

finding mr
pembrooke

by
John Brantingham



The Wapshott Press

For Ann

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Cover image

"Suburbia" by David Shankbone, <https://bit.ly/2k5EOg6>

Many thanks to Ann Brantingham for her suggestion on the cover image.

White Line, *Reflex Fiction*, February 2019

Fifteen Years, *Worthing Flash*, October 2018

Mr. Pembroke's Good Jesus, Short List, Bath Flash Fiction Award, October 2018

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mr pembroke

mr pembroke wakes up monday morning and showers and shaves and dresses and fries two eggs and pours orange juice into his los angeles lakers 2010 championship souvenir glass and watches the news until he realizes that twenty-nine eager sixteen year olds are going to sit down in his physics class in twelve minutes and that school is eight minutes away if he coasts through a couple of stop signs but somehow that doesn't make him stand-up and he wishes regis were still on but michael and sarah's banter is pretty good and he chuckles for eleven minutes and looks at his watch and can't take himself away from the kitchen television this morning and that thought occupies a full minute and then another and then his phone rings and it's the school and he hasn't missed a single day nor has he been late in thirty-seven years so the voice on the other end seems to believe him when he says that he's in bed so sick that he slept through the alarm and he makes a coughing laugh with the voice and says you're right that's no way for last year's teacher of the year to act and he says he might be able to make it in tomorrow even though he knows he's not going to be able to leave the kitchen so he coughs again to start tuesday's lie and hangs up wondering about retirement whether he's built up enough and he laughs because whether he has or not he's going to be retiring because he can't move and he wants to but he can't after all this

time of helping bright kids like it was a holy mission handed down on tablets but michael and sarah on the television make him laugh so he makes himself butter toast which is his sunday morning treat and he laughs and nods and says to his television tell them michael and then he can't remember what it was michael said

the chicken

the day mr pembroke decides he's done with teaching he finds himself still sitting at the breakfast table in his pajamas watching television at 6:32 in the evening and ravenous because he hasn't eaten anything since breakfast so he forces himself out of his chair to get the leftover chicken carcass apples bourbon a paring knife and peanut butter and sits back down to watch the end of laverne and shirley which he's always hated as he cuts off pieces of meat and apples which he dunks in the peanut butter while he laughs and wonders how he could have missed the subtle brilliance of lenny and squiggy before except that watching them drunk might be the way to do it and he drops a cold piece of chicken aspic on his pajamas and wonders if it will stain his pajama tops in an icon of the madonna and if that happens will it mean that what he is doing is sacred and if it doesn't will that mean what he is doing is profane and laverne is being slutshamed and everyone in the audience is laughing and that makes him want to weep because why does life have to be so pointlessly difficult every every every moment

elbow

wednesday morning mid-semester mr pembroke goes down to turn in his emergency retirement paperwork because no matter what he does or says to himself he cannot force himself to face the kids he loves and has always loved but he finds principal auerbach waiting for him this young man who was once one of his students saying you can't leave like this and not finish the year but mr pembroke says no i'm done and he feels like he's been playing for an alien baseball team but has never known the rules to this variation on the game and for a while he was winning but some cosmic force just called him out and maybe auerbach feels that too because he says let me fill out some other paperwork and we'll call this sick leave for a month and i bet in two weeks you just won't be able to handle the time off and he laughs and slaps mr pembroke on the back the way his father used to and when he gets home his email inbox is filled with students' messages with please don't go and you can't leave and how could you do this to me and those are just the subject lines and mr pembroke finds himself curling and uncurling his toes and remembering the last time he quit something and his father smacking him on the back of the head and telling him that no pembroke ever lets his team down and certainly not mid-season and then there's justin's email saying simply please help so he opens that one even though he's hyperventilating and it turns out justin has to

pass physics and he just doesn't think that he can without mr pembroke and if he doesn't he's not going to university and his dad is going to make him join the army and he doesn't think he has what it takes to go to afghanistan and so mr pembroke writes him back to tell his father to fuck off and then erases that and tells him to just move out and not look back and then erases that and writes why don't we meet and i'll give you some tutoring and he almost hits send with that one but he just can't face one more moment of that day and night need coming at him so he erases that and leaves the email unsend and takes a shower so he can weep with no one hearing him not that anyone's in the house but he has the suspicion that his father is watching him and now like then the only place safe in his home for emotion is in the bathroom the shower blasting and steaming and mr pembroke blubbering into the inside crook of his elbow

concrete

saturday finds mr pembroke thinking about what the principal is kindly calling his sabbatical as he sweeps off the concrete pad behind his house when a marching line of red ants stops his broom and he lies on his stomach just the way he used to do when he was a kid except then he would have burned them and his principal thought this was just a midlife crisis and that he could never just quit teaching forever not a true educator like him and a year ago he would have agreed with the man but a year ago he wouldn't have gotten down on the ground like this to watch them moving across this plain and a year ago he would have thought that nothing but the kids mattered in this world and a year ago that would have meant that he didn't matter either and fifty years ago he would have taken a magnifying glass to these little animals to watch them pop with the cruelty and romance that young people don't understand kills you every single day until one day you find yourself hovering over an entire clan of red ants who are just stomping on and on and on

umbrella

in the morning mr pembroke feels the raging courage of forty years ago so he leaves the house without his umbrella even though there's a twenty percent chance of rain and sure enough he's caught outside walking all the way across the grocery store parking lot head down hands stuffed into pockets when he hears someone call mr pembroke and he turns to see lindsey fontaine the divorced mother of a former student from ten years ago jogging across to him and she puts the umbrella over his head and wraps her arm around his and says i'd hate to see you get wet and she smells like roses or lilacs or something and she pulls him in close to makes sure he's dry and is she hitting on him and it's been a long time since anyone hit on him and he doesn't know that it happened then either and they hop over a puddle and laugh at having done it and she lets him go when they're safely in the store and folds her umbrella and says mr pembroke a man your age should not be going out in the rain at all and my god i would never allow my father out on a day like today and don't you have anyone to rely on and then she's gone to her shopping with the promise that she'll be back to escort him to the car but when she's gone he puts a hand out to steady himself on a stray shopping cart and he doesn't know now if he's going to buy some food or just cut the pretense and get a big bottle of something except that if lindsey fontaine saw him

do that she would probably just fold her arms and call him dear as she scolds him so he goes down the inevitable frozen dinner aisle and hopes she forgets him forever

mrs pembroke

mr pembroke stops by the liquor store on his way home just as justin rolls up on his skateboard so mr pembroke reaches for the tortilla chips as though that's what he came here for and justin says hey mr pembroke now that you're not teaching anymore do you think you can buy me some beer if i give you the money and he's not being a smartass but really serious and mr pembroke says just because i'm retired doesn't mean i'm going to let you poison yourself and that seems to touch justin who nods at him as though one human caring for another is a revelation and he says you're a good guy mr pembroke and you're a whole lot better than my dad and i hope you and mrs pembroke have a good retirement and he's sincere and when he leaves mr pembroke buys a fifth of jim beam and a fifth of smirnoff and dreams about mrs pembroke whom he still hasn't met and he's been dreaming about since the sixties or so and this is a first because he imagines going with her to justin's graduation and in this vision justin is his son and mrs pembroke kisses him on the cheek and says i didn't think he'd ever graduate and mr pembroke nods and laughs and can't keep from weeping and he says that justin really is a good boy down deep and by the time he's pushing his way out of the dream he finds that he's driven himself home and he waves to jacqueline going into her house and she's the neighbor who has no mr and no justin and nothing as far as he can tell

but a whole lot of tomorrows ahead of her so mr pembroke smiles and says hello but by then she's turned and the door is closing behind her and then it's closed and then she's gone and mr pembroke laughs and shakes his head and he goes inside for television and a drink

Wapshott Press, *finding mr pembroke*,
Poetrylandia Issue 1

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John Brantingham is Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks' first poet laureate. His work has been featured in hundreds of magazines, *Writers Almanac* and *The Best Small Fictions 2016*. He has ten books of poetry and fiction including *The L.A. Fiction Anthology* (Red Hen Press), *Crossing the High Sierra* (Cholla Needles Press) and *California Continuum: Migrations and Amalgamations* (Pelekinesis Press) co-written with Grant Hier. He teaches at Mt. San Antonio College.

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