

Highly Commended  
Under The Silver Tree Writing Competition 2023

## Where Monsters Tread

By Kristof Mikes-Liu

The boy runs away from the monster. The ground resists the monster every time it lands. The boy feels the monster's weight in every pounding step it takes.

Each running step of his own propels the boy forward. He possesses an uncanny precision of vision. He navigates a path through the maze of trees. It is mostly straight and sometimes crooked. Always, the threat is at bay.

The smallest part of the tip of his shoe hits a tree root on the path and his rhythm is interrupted. The force that propels him forward succumbs to the force that pulls him deep into the ground. He falls. His face hits a barrier, the ground's surface. His skin starts stinging. The palms of his hands sting too. He should be grateful to his hands for breaking his fall. His knees sting. His shoes are surprisingly clean.

The monster is gone, perhaps also fallen. Or scared by the thrill of the chase.

The boy rises to his feet. The stinging is a marker of the limits of his descent. It is a bit strange, how the ground pulls you inevitably toward it while its surface always pushes you away. He thinks of a ball whose desire is to fall and whose destiny is to be repelled, until mid-air and mid-bounce, the pull to fall again bears down on it and again it succumbs.

The boy looks around. His breathing remains heavy. He breathes in the worries of the world. There is a lake of worry in his chest. His outbreath seems only to clear the scum that floats miserably at the lake's surface.

He traces his way back through the maze of trees. There are hints of past monsters: a solid branch, broken; depressions in the path; the musty smell of abandonment. Bells are ringing, not joyful in their timbre, but sombre. He once pondered how strange it was that the same sound can express joy or sadness depending on the occasion. The bells signal a transition from one part of the ceremony to another.

The space between trees clears and he comes to the patch of grass that connects the bush to the church. The procession is about to start. He had wanted to be present for the whole ceremony but the feelings had come back and he had to take his own Time Out. It was odd that nobody reprimanded him for leaving the church. The adults had assumed he was too young to understand these things and would play outside. Also, he may have led them to believe this.

*Boy: I'm bored. I want to go outside.*

Adult, tearful: *Ok go if you must; not too far.*

How far is not too far anyway? His Nan would descend no more than a couple of metres into the earth, but would be too far for him to be able to find her. He had run a much longer distance overland than she was destined to go below, but he had been able to evade the monster *and* find his way back without anyone really noticing. You can go across as much as you like and not much will stop you. A wall might stop you but you can get around most walls. Across-ways always has an option around. But down and below does not. Not really. It is a one-way ticket, a journey of no return. That is probably why such a journey is not available to the living. Some people cheat by digging tunnels, but really, tunnels are simply strange extensions of the surface. You can lower the surface by digging, but that just means the surface is lower. It does not bring you *Under*. No matter how hard the earth beckons you to its core, you can only get as far as its surface. The privilege of going any further is reserved for the dead. That is as far as he allows his contemplation to roam. He does not want to understand better. He does not like that his Nan no longer talks to him, or plays cards with him, or has him by her side as she prepares a meal or passes him a secret treat. She is soon to go below, where he cannot also be. That is enough understanding for now.

And yet he wonders.

He remembers his mother talking to his friend's mother. He remembers that one was holding a cup of coffee, the other a glass of wine. Which mother was holding which vessel, he cannot recall.

*'They were so close, young \_\_\_\_\_ and his Nan. I don't know how to explain that she's passed away.'*

*'He's too young to understand,' said his friend's mother. 'Say she's gone on a long journey and won't be coming back. Or that she's having a long sleep.'*

*'He knows there's going to be a funeral and his Nan – Mum – will be buried.'*

*Part-smirk, part self-satisfaction, the reply comes: 'Maybe say her journey is under the ground, into the earth. And that he can't go with.'*

He had overheard the entire exchange, and wondered – still wonders – why he cannot *go with*. At home, he had attempted to press an action figure into the floor so hard that it would find its way Under. The result was otherwise.

Unsuccessful, he ended up with aches in his own shoulders and hands, and the displaced limb of a tiny man with cape. He tried again with a block of Lego and broke skin while floor remained intact.

With his hand in a fist, he had tried to pierce the grassy surface into below. His efforts were met with a firm and dispassionate resistance from the lawn and mildly grazed knuckles. There was also dirt in his fingernails but under

the circumstances, this detail went unobserved. His grieving mother was in no state to notice.

Once, after dinner, he even tried to whisper the word *Nan* into the back patio. His call was met with silence. He tried again with braver voice. The silence remained unperturbed, unmoved by the hint of desperation (perhaps despair) in his voice. Perhaps his Nan's journey had already commenced, and she had ventured too far into the beyond below to hear his calls. She would never have ignored him deliberately.

His friend had also passed on additional intelligence gleaned from his coffee- or wine- drinking mother.

*'My mum says that dying is like ghosts. I asked her what's a ghost and she said don't be silly. But I heard at church that ghosts come from hell unless they're holy. I think ghosts turn into monsters.'*

This is why he forces himself to come to the funeral. Then chickens out. Then forces himself back. He wants to see where she goes - just in case he has misunderstood the words of adults, and a loophole means his Nan is alive and well again. He worries that all he will see is her body inanimate and in her Sunday best, to be rendered ceremoniously to the voracious earth. He worries that there might be nothing more of her left than a lifelessness that over time, becomes the same as soil.

The worry - about forgetting his Nan - turned into a monster and chased him away. He ran from it until he tripped up and the monster disappeared. Had

he scared it away? Had it disappeared into the ground to join his Nan? Was it a ghost?

Four men and two women carry the coffin out of the church. Their clothes are black like night time but the sun is strong. As they proceed down the stairs, he wonders if the coffin will slide forward and out of their hold. He remembers going to the park with his Nan and how she helped him climb the slide there. He would start sliding with glee and a tiny bit of terror, but her big smile and chuckles of delight would always reassure him. He wonders if she is smiling inside the coffin that is tilting down at the top of the church stairs.

There are no shenanigans. The procession proceeds without a glitch. Prayers are chanted as his Nan is brought over to the Church yard.

He finds his mother and joins her. Her black robes and scarf and sunglasses dampen the glint of the tears that stream from her eyes. He holds onto a fold of her dress and she extends her arm to take his hand.

They stand before the grave. There is a rectangular hole in the ground, deeper than he is tall. *Is this really two metres?* he wonders. He peers into the corners, out of reach of direct sunlight, and looks for monsters. If they are there, they must be keeping very still.

The lake of worry in his chest becomes less turbulent. He has seen where his Nan will go.

The coffin is set at the top of the hole in the ground. Slowly it is lowered into the ground. He imagines his Nan waiting patiently for this all to be over so

that she can rest in peace. It does not really seem like her to waste time, though. She will want to get up and do something after she has had a small rest. When it is all over and she is indisputably underground, he suspects she will get up, look around, and find something to do. The monsters, if indeed below is where they reside, will meet their match in his Nan.

He imagines his Nan calling them out on bad behaviour:

Nan: *You young monster, you terror! There's no need to behave like that.*

*Put it back where you found it and say sorry.*

Monster (still subversive): *Sorr-raay!*

Nan: *Not like that. Say it properly.*

Monster (relieved that resistance is futile): *Sorry. ... Sorry Nan.*

Nan: *That's ok. Try not to do it again. Now come here and we'll play cards together.*

His imaginary wanderings are interrupted by his mother asking if he would like to throw a rose into the grave. He wonders why people throw flowers into graves. When they are covered up by dirt, nobody can see them. He revises his observation: Nobody *above* ground can see them. They must be for the folk underground to admire and cherish.

He takes a rose, the one with the longest stem he can find, and whispers something into the flower before he throws it. He imagines the rose carrying a

long invisible string that leads back to himself. He hopes when she gets out of her coffin and down to business, his Nan will find the rose and listen to its message and find the thread that connects her to her grandson. He hopes that with all the monsters she will have to bring into line, she does not forget him.

They walk away before the grave is covered up. He imagines that his Nan is getting impatient with waiting. He returns the next day to confirm the hole is filled.

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After all these years, I still believe in monsters. They are not all bad. They inhabit the places we cannot see. Yes, call me a man of science too. I know a lot about soil and how to make it healthy now. People pay me for my thoughts. It is literally my job.

Monsters and soil science are not mutually exclusive. Beyond the chemicals and organisms that make it up, the underground space connects us to ourselves. So much of what makes us who we are today is down there. Our history is buried there. Our future is tied to what we grow. The monsters help make things happen. And my does Nan too. I reckon she surprised them with her kindness and feeds them well and plays cards with them. There are also others down there. Some are like my Nan; others are less kind.

The monsters do not scare me anymore, but I worry sometimes about how they are doing.