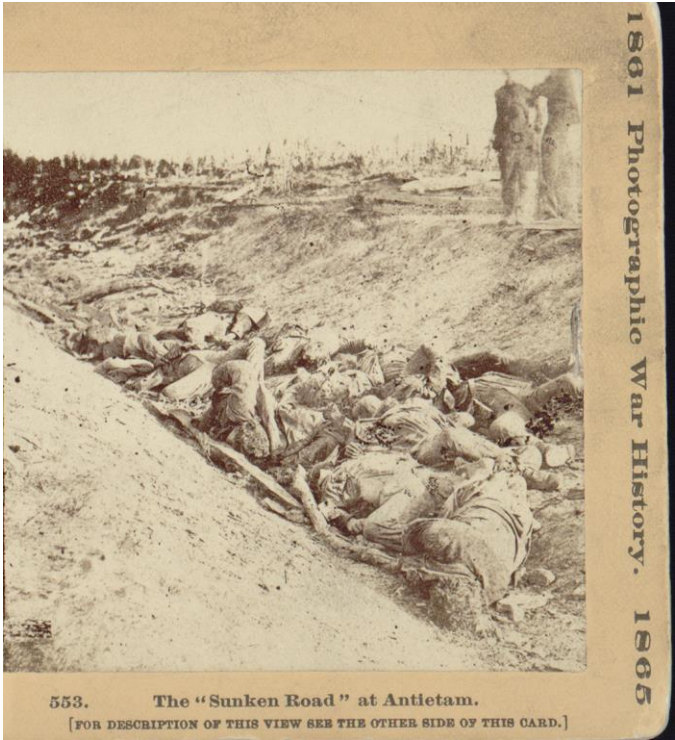
“It won’t do, Dew,” his mother said. “They’ll think I raised a castrato.”

“Uh?” Dew looked confused, not a good look for an aspiring supervillain like himself.

“Oh, just stuff a sock in it,” his frustrated mother said, slapping her thighs as she stood. Raising a supervillain was no picnic. She needed to go for a walk in the park.

Poem

## Bones



*Library of Congress. The Sunken Road at Antietam,  
Alexander Gardner. 1862*

Anonymous bodies lie,  
Side by side, head to toe,  
Reposing in trenches  
Dug, filled, and then capped with sod  
Foot by foot, yard by yard.

Grassy swales formed  
In the fertile soil of  
Quebec's Grosse Isle,  
Covered with the greenest of grass,  
The likes of which  
Are said to grace the  
Hills and valleys  
Of old Ireland.  
Now thousands of her sons and daughters  
Lie here dead.  
They escaped famine though.

Confederate dead,  
Buried where, or at least near,  
The place they fell  
To bullets shot by  
Victorious fellow countrymen  
Whose own bodies were  
Eventually reinterred in  
Formal cemeteries a mile or so away –  
One or two unknown  
Soldiers per headstone –  
The dirt road that hid the defeated dead,  
Sunken once again.

Bones into smoke,  
Generations of Jews,  
Romanies, gays,  
and other undesirable Europeans  
Formed their own  
Invisible roads of bones,  
Rising to whatever gods they  
Once worshiped.



Play

# Graveside Service

10-minute play



*Lowell Cemetery, Anne O'Connor*

Setting: Cemetery plot, grave dug out and covered with fake grass. The mound of dirt is “hidden” under another length of astroturf.

A coffin rests on lengths of lumber over the hole, all under a popup tent.

Characters:

- Funeral home worker: Dan
- Older sister: Irene
- Middle brother: Mike
- Youngest sister’s girlfriend: Polly
- Dead body
- A motley group of mourners including younger sister Ellie, who does not have a speaking part.

Dan: (escorting characters out of limo to the gravesite)

Right this way. Watch your step. The priest will be along soon.

(All move toward open yet obscured grave, shuffling uncomfortably, trying to find a spot with good footing on the uneven ground.)

Irene: (glaring) This cemetery looks like shit. Would ya look at the grass. What, they never mow?

Polly: (Looks uncomfortable. She's from the Midwest and nice) Ssh. I'm sure they do their best. Staying on top of everything in the spring isn't easy.

Mike: When will the priest get here? (to Dan) We paid him, didn't we?

Dan: He's here now. (points to the left) He had to stop at the rectory.

Irene: It's about time. (She walks over to the backside of the stone, poking holes in the ground with her heels.) Look. (points at stone) Someone's doing their job. It's already engraved. They put Ma's name and birthdate too.

Mike: Why would they do that? (Angry) We didn't tell them to add her.

Polly: It's pretty standard.

Irene nods

Mike: Well Mom should be here.

Irene: She wouldn't know what was going on. Hell, she'd probably trip and fall and break her other hip.

Mike: No, she wouldn't.

Irene: Well, you don't visit that often do you. She can barely shuffle between the couch and wheelchair. It sucks. I'm sure she's putting on the Ritz for her prodigal son when you do go.

Polly: Ssh.

(All continue to stand, wobbling a bit as one foot and then the other sinks into the rough ground. A male voice drones a prayer.

(whispering)

Mike: I have his watch.

Irene: Yeah. I'm sure you do.

Mike: It looks better on me than you.

(Polly rolls her eyes. The droning continues.)

Irene: He gave me two bits of advice, you know.

Mike: Yeah?

Irene: Yeah. Don't say shit and let your sister deal with your mother.

Polly snickers.

(The droning voice stops and invites all present to the funeral meal to be held at the country club.)

Mike: They gave us a good deal on a buffet.

Irene: I never really liked that place, but whatever.

Polly: Don't say whatever. It's passive aggressive. What would your father say?

Irene: He'd say, 'Don't say shit.' I told you.

(Dan starts to round people up so the coffin can be lowered into the grave.)

Irene: I looked in there, you know?

Mike: The coffin?

Irene: We all did that. Good Irish Catholic wake wouldn't be worth much without a bad embalming job, now would it? No, I looked in the hole. Yesterday.

Mike: Oh. (pause) So?

Irene: Well, it was kind of rougher than I thought, but look, the quarters are tight, in between the other vaults and all. I'll bet all those embalmed bodies stuffed into concrete are still recognizable after a century.

Mike: Ashes to ashes isn't a thing anymore, I guess.

(All stop action)

Dead body sits up and speaks:

I used to run through this cemetery to football practice in high school. The graves would collapse in the oldest section sometimes when we went over them. They didn't have vaults, just wooden caskets.

The old neighborhood is all here. Look, there's Marcus and old lady Daidio. Oh, and the judge. He was a winner, wouldn't even let the kids go by on the sidewalk without yelling at 'em.

I bought this plot when my own father died. I told you then someday you'd know how it feels when your father dies.

There's space for two of you here, you know. I bought six slots. My parents are here. Me too, now. Your mother soon. Maybe one of you will get married and be buried somewhere else.

Oh, I'm gonna miss my Reenie until she arrives. She's delicate. You kids take good care of her now. She's the only mother you'll ever have.

(A car revs and breaks the spell, causing the corpse to settle back into its box. The mourners look around and shuffle their feet. Dan walks over to the limo and holds the door. Two men with shovels stand next to an excavator a respectful distance away.)

Mike: Let's go. We're holding them up.

Nonfiction

# Conservatory

## Memoir



*Classical guitar, Jason Vieaux. Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International license.*

“No. You came in on the wrong beat. Try again.

“You’re still coming in wrong.”

“I’m counting. I’m coming in right where I should be.”

“No, you’re not.”

The relationship between me and my teacher left much to be desired.

“Do it again. Listen to the accompanist.”

“Still wrong.”

I lost my temper and slugged the rosewood back of my treasured guitar, cracking it.

“I was right.”

The accompanist, a piano student a year ahead of me, finally stepped in.

“She came in at the right place.”

My teacher did not acknowledge this except to say, Let’s go to the next section. Pickup for 124.”

The lesson plowed on. And on.

By the time my recital came up, I had almost lost my love of music, lost the joy in the challenge of understanding the music, the pride in playing a difficult piece well, of bringing all those dots on the page alive as they became my own music, of reveling in my chops, the technical abilities that grew imperceptibly every day as I practiced, sometimes five hours a day.

I’d been thrilled to get accepted to music school. Hearing others perform and practice, all of the instruments in the Western music canon blaring away. The jazz program at the school broadened my musical outlook; I heard avant-garde stars and session musicians who came into town on

otherwise slow weekday evenings and played at the local clubs.

The teacher sucked the joy right out of the room, demanding an excellence that was beyond him and not seeing the musicality and humanity of each student. It wasn't just me. All students in the department watched without saying a word as that teacher drove a terrified student to tears during a performance class, again and again. Yet, true masters of the instrument found words of encouragement for each student courageous enough to play for them during master classes visitors taught outside the regular curriculum.

Escape was necessary. I left for grad school, fleeing to the West Coast, as far as possible from Hartford. There, I missed the camaraderie of my old school: students and teachers hitting their local to drink, play and joke around until the joint closed. But at the more prestigious school there was no cruelty from the head of the department. Students grew as musicians without trying to cut each other's throats.

My Hartford teacher came out to Los Angeles for a seminar and I was shanghaied into providing him a ride to the airport when he left. We never spoke again.

# Days of Past Glory

## Memoir



*Photo Anne O'Connor*

Once the first 100 riders had sped across the parking lot, heading up over seven miles of paved and dirt road, as part of the Mt. Washington Auto Road Bicycle Hillclimb, the second group assembled behind the starting line. I took my place with the mostly male and all very fit riders, but toward the back. I knew that I would not be among the fast riders. That decision landed me on the grate of a bridge connecting two parts of the pavement.

“I don’t want to start on this,” I said, I thought to myself. The men in front of me parted the way so that I could stand on pavement. “Thanks,” I nodded.

The gun sounded and the more elite riders were across the lot and heading up before the peanut gallery riders like me even turned the pedals. I knew I would make it to the top and I knew I would be slow. I had done one practice ride a month earlier and had hundreds of training hours in.

Fragments of the race remain in my mind, although I'm probably conflating a couple of years at this point. Grinding and grinding surrounded by others, most faster, some not. Chatting with the dad of a disgraced Tour De France rider during a time when doping was de rigueur. Watching riders toppling into the mud where the road was not paved on the steepest sections. Someone saying to me, "Wow, you never stop." Me, having enough breath to say, "If I did, I'd never get going again."

The steepness required special gearing, the front wheel was always higher in elevation than the back. Overheated riders ditched the jackets needed at the cold, rainy start along the sides of the road. A photographer tried to grab pictures of each rider to sell later. Emerging above tree level cowbells and shouts from the supporters greeted each of the 300 riders. Finally, the buildings came into view and I was guided to the right-hand fork for the final ascent. Too tired to deal with the giant rock embedded in the roadway, I walked the last 50 feet. No shame in that.

A volunteer handed me a finisher medal and a fleece blankie and I began to shiver in the light hail at the top of the mountain boasting the worst weather in New England. It was the end of July.

After finding my driver who was searching for me with my bag of dry clothing, I wedged into the women's room to change. No modesty. If I didn't get those wet clothes

off, I'd go hypothermic. After changing, I waited for a sink to rinse my face. The sweat that sloughed off with the tap water tasted the same as the water I might lick off my lips after swimming in the ocean. Who knew I would find the bottom of the ocean in myself at 6,000 feet above sea level?

# JFK

## Reflections



*Library of Congress. John F. Kennedy motorcade, Dallas Texas, November 22, 1963. Victor Hugo King.*

War hero, handsome husband, young father with a child playing under your desk, proclaimer of rights, Prince of Camelot. Pain-addled. A chaser of women (like your father before you). Failed invader of Cuba.

Your visions, detailed by speechwriters and presented in your elite New England accent (but not a proper Brahmin enunciation, really mere lace-curtain Irish), gave the country hope.

Promises to establish an equal footing for all races, assurances that the old would be secure and the poor could

live without fear were left undone when a bullet pulverized that fine brain in your skull.

Your pretty wife went silent in shock. Your toddling son stood for millions to watch as your body passed by along with the saddled horse bearing a pair of backward pointing boots

Your successor presided over the nuts and bolts of fulfilling your dreams: the Civile Rights Act and working toward the Great Society which was meant to end poverty.

Could you have done that? Or would you have gotten mired in everything that came later? Would you have guided the country out of a distant war it never should have been part of?

You, now mythical, once gave the country hope. We will never know what could have been if the assassin missed.

# A New Millenium

## Reflection



*World Trade Center, September 11, 2001, Michael Forant, Creative Commons Attribution 2.0*

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked planes and destroyed the illusional invincibility of the United States. They led us into a world of hatred, for no reasons we could understand.

On the East Coast, it was personal. Everyone was affected, knew someone who'd been killed, or perhaps had a relative who drove past the Pentagon and saw the tumbled wall.

It was a time in my life when I traveled. A job I took me to Europe, the U.S. and Canada. The travel was amazing. Kind of like a junior year abroad with a corporate credit card. I never felt in danger despite my (perhaps bad)

inclination to break off from the pack of drinkers who were my coworkers. Instead, I jogged through the streets of Utrecht, wandered Paris in the dark and rain, drove the autopista in Spain – a place where I did not understand the language but by using the bits of Spanish I knew from being a musician and some Italian learned from a best left unmentioned ex, I could figure some stuff out. I carried on with a man who spoke some English, but not enough to follow me when I got on a roll.

I have lived freely and well, in ways that are perhaps unique to a child of the 60s. Friends and lovers, playing music, writing, producing cable TV shows, driving cool cars, blissfully extending my childhood into middle age. There was no pressure to assume the red robes that Margaret Atwood wrote about, or to spend my time amassing a fortune – incidentally something that I now regret. But only sort of.

After 9/11, we would never be the same. Soldiers sporting machine guns at foreign airports would no longer be a curiosity, but something that could happen here, in the land of the free.

Later, 25 years later, we rarely mention 9/11, except maybe during a memorial. The search and comfort dogs have all died, the orphaned children are grown and a shopping area sprang up from the detritus left in lower Manhattan. People moved on.

Now armed thugs with federal insignia roam city streets; many see nothing wrong with this. Our freedoms to dissent, to travel, to know we can have world-class health care no matter our socio-economic status is threatened.

Live children, live. Don't suffocate on today's world.  
Hopefully, this too shall pass if you take charge.

## Asbestos

In Memorium



*Kachina and Peyote Buttons A.J.*

The toddler ran to his dad, a man tired and dirty from working construction or maybe it was demolition that day, and rode to the barn, piggyback on the strong shoulders of his first hero. As a bigger boy, he still ran to his dad at the end of the workday treasuring, without realizing it, the

moment his god slung his arm over the boy's small shoulders as they walked to the barn. Over the years, the youngest of 13 learned to care for the animals that helped feed the family.

His dad died, and the child, now on the cusp of becoming an angry young man, left Arizona, left the reservation, left his mother and moved from place to place, staying sometimes with family and at others with strangers. He landed in New England where he joined a new tribe, a self-formed group of misfit creatives who nurtured their chosen arts and worked day jobs to feed their passions.

The young man learned to funnel his anger at a society that denigrated his people and others like his, finding work in what is now called social justice advocacy and always, always writing, painting and performing.

He married and fathered a family, a life that was sometimes better and sometimes worse. With time and age, his anger calmed as his love for family and community, that love that originally fanned his anger, rose closer to the surface.

On a day that passed unnoticed, the demolition dust that sloughed off the father into the child more than a half-century earlier grew restive. It wove a carapace around his heart and his lungs. It tucked itself in, nestling between his stomach and liver, building a mass heavier than most would be comfortable carrying in their arms.

In exchange for pain, the voracious dust fed on his muscle, on his fat, on whatever it could steal. His sturdy legs, which carried his 300 pounds for so long, failed. His arms, arms that could hold someone until their center of being healed, became bones draped with bags of skin.

One morning, before breakfast, the dust ran out of sustenance. The pain, which had become the man, stopped. The man was no more.

Anne O'Connor is an award winning journalist and former classical guitarist. She wrote *Fitchburg: the old hometown* available on amazon.com

Cover photo:

Live oak with Spanish moss at the Gulf Coast, Anne O'Connor.

Cover and book design: Anne O'Connor

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