

THE EXCURSION

A Modern American Retelling

A Poem

By
Peter James Stouffer

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Setting Note: *While the Village of Holly and Rose Township are real locations, their geography, businesses, and institutions have been used fictitiously or altered to serve the plot.*

Adaptation Note: *This work is a modern retelling inspired by *The Excursion* (1814) by William Wordsworth.*

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BOOK I

THE GHOST SUBDIVISION

"A map is just a piece of paper that lies about where the mud is. You can draw a straight line from here to the horizon, but God didn't pave it, and He certainly didn't cosign the loan."

— *Samuel Walker,*
Surveyor's Log

i. The Turnout at Tipsico Lake

"The sun doesn't charge extra to shine on the poor side of the fence. It takes a hell of a lot of money to be as miserable as the man in that pontoon boat looks."



It was the summer of the drying creeks, when the sun climbed high before the coffee brewed and glared distinct through the humidity—a pale steam rising off the fens and lakes of Rose Township. The northern ridges stood dappled with shadows from the brooding clouds, but down here, by the water, the heat held still.

I pulled my car onto a patch of dust, a gravel easement between the road and the private fence—that strip of "borrowed ground" the township claims but never paves. My phone buzzed in my pocket—another rejection email, or perhaps a Venmo notification for a gig that paid too little, too late. I let it buzz. I was thirty-two, over-educated and under-employed, drifting through the gig economy like a ghost in the machine. I was looking for something solid, and the only solid thing I knew was parked right in front of me.

Samuel Walker sat in a folding chair beside his vintage Airstream. The trailer was dull as a worn-out dime, an aluminum hull docked in the tall grass. He held the shoulder, strictly legal, existing in that liminal strip between the asphalt blur and the cool, private privilege of the lake.

He was seventy-four, a man who had spent his life with a transit level and a chain. He used a digital theodolite now, but he still kept his grandfather Jacob's brass transit in the truck cab—a heavy, purely mechanical talisman from 1920.

He knew the water table better than he knew the parish priest. He read the scripture of the glacial till and the holy text of the moraines. Retired now, he kept his hickory surveyor's pole leaning against the trailer like a shepherd's crook.

"You're late," he said, not looking up. He was watching the light hit Tipsico Lake, glinting off the aluminum docks and the pontoon boats he could see but never own.

"I had to file a story," I lied. I hadn't filed a story in weeks. I was paralyzed by the noise of it all—the constant scroll, the panic of the rent due on the drafty cabin I rented.

Samuel turned. His face was a map of deep lines, tanned by fifty years of working outdoors. He looked at me—pale, anxious, checking my phone again—and his eyes narrowed. He didn't judge, but he measured. That was his trade. He looked for the grade, and he saw I was slipping.

"Sit," he commanded, kicking a spare crate toward me. "The heat is good for the bones. It dries out the nonsense."

BOOK I THE GHOST SUBDIVISION

We sat in the silence of the roadside. A truck thundered past, rattling the gravel, but Samuel didn't flinch. He was fixed on something else.

"I was thinking," he said, his voice like gravel rolling in a mixer, "about the difference between a ruin and a wreck. A ruin has dignity. A castle, an abbey—they fall, but they leave a shape. But what we build now? The vinyl? The particle board?" He spat into the dust. "It doesn't ruin, Jim. It just rots. It turns to slush."

He pointed with his chin down the road, toward a paved cul-de-sac that ended abruptly in a wall of sumac.

"You know that place?"

"The unfinished sub?" I asked. "The one they stopped building in '08?"

"The Ghost Subdivision," he corrected. "Let's go. I want to show you what happens when the math is wrong."



ii. The Geometry of Loss

*"There is no such thing as a 'permanent improvement.'
There's just things we built today that the weeds haven't figured out how to eat yet. Give 'em time."*



We walked down the hot asphalt of Hickory Ridge to the entrance of the sub. The road was wide, curbed, and gutted, built for fifty luxury homes that never came. The sewer caps were stamped with the date 2007. Grass grew three feet high through the cracks in the pavement. It was a zombie street, a monument to a bubble that burst before the paint was dry.

Only one house stood in the desolation. It was a foreclosure, a two-story colonial with the vinyl siding peeling off the north face like dead skin. The windows were dark. The "For Sale" sign had long since fallen into the weeds, bleached white by winter after winter.

"Maggie's place," Samuel said softly. He stopped at the edge of the driveway, respecting a property line that the bank had long forgotten.

"I knew her," he said. "Maggie Kowalski. She was a nurse's aide. Strong hands. Eyes that were always looking for a reason to laugh, even when there wasn't one. She moved here with her husband, Rob. He was a carpenter. Good with wood, bad with credit. But they had the dream, Jim. They signed the papers. They thought the world was going up and to the right, forever."

Samuel traced a line in the air with his hand, leveling the horizon.

"Rob was a provider. That was his religion. When the crash came, when the developer—Mr. Sterling—went bankrupt and vanished to Florida, the work stopped. The subdivision died overnight. Rob sat on this porch for a month, watching his tools rust. Then he heard about the oil fields in North Dakota. The Bakken. 'Black Gold,' they said. 'Jobs for any man with a pulse and a strong back.'"

"He left on a Monday," Samuel continued. "He kissed Maggie. He kissed the baby. He said, 'I'll send the check in two weeks.' He drove his truck west, chasing the boom."

"And?" I asked, though I knew the rhythm of this story. It was the anthem of the Rust Belt.

"And the checks came for a while," Samuel said. "Then they got smaller. Then they stopped. Then the phone was disconnected. Disappeared. Swallowed by the camps. Maybe it was an accident on the rig. Maybe it was the meth that floats through those oil towns like snow. Maybe he just couldn't bear the shame of coming home empty."



iii. The Waiting

"Hope is a fine breakfast but a lousy supper. A woman can live a long time on bread and water, but she'll starve to death in a week on promises."



Samuel walked up the cracked driveway. He touched the peeling siding, feeling the cheapness of the material.

"She waited," he said. "That was her work. She waited while the weeds took the lawn. She waited while the neighbors walked away from their mortgages. She waited while the baby got sick—some respiratory thing, the damp in the walls, maybe, or just the poverty setting in."

I looked at the house. I tried to imagine it—the silence of the phone, the slow creeping panic as the bank notices piled up like snowdrifts against the door. I felt a cold prickle of recognition. I knew that panic. I felt it every time my lease was up for renewal.

"The baby died in the winter," Samuel said, his voice flat, brutal. "Pneumonia. Or neglect. Or just a lack of heat. Who can say? The county came and took the eldest boy—sent him to an aunt in Flint because there was no food in the cupboard. Maggie didn't fight them. She was already gone.

"She turned into a ghost in her own kitchen. I'd see her sometimes, wandering the county roads in Rob's old flannel jacket. It was three sizes too big, hanging off her wasted frame like a shroud. She'd stop trucks with out-

of-state plates. 'Have you been to the Bakken?' she'd ask. 'Have you seen a carpenter named Rob?'"

Samuel turned back to me, his eyes hard and bright.

"She died right here," he pointed to the porch steps, where a colony of ants was dismantling a dead beetle. "Found by the mailman on a Tuesday. Heart failure, the coroner wrote. But that's medical shorthand. She died of waiting, Jim. She died of a subdivision that promised a life it couldn't guarantee."

He kicked a piece of loose siding. It clattered across the cement.

"And now? The bank owns the deed. They'll doze it down come August. Scrape the lot clean. The siding, the drywall, the memories—all into a dumpster. And the woods will creep back in to swallow the scar. In five years, you'll never know a woman loved a man right here, and lost the world for it."



iv. The Descent

"A vinyl house is like a politician's smile: shiny, uniform, and hollow in the middle. It'll hold up just fine right until the weather turns."



I looked at the house. It wasn't just a sad story. It was a threat. It was the physical manifestation of my generation's nightmare: the precariousness of it all. One bad year, one lost gig, one shift in the global economy, and the weeds come for you.

"It's all fragile," I whispered. "Everything we build. It's just Tyvek and debt."

Samuel adjusted his cap. He saw the fear in my face—the nihilism creeping in at the edges.

"It is fragile," he agreed. "If you build on the drift. That is why we must go deeper."

He picked up his pole.

"The air is too heavy here. It's full of ghosts. I need to breathe the Fen air to clear my lungs. I'm going to see the Doctor."

"Elias?" I asked. "The Solitary?"

"The man who thinks this," Samuel swept his hand over the ruined lawn, "is the only truth. He lives in the muck because he thinks the muck is honest. He thinks despair is the only logical response to a world that kills babies and forecloses on widows."

Samuel looked at me, a challenge in his eyes.

"You're scared, Jim. I can see it. You look at this house and you see your own future. You think the system is rigged and the rot is inevitable."

I didn't answer. He was right.

"Come with me," Samuel said, starting back toward the truck. "Let's go talk to the man who gave up. Let's hear his argument. Because unless you can answer him, unless you can find a reason to build on this shifting ground... you'll end up just like him."

I looked at the house one last time—the empty windows staring like skull sockets—and then I followed him. I wasn't going for the scenery. I was going because I needed to know if there was an alternative to the rot.

"Lead on, Surveyor," I said. "Take me to the swamp."

