

# Breathing Under Water and on Dry Land

by [Jeff Burt](#) (January 2025)



Fields in the Flood (Thomas Girtin, 1900)

**It started with a crack** in the joint between the walls of the second story of the new school, wide enough a fifth grader could see a wedged image of downtown and stick a binder through. Two pieces of rebar had sprung from the concrete like two wild hairs from a boy's lick and pointed disparately at different angles at the sky, as if an omen.

A local warlock called it an upside-down divining rod,

humankind's meager attempt to draw water from the sky since the drought meant you couldn't draw it from the ground.

An ecologist said it was bad sand, that the sand used now in concrete was materially different than old sand, and the mixing properties of hundreds of years was no longer true. Edged, angled sand, that was what was needed.

The state senator suspected recycled Chinese rebar.

A renovation engineer said it was the shift of the earth from ground water running a different path from the Mississippi River. But when he dug, the earth was dry as far down as the digger could go, and the forty-foot augur, too, came up dry.

A few days after, a cyclonic front formed to the west with a ridge of tornado-spawning weather. Fuller Township received two of the tornados, one of which hit the grade school at nine p.m., pancaking the roof, blowing out all the windows, and scattering papers over three other townships.

Overnight, nine inches of rain fell in seven hours, and the three creeks in the township flooded. The feeder creeks to the Mississippi got backed up into the township, into the farms, into houses, into bars, into the grocery store, and swamped every parking lot that people had driven to escaping the flood of their properties. Two cell phone towers crashed, leaving the township without usable smart phones, and the inability to watch their citizens standing on porches and sitting on roofs waiting for a power boat to come and rescue them.

It was not the loss of adrenaline that stuck to the faces and poses of the people of the township, the fight response turned into a dizzying flee response. It was the flatness, the nothingness of the flood that took over their gaze and their lips. A roof floating by was just like a mini-fridge bobbing in the water. A diaper bag was no different than a cow, and there were several cows. Life had not been taken, but joy, depression, elation, and worry had vanished, these emotions

which had followed the contours of life had been demolished, and they had been mixed together to where no emotion ruled, as if vibrant paint colors had been mixed together and the results was always a dull brown, unusable to paint anything.

The force of the flood made estuaries again in the Mississippi, the rolling hills now knobs of trees surrounded by water.

Except in one spot, where Bill Russell's special levee protecting a long, large pond had been preserved, a sanctuary for frogs, though that too was now surrounded by the river, seemingly stagnant but with an undertow that could swallow a house.

Bill Russell, only five-foot-four, with round thick wire rim glasses, slicked down blonde hair with a single wild uplifted thatch at the crown that made him appear more like a wild bird, was stuck on that new island, he and one fisherman who had thought it might be a good day to catch fish roiled up by the storm. Bill was stuck in mud up to his waist.

The fisherman, tangled in swamp grass nearly over his head, writhed almost in reach of Bill. The fisherman had a neck the size of Russell's waist, muscular, an ample support for his head weighed down by a hat pinned with a hundred lures. He grunted as he swished back and forth like a washing machine.

"How did you get here? Man, this flood is turning up a lot of weird stuff." the fisherman asked, eyes wide and forehead wrinkled in wonder.

"The act of immersion leaves one dehydrated," Bill responded, "delusional; when one is absorbed by the wrong ambience and becomes part of the ambience, bad things happen. I'm having trouble catching my breath. I'm asthmatic. Any chance you can try to save me? You seem to have been deposited by God there for a reason," Bill asked, trying not to squirm in the mud.

"I'm not here to save you" the fisherman laughed. "I'm in my own predicament. Just look. I've less body showing than you do. I'm more than half submerged. I am literally up to my neck in a morass. If you're asking why God dropped me next to you, almost on top of you, I've got no answer. Right now, I'm here to save me. Every time I try to rotate my legs to left them up, it seems to make it worse. Like I'm rolling spaghetti on a fork, except it never unwinds. Don't worry, I didn't come out of a dream to pull you to safety. You happened to be on my path. I am a considerate human being. I can pull you up, but I'm not your savior. If I can get out and pull you out, I'll just be a kind person. That's it." The fisherman looked at the mud tomb, then at his own straitjacket of grass.

"My immediate goal is to get the fob to my F-150 from my jacket pocket, the zipped one, and into my mouth."

"Your mouth?"

"Yeah, I figure it's the only safe spot all tangled like this, and I need to use my hands to stay afloat, or unbound, or untangled, whatever the hell mess I'm in."

Bill squinched his face in disbelief. "Don't think putting keys in your mouth will get you to your truck."

"No, but it will give me encouragement. I hate the taste of metal. Can't clean my spinners because of that. Got to use alcohol wipes. Say, how did the reservoir break? It's got a rim of earth the size of a city block."

"It slid, like an ice cube across the table," Bill said. "Just got picked up and moved."

"But only pieces are left. Looks like the straw pulled from the scarecrow in Wizard of Oz."

Bill snorted, trying not to laugh. "That's a good way to look at disaster."

"Hey, aren't you the guy who wants to buy back the river itself? Buy up all these fishing spots for yourself and your amphibian preservation?" the fisherman asked.

"Yes, that's me."

"You're the plantation owner."

"Plantation?"

"Sure. It's non-geographic, not a place, but still a plantation. You own almost all of the businesses in the township, you bankroll all the contractors, painters, remodelers, hell, even the pest vans I heard are rented by you. You sit in a large oak chair in the boardroom of the bank, so you own the mortgages to the little houses up and down the highway. Nice little low interest mortgages, but you own them. You've got the jobs, the money to borrow, the command to say who's up and who's down. I know you don't whip anybody any more, but I can see a lot of people owing you, afraid to cross your path or not side with your vision. You own their freedom—maybe it's just economic, but then so was slavery. You'd be hard pressed to tell me how it's different than, say, Google, or Apple, who know everything about you through a cell phone, where you've been, what you buy, what your tastes in reading and music are. Hell, I once searched for a 78 recording by Harry Belafonte doing calypso music and by the end of the search, I was being offered Jamaican holidays and rum cookies."

"I don't have data on people," Bill said, spittle spewing from his lips.

"Oh, that's right. You're the *nice* kind of modern plantation owner. Excuse me. The *benevolent* kind. You hesitated before you said the word people. You were going to say my people, weren't you? I caught that," the fisherman laughed.

"And this frog stuff. I get it. That's you, right, buying land

and putting on a nature preserve so nobody but you can use it. Save the frogs. Wahoo! But save them for you, right. I get it. Frogs are the harbingers of the future. No frogs, no future. No dragonflies, no future. I get it all. But you'd be squeezing the life out of me and all the other low-income people out of the right to fish, to cast a line and sit and enjoy the day away from your plantation. Man, this place is about the only place I got left that's free. You see, this place has no purpose. I say I fish here, but really don't. I don't have a purpose here either. You will make the frogs free, and send me back to slavery. Doesn't seem like a fair trade."

Bill swung his head low, then looking at the mud, thought better of it. He lifted his arms, but that only made him sink another inch. "I've been trying everything. Nothing works."

The fisherman squirmed, pulled in his arms, sucked in his gut, held his breath for a few seconds as he worked his legs, then stopped with a sigh.

"Let me get this straight. We are holding back the raging Mississippi River to save frogs. Your frogs. We get out of this predicament, and then I go back to my rural poverty and you go back to your plantation. How's that fair? It's like I give \$100 of my \$3000 bank account, 3%, and you give \$100,000 of your 10 million, 1%, and you get written up in the paper? I'll save you, and I'll save the frogs because I love this planet, this river, but I am not saving you.

This is great," the fisherman said, thrashing in the swamp grass, becoming less animated with each reach and kick. "You're stuck in mud that squeezing your lungs so you can't catch your breath, and I can't catch it for you. You can't keep me from slipping off this balled-up swamp grass into the undercurrent. Fine pair we make. But I do promise that I'll clean out your house, get rid of that rich Arkansas soil from your entryway and carpets, if I make it. I need the work. You

got anything to promise?"

"I will tell you a secret," Bill said. "If you bow your legs like a bullfrog, now don't get shitty with me, if you bow them, you will stretch the swamp grass, and then if you push up like you're jumping, you might be able to get a little less tangled."

"Let me guess. You learned that from a frog."

"Yes, I did. I got caught in some thick green algae muck, and I watched how the bullfrogs disentangled themselves. It works."

The fisherman did as Bill suggested. It worked. In less than a minute, he was free. He scrambled to the edge of the mud that trapped Bill and began the slow, grunting task of hauling a human body out of four feet of mud. The fisherman could not budge Bill. He smiled, and withdrew the fob from his mouth. He pressed it, and the F-150 beeped twice.

He waddled to the truck, entered, and started it, and carefully drove within ten yards of Bill without the tires sinking. He took a yellow nylon rope he kept for fishing and threw it to Bill, telling him to wind it under his shoulders three times and knot it. Bill did four times. The fisherman moved the truck once, with no success. Twice, with no success. With a final tow, the rope taut and trembling, the fisherman pulled Bill free with a tremendous pop.

They laughed, the hilarity of the doomed.

"That truck," the fisherman laughed. "People tell me it's too old, not safe for hauling any more. But hauled your ass out. Hauled my ass out many times, too. It's a saving machine, that truck. You know, I can't heat or cool it any more. My dash knobs are all missing except for the radio. No A/C. No heat. No dimming lights. Built in 1990 but acts like it's from 1920. Gets me around. Gets me to this hole, though I don't know if I

will ever bring it so close to the water or this quagmire we're in. You like trucks?"

"They have their utility," Bill said, still sprawled on the grass with the rope under his shoulders. He strained to breathe.

"This beauty has more than utility. You know who loves trucks? Little kids. They love old trucks. I think an old truck shouts Grandpa to them, a kind of love, a kind of freedom, cause Grandpas may not make you wear a seat belt and Lord knows that sonar beep doesn't go off in my truck any more for a seat belt. You can go off road a little. You bounce a lot. Who replaces the struts on an old truck? They cost more than the truck. You can eat snacks and not worry about the crumbs. Crumbs clean up, I'm saying. You can open the windows and let the air stream in."

"In your truck, I imagine you have to, if the temperature control knob is broken."

The fisherman laughed. "Natural air conditioning. And the knob is not broken. It's missing. There's a story to that but it's a long one. You aren't breathing just right yet, so we'll sit a while. I have to figure how to get the truck out. Right now, I don't see a path. We'll have to have some of that idle talk, you know, to fill the space between now and getting rescued. It's like fishing. Throw some bait in the water, and wait. Sometimes the fish samples the bait, but doesn't swallow the hook. Sometimes it swallows the hook. We'll just have to find a conversation where we swallow the hook. For instance, how'd you get attached to frogs? I mean, frogs!"

"You're very good at idle talk, and voluminous, too," said Bill.

The fisherman looked at Bill, furrowed his brows, took off his hat, and laughed.

Asthmatic, Bill lived an epinephrine pen at the ready, and albuterol canister often in his hand. He would have an early death, the alveolus of his lungs slowly and steadily dying, the tiny air sacs in the lung where oxygen enters and carbon dioxide exits the blood stream, the access points, the exits, the entrances, the overpasses, and underpasses of exchange for the roadways of the human body.

Bill hunted bullfrogs roaring in the twilight in the reeds and algae muck that accumulated over summer and had begun to sink and stink in August, depriving the water of oxygen in the stagnant backwaters. He loved to walk near the pond and throw a stick and hear them jump, though the larger they were, thus older, the less they moved and the more they roared. He marveled that they could breathe both through their skin as well as through the flat nostrils, the direct transference in the blood a wonder he watched happen on an electron microscope in college.

Touching them, filling his big palms with a bull, the squishy sides flopping over the pinkie and the thumb, provided a sense of enormity even though, in the context of elephants and giraffes, was a modest enormity. Often, when he did his stint in the military, quartered near a slough of the Mississippi, he would capture a bullfrog and calm it in his hands, petting it like he might a dog, until the frog seemed to become content, sitting like the imagined Buddha badly captured in sculpture. He had even taken his attraction into the drought days of August, digging with his fingers into the mud where he would see the soft skin rising and falling like a bellows under a thin skein of the river's muck. He would gently lift the frog, examine it, then put it back, almost without a fuss, and the bullfrog would continue its submerged state like a submarine barely beneath the surface.

Bill found few bullfrogs detested handling. It was more a matter of not squeezing too hard, so that whatever served as adrenaline for a frog didn't course through its blood. Since

Bill could feel the heartbeat against his fingers, he knew the right pressure to control the frog without it becoming fearful. Also, if a bullfrog felt trapped, it might squeal, a short alarming signal of dread, of feeling trapped, but then if Bill let the legs flap through his fingers, keeping the frog pressed against his chest so that the eyes were swallowed in his shirt, the frog stayed calm, not placid, but externally inert with a minimal heartbeat.

He never took one home, not that he would not have enjoyed having one in his dorm. But he disliked the insects that bullfrogs ate, the flies and the striders and the mosquitos that would appear on the tongue of the frog if you pressed too hard on the stomach and behind, the sick pink tongue dotted with the last few minutes feed. Bill didn't want capture. He wanted the frog in the home of the frog, a sharing of the mud, the reeds, the floating duck feathers, like the water striders living on the surface of the pond, skating over it as if the water had a scrim of ice.

"And tell me another thing, William Russell, what's with a white guy like you owning a restaurant named Smoke? Smoke was a soul food when I was growing up."

Bill craned his neck to get a full view of the fisherman, whose bobber still strained wildly at the end of the line in the muddy water, an indication that fishing was really a hope to snag.

"I encountered smoke at a diner near Baton Rouge that specialized in plantation food—quantity, quality of taste, and no qualms about fat. Smokes, sausage sandwiches with dill pickles, peppers, grilled onions, cabbage. Sausage hot enough to not only make you pant for water, but for a towel to mop your brow. When I came home praising the sandwich, Patti, my wife, said she knew how to make them, and would do up a dinner."

"I hate to correct you, but that was not plantation food. That was sharecropper food, for a party, in the fall, when all the hard work of summer and harvest ended."

"The restaurant said plantation food," Bill said sternly. "I cannot describe the pungent atmosphere. It is not like a Middle Eastern market, where the cumin and curry float the other spices, and there is a mix between the peppers, the dried herbs, and the sweet, where your nose travels different pleasing routes and settles finally on one. This is more of a frontal assault, this is pepper cutting its way through all aromas, pungent as in back-burning so that you will smell nothing else, both char and smoke, not bitter, not sour, but face slapping hot. And to that the cook added a strange pie, a mix of molasses and beans and yams, and fried plantains around the side like a hedge to a garden. She had sliced the sausages in half and lain them on the pie, four pieces to my pie, and had glasses of lemon water at the wait. She served no bun, said it confused my tongue."

"I am not an emotional man, nor had been an emotional boy. But I had a good cry that night, started tearing up after a few bites, weeping about half-way through, and blubbering by the end, each bite more delicious than the first as the assault on my throat and stomach yielded to my overwhelmed tongue. The food was art in the way that sandblasting is sculpture."

"Patti, my wife, and I lay awake talking about a restaurant, a restaurant that would not be a Northern version of Southern food, nor a nostalgic bid at the 19th century, but a new Southern appreciation, diner style."

The fisherman started, "I'd have been thinking about having another smoke the next night, not planning a business. Anyone can make smoke in their backyard. You don't need to go to a diner. Well, at least poor folk, black, brown, and white, they don't go to a diner. It's you owners, or people who think they're owners, that's who eats a smoke at a diner."

"Our diner," Bill said, "is the busiest place between twelve and eight in fifty miles. We don't advertise. We don't look for owners, as you say. We are not even on the internet. We are closed on Sunday for lunch and all-day Monday and Tuesday and fill up. We can't get any bigger. We somehow got on someone's map for good food and that's brought traffic that's not local, and that's okay. But it's not why we started."

The fisherman laughed. "No, you started to make money. Your success and low prices meant the other two restaurants closed."

Russell countered, "our business was so strong we hired every single employee of those restaurants over time plus made the two owners shift managers. It all worked out."

"Hallelujah. Three restaurants become one. Not quite a merger and not quite a buy-out. More like a liquidation and then you mopped up what was squeezed onto the floor. As the diner got more successful, it probably meant the owners had fewer hours to put in, and didn't have to worry about menus, supply chains, sick outs, and food inspectors, let alone customers."

"Yes, exactly. Lorna who owned the diner on the highway talks all the time about how she used to sweat to pay social security and jiggle time slots to not put any wait staff over thirty hours a week and get into the benefits equation."

"And you solved that how?"

"By better scheduling, and pro-rating benefits by how many hours you do work—if three quarters time, the employee pays the additional one quarter share of the benefit cost. If half-time, half the cost. The formula works. Of course, there are still those on government insurance that don't take benefits, and a few that still don't want any benefits from a government or a business. Males all. In their twenties."

"That's great you can offer that since you've got no

competition. All those semi-skilled people needed someone to help them.”

“And that’s exactly how we took to it, that benefit plan. It’s been a great model for us. We use it for all of the businesses.”

The fishermen took off his boots to pick off the remaining swamp grass. His fingers worked meticulously.

Bill dredged the mud off his shirt and pants and shoes, his palms like an edging trowel working with cement.

Bill collected himself. “I can tell what you’re thinking by where you’re heading. You’re thinking that I’ve got these poor white and blacks and Mexicans and Hondurans working for me, working for Patti. I know all the jokes, all the slams. Married his cousin’s cousin. Can’t be out in the sunshine without an umbrella. Likes soul food but not soul people. My wife runs the school and the only place to sit down and eat. I own the lumber yard and hardware store. I own the gas station. My property’s large, but much of it is set aside, in its natural state.

“People like living here. They want their sons and daughters to live here. I help them to stay. I employ them. Can’t say I saw a lot of employment before I got started.”

The fisherman laughed again. “This little town in Arkansas, even if it’s on the Mississippi, even on a little delta, it’s cut off, you see. We’re not close to a bridge to transport you into the wonders of a different state, a big city. The rest of Arkansas has forgotten us. Mississippi doesn’t want to know we exist. We’d be poor with or without your industry. But that’s fine with us. As long as we can eat and be family and some of us fish. We don’t have to paint our houses every five years. We don’t really care. That’s the nature of knowing bliss, a bliss that covers you from when you were a little kid until you die, being in touch with something that doesn’t change

every five minutes.”

Bill shook his head defiantly, almost shaking his glasses off his face.

He sputtered as he spoke. “It’s not like Patti and I are making modern stew. We don’t heat up the beef or the pork in the pan first, microwave the carrots and potatoes, then mix them altogether for forty minutes in a pot or just throw on some glass jar gravy. We don’t do it that way. We cook our stew in the pot for eight hours, all day, and it tastes good at dinner. That’s how we want to live our lives, slow. That’s why we like it here.”

“And that’s how you’ve made everyone else live,” the fisherman said. “At your pace. The ones that want it slower have to speed up, and the ones who want it faster have to slow down. You’ve got your hand on the throttle of the engine, baby, and your grip is tight.”

Bill countered. “I saw Fuller Township restored building by building, life by life. It had a sagging poverty, as if everything was played out. Nothing stood tall. The school building, what a sad place. The char from a small fire you could still smell, and could see two walls of a classroom that had not been repaired. We fixed the walls. We painted everything.

“In three years, we’d put a fresh coat of paint on every house except the ones that were a little odd in color or had siding. We even painted a few of those. In painting the houses, we found holes that bats and rats came in and out of, and fixed those, too, and eaves that had rotted and roof sections gone bad. On a sunny day, especially towards sunset, we had all of those west-facing walls shining so brightly it almost hurt to look at the houses on the main drag.

“Then, out of the blue, Dragonfly Limited comes to town and sets up shop, hires twelve people. Camping bags, shopping

bags, stuff made out of hemp. A counter-culture company. Nice bright green logo looking like bright green marijuana but not quite. A couple from Joplin ran the place, nice young couple, wanted to fit in. Had two girls and sent them to the school. Bright kids, if a little on the hippie side. Couldn't wear shoes.

"Johnson Motors needed a place for testing and decided to build a facility, a metal building, on property near mine on the river. Four of the men transferred from the home office, but they hired a few people that didn't make much more than minimum wage but didn't have to commute an hour to make the same wage. And they got to work on the river and on engines and with oil and gasoline. In the summers you'd see five or six teenage boys hanging around working for free."

"You're telling me that it's best," the fisherman whispered, "that you control the flow so that people can live here, kind of like you want to control the flow of the Mississippi so that you can preserve the land as you see fit. How's that control working out for you, by the way? This flood is prodigious," the fisherman roared, waving his hand broadly across the river.

"My name is Rollie Prometheus, by the way. Used to be Rollie Washington, the last name picked by my great-great-great grandmother after being freed and not wanting her slave owner's name. So, she picked the first president's name. I didn't like that either. So, I picked Prometheus. Some say it is the god who brought fire to the people. I say it's a mortal who brought them charcoal briquets."

The fisherman waited.

"William Russell, you look pretty bewildered right now. I'm hurting just looking at you. Sopped, lungs heaving, disoriented. I can tell you can't wait to be rescued and get back to turning little Fuller Township into an example of

compassionate recovery. It scares you what it might be like and you can't wait to restore it to order, your order.

"Me, I will be sitting' here by this river on Saturday if the world goes to hell or the world goes to rapture. I'll be sitting' here watching my bobber going up and hoping it gets pulled down far enough the hook gets set and I have fish for dinner. I'll be sitting here whether we elect another lobby-infected Democrat or Republican. You say you love frogs, well in biological assumption, when I'm sitting' here on this promontory of rock reaching into the river, I'm a bullfrog on his lily pad enjoying dragonflies and lacewings hoping one's gonna trip up and I'll be having lunch. Other than my wife and my baseball, you can have the rest.

"You see, for you, it's a matter of order, cleanliness. You want to make things right, in whatever moral and natural order you conceive. You've got a picture of it, and cleaning up this muck hole takes you one step closer to perfection.

"Your wife, now there's a reputation, an honored scholar, a published education researcher. She's on a mission. She's not just a teacher, she's an evangelist, she's a do-gooder, she's a redemption believer. She's going to bring back to life what she sees as dead. That woman, she matters. She's got a pace, an insistence to her, sunup to sundown. She probably wears you out.

"But she's a romantic, Billy. One day the right time will come along and it will finally arrest that clock and make it stand still. She'll find out she's got a weariness inside of her, a fatigue she never knew was there, like a wound. She'll want a baby and that baby will heal that wound, and in the healing that pace will slow down. And Lord knows, if you and she have children, that'll take the physical evidence of that mission right out of her, and plop it wrapped in baby blankets right in front of her. She'll be a good mother. They'll call her the salt of the earth, you know.

"But you—there's many a person who thinks he is the light of the world, that his little candle shines in the darkness, casts out gloom and depression and highlights evil and poverty and injustice. And you've got that candle in your hand. Maybe I should say fist, because you're not gonna give up that candle. That's the problem with people who think they've got the light and won't give it up. Because true light has no power. It just shines. It's only by keeping people in the darkness that people have power with light. Maybe you need to think about that. Plantation owners. Plantation owners have always controlled the light and the darkness."

"You don't understand me," Bill said. "My lungs, what I've got left of them, they took out the bottom of the left lung and a little lobe of the right. Two surgeries. My lungs are closing up. I don't have good transference of oxygen, never did. I can't do my exercise bike any longer, have a hard time getting up the stairs. By the time I get to the third floor, I'm out of breath. Sometimes if it is super-hot and super humid, I have to sit down at the second landing before I can go up to the office. To live, I have to hold things tightly."

I love to look out from the third floor. I can see all the way to the Mississippi. I can turn and see all of Fuller. And yes, I want to see Fuller thrive, as a whole, and for each person. You make me out to be a marionette, a puppet master. Some of that is true, as it is always true of making progress.

"I come to this river to revive myself, put on those old tight fitting red trunks and bright yellow goggles. I look like I'm from an old outer space movie. I scare other people when they see me dressed like that. I have become an oddity. I have this little pond I like, and I immerse. My breathing improves, goes low and shallow, relaxed. Sometimes I come home all muddy, too, shoulders to toes, learning to lower my metabolism in the mud, learning a new way to breath. The doctor said my left lung is about shot, and the steroids aren't really working any more. I won't go with a sigh, but a gurgle, a few bubbles, and

a final froth. Like a bullfrog. I intend to die happy. I wanted to die here. But look at it. It's ruined."

The fisherman reeled in his bobber and absentmindedly checked the bait.

"Sorry about your condition. Notice the water is starting to look a little tanner, like coffee ice cream, instead of that dark chocolate from all the washed down black top soil. Pretty how it changes. Don't know how fish can swim in that. You know, I understand refuge. That's why I am here. But one person's sanctuary may not be another's. A frog and dragonfly may share the refuge, but the fish may like the new uninterrupted shore. It may not be ruined for them. It may not be ruined for me, either. Who knows what the reeds and the birds and all the other people desire. You know, in a sad sort of way, I'm glad we got caught like this, you over there, me over here. We would never have talked, otherwise."

"No, I suppose not. Maybe," Bill snickered.

The fisherman laughed, and then Bill laughed, both of them until snot shot from their noses.

The two sat, William trying to dry out, and Rollie trying to not fish, held in some state of peacefulness watching the waters rage and roil, waiting for the sound of a helicopter.

"When that helicopter comes," Bill started, "more than likely it'll be a basket on a winch. I'd advise, having done that once before, to grab on to the winch cable as well as the basket. Makes you feel less sea-sick."

"You've done this before?" the fisherman yelled. "I am fishing in the wrong spot. Should have gone over by one of the bridges."

William started, "Do you know Humphrey Bridge, what's left of it? My Daddy worked on that bridge. In the beginning, during

the end of the Depression, it meant a steady job. He was eighteen when he started, and about a year after he finished, he enlisted in the Navy, Pearl Harbor. After the war, daddy used to take the family for picnics near the bridge, said it was the greatest thing he'd ever done, greater than defeating the Japanese and the Germans, because a bridge was about connecting people, not de-connecting people. They were poor, and my brothers and sisters would laugh at Daddy. But not me. When I go there, I just sit, breathe as deep as I can. I don't exactly swim, just float, paddle, like a little boat in the big river, staying to the shore. When I am done, I go home. I have gathered myself. Some people have the Holy Spirit, some have meditation. I have Humphrey Bridge.

"I'll suffocate, you know. My lungs will slowly fill, the alveoli will stop squeezing oxygen out of the blood. I'll gulp, but it won't work, gasp, and never get that air down deep. The doctor said that it will be hard, take a long time. I will need to be sedated the last several months.

"But I won't go that way. I will go into the backwater and find a squishy mud and just bury myself in it. No funeral. No digging me up. Just put a headstone near the mud and call it a day. But I'd bet money it'll be by the Humphrey Bridge, that I'll actually go swimming when I am weak and try to cross the river where the bridge used to go, and the Mississippi will take me. It will be a short suffering."

The fisherman patted Bill on his shoulder. At first it was a pat of fake condolence, but grew warmer with each tap until compassion made the tap into a rub.

"Did you know, Bill Russell, the backwater where the frogs croak is stagnant on top even if a cold flow goes on underneath? All life occurs up to six feet above the water where the birds and insects travel, and down to six feet below, where the fish and frogs and turtle dwell. Six feet. Interesting how that's the height of a person, more or less. I

always found that interesting. It's a place a person can walk with no one over him, and only the size it takes to bury a person below him. I think about that when I'm here at the river."

Bill started raking the mud from his clothes again. He sat closer to Rollie and removed some clots of grass and mud from Rollie's back.

"When the chopper comes, you go first. It'll be cleaner."

"Billy, I am still praying for a rowboat. Hell, a pontoon boat. Or some miraculous parting of the waters and I can drive out. That F-150 saved your life. It's the kind of thing you might want to memorialize at the town park."

Bill laughed, again snot shooting out his nose.

"You think I should sell some of my businesses?"

"I'm not telling another man what to do. You get that?"

"Yeah, I get that. You're no savior."

"Maybe if you sold a business," the fisherman said, grinning, "to the employees."

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**Jeff Burt** lives in Santa Cruz County, California, amid redwood, flood, quake, and drought. He has contributed to Per Contra, Gold Man Review, Lowestoft Chronicle, and won the 2016 Consequence Magazine Fiction Prize. More is available at the website <https://www.jeff-burt.com>

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