

Michigan Gothic

David Jibson



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Dedication

To people everywhere who work in hospice and the caregivers who bravely take on important and demanding responsibilities.

Cover Illustration: “Michigan Gothic”
A watercolor by David Jibson.

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Introduction

The characters in this book are fictional but, at the same time, they are real. The events described didn't happen but they do happen. The place is fictional but it does exist. The story is not true but it happens every day.

Michigan Gothic grew out my work with a hospice agency in rural Michigan. It was my privilege to meet people with an outlook and values that are slowly disappearing along with a way of life.

I chose to write this story as poetry because the story itself is poetry and I couldn't see a better way to express it. Augie's death parallels the death of the family farm and a part of our culture that helped define who we are.

Augie

Augie wakes up one morning
and something doesn't feel right.
He doesn't know what it is. He feels off
in a way he can't put his finger on.

He might have said something to Wanda
if she had been in bed beside him
but she was already up and dressed.
He could hear her in the kitchen,
could smell Maxwell House
perking on the stove.

He feels like he didn't sleep
but doesn't remember being awake.
By the time he gets up, takes a pee,
pulls on his overalls and socks
and shuffles into the kitchen
he decides to say nothing.

Wanda pours his coffee, sets it
on the table in front of him.
"If you want an egg this morning
you'll have to go to the hen house."
"That's okay," he says.
"I'm not hungry this morning."
"Something wrong," Wanda says.
"No. Just not hungry yet is all."
She goes about her business;
he goes about his.

The Farm

Augie carries his mug out to the porch.
He sits down in a steel motel chair,
his favorite spot. A rusted milk can
serves as an end table for his coffee
and his smokes. The sun is already up
over the roof line of the corn crib.
It'll be hot today. Augie is glad
he doesn't have cows to milk anymore,
glad not to have had to be up hours ago.
He should be out feeding the chickens
and making sure they have plenty of water.
They are the last of the animals on the farm.
Gypsy, last of a line of Australian shepherds,
passed over the winter,
probably from not having anything to herd.

After Feeding the Chickens

It's mid-morning. The chickens are fed
and watered. A few clouds are starting to build.
Augie goes back into the house,
finds Wanda in the parlor
working at her Swedish weaving.
Augie goes into the bathroom,
pulls down his drawers and sits on the pot.

When his work is done Augie looks
into the bowl. It's there again
like yesterday and the day before,
a dark red string of stain sinking
into the water, spreading
like slow lava from a volcano.
Augie flushes.
It's gone.

Wanda

It's Monday, the day that Wanda washes clothes. She insists on using an old wringer washer and hanging clothes outside to dry in weather like this.

"Augie," she says. "Why is there blood in your underwear?"

"I don't know," he tells her.

"Well, how long has it been there?"

"I don't know," he says,

"a couple days, maybe three."

"You're going to the doctor," she says.

Augie knows not to argue with Wanda once he's been caught at something.

Later, he hears her on the phone in the kitchen. "Wednesday," she tells him.

"That's good," he says. "We can go to the store and get our senior discount."

Augie Goes to the Doctor

The old GMC is coated with dust.
It hasn't moved in a couple of weeks.
Augie holds the passenger side
door open, helps Wanda boost
herself in. He goes around
to his side, gets in and starts the engine,
heads out the drive way.

They drive past the barn, out onto
the road and pass the neighbor's boy
cutting hay on Augie's west twenty.
Augie leases out the field.
He no longer has any use
for the sweet alfalfa.

Augie doesn't charge the going rate
because he knows Max's boy
is having a hard go of it.
Nobody farming dairy these days
has any money. Augie is just glad
to have his acreage not going to waste.
He and Wanda don't have anything
to spend money on anyhow.

At the Doctor's Office

Augie and Wanda sit in the doctor's waiting room..
She has some crochet. He looks through
at an old golf magazine, thinking
what a waste of good land.

When the office girl calls Augie's name
Wanda gets up too. Augie wishes
she didn't always have to go
in with him but he knows it's
because she doesn't trust him.
In another way he sort of likes it.
Wanda will do most of the talking.

The Following Week

The phone rings late in the day
but too early to be one of the kids
who know to call after supper.
They always say hello to Augie
but he knows they really want
to talk to Wanda. That's fine by him,
means she has somebody
besides Augie to talk to.

"It's the doctor's office,"
Wanda says. "They want to see you Monday."
"I was just there," Augie says.
"Well, you gotta go back for your test results."
Augie shrugs. "Can't they just tell you on the phone?"
"That's not how it works," Wanda says.
"You gotta go back so's the doctor
can explain things and so's you
can ask questions."
"You mean so you can ask questions,"
Augie says. Wanda makes her face.

The Ride Home

The first four miles back from town
are driven in silence. Neither
Augie or Wanda can find any words.
Finally Wanda says, “Well, Augie.
what are you thinking?”
Augie slows down the truck.
“What will happen to you, Wanda?
That’s what I’m thinking.”

“No, Augie, about what the doctor said.”
Augie says, “I know I don’t want
to go through what my father
went through. Nor your sister neither.

“Well, you’ve got a week before
we go back. You gotta think
about what you need to ask,
so’s you’ll know what you wanna do.

“Not much left for me to ask,”
Augie says. “I just gotta
decide how I wanna do it
and I’m thinking already
I should just let it happen
instead of scrapping for every minute,
getting weaker and sicker every day,
making things harder on everyone,
especially you. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking this is something
you gotta decide and I’ll be here
for you whatever that is.
And you shouldn’t worry about me.
One of us has to go first. I always thought
it would be me and it could
still be. You got some time left.”

Augie turns onto the dirt road
that leads back to the farm.
There is a vehicle coming
from the other way. He rolls
up his window to keep out the dust.
“I can’t remember how long
it’s been since it was this dry.”

Augie in a Home

“Maybe I should go into one them homes,
you know, for dying people,”

Augie says to Wanda during breakfast.

“Eat your egg,” Wanda says.

“Those places are too far away.”

“I’d teach you to drive,” Augie says,
so you could get back and forth,
do your shopping and such.”

“I know how to drive,” she says,
“tractor, truck, even a combine,
anything you can think of.

I just never got my license.”

“You don’t know how to drive in the city.”

“Neither do you,” Wanda says,

“but you don’t need to worry about that
because we’re both staying right here.

We talked about it and it’s all agreed to.”

Augie swipes a piece of rye toast across his plate
through the last of his egg yolk, knowing
the discussion is over.

Mary Ellen and Tom

It's Wanda talks to the kids.
It's not the sort of thing Augie can do.
Mary Ellen says she'll drive up
from Grand Rapids on the weekend.
She is a teacher and usually
comes up about once a month.
It's only a hundred miles.

It's different with Tom in California.
He's an engineer and doesn't get
much time off. Augie and Wanda
haven't seen him for at least
a couple of years. Time has its way.

Max and His Boy

Augie takes the truck over to Max's place
a quarter of a mile down the road.

He times it so that he won't interfere
with milking time. Max and his boy
are in the barnyard looking at
an old Massey-Ferguson
Max bought used thirty years ago.

"We got her to run," Max tells Augie,
problem now is the power take-off."

"That's why they call it an M.F.,"
Augie says. It gets a laugh
even though that joke's been heard
a dozen times before.

"Thinking of selling," Augie says.

"I figured," Max says. "What are you thinking?"

"Cheap," Augie says. "Don't expect to get much;
enough to bury me and set Wanda up
for what few years she's got left."

"We can't do anything right now," Max says.

"We might not even make your lease payment
for next year, at least not all at once."

"Don't worry about it. Just go ahead and cut.
There's nothin' I can do with the stuff.

"Maybe one of those horse people
from the city will buy your place," Max says.

Augie tells him how the barn's not set up
good for horses and how he wants to
hold on to the house and one acre for Wanda.

"Still," Max says, you got some good pasture."

"That I do," Augie says. "That I do."

Mary Ellen

Mary Ellen grows up tall.
She loves life on the farm
until she hits puberty
when she seems to lose interest in 4H,
starts hanging with town kids.

She graduates at seventeen
and is gone before Augie knows it.
She works that summer on Mackinac Island,
enrolls at Grand Valley in the fall.
Her last two years she rarely comes home
and when she does, Augie has the feeling
it's because she misses her cat
more than him and Wanda.

Augie often wonders why
Mary Ellen doesn't get married.
She is a pretty girl, all freckles
and amber colored hair,
a gentle voice.

It's Tom finally tells him.
"Pop, Mary Ellen is – you know,
she likes girls."

"Mary Ellen's a lesbian?
That explains a lot." Augie says.
"Does your mother know?"
"Mom's always known," says Tom.
"Well that explains a lot too," Augie says.

Tom

Tom is as good a boy as ever was,
works hard as any farm boy,
good grades, stays out of trouble.
By twelve he's a better mechanic
than Augie is. He has a gift.

When Augie has the talk with him
about taking over the farm one day,
Augie is disappointed at first
that Tom plans to go off
to Michigan Tech to be an engineer.

“I know you want this, Pop,
but I want something better.”
That word *better* gets to Augie.
He never thought
anything could be better,

but now that Augie sees how
Max's boy struggles,
he's happy with Tom's choice,
just wishes he'd settled
closer to home.

Pastor Dan

Pastor Dan knocks on the front door screen.
Wanda comes from the kitchen to let him in.
Augie's in his green recliner.
Pastor Dan tells him not to get up.
Augie wasn't planning to get up.
They shake hands. The pastor
tries to look comfortable. He's not.

Pastor Dan's not a real pastor.
The little Methodist church is down
to just a few families, all of them old.
They can't afford a real pastor.
Pastor Dan, who's really a Baptist,
works full time at the lumber yard.
He pastors on Sundays
and on Thursday evenings
for what few dollars
the tiny congregation can spare.

Pastor Dan wipes beads of sweat from his forehead
with a red bandanna from his back pocket,
asks Wanda and Augie if he can pray with them.
The three of them hold hands.
They are like a little circle of mushrooms
that grow in the yard, Augie thinks.

Pastor Dan prays for wisdom for all of them,
healing and freedom from pain for Augie,
comfort and strength for Wanda.
Everybody says amen at the end.

Pastor Dan says to call him anytime.
He sounds sincere but Augie knows
the pastor is relieved to have this visit over.
So is Augie.

Augie in the Army

Augie is in basic training at the end of the war.
He gets sent to Germany
as part of the occupying force.
He finds a country not much more
than a pile of rubble with widows,
orphans, old men and a few
legless veterans sifting
through ruined buildings
looking for anything they can sell.

The army never really gives Augie a job.
Often at loose ends, he rides
a bicycle into the countryside
where the devastation is less.

When he sees a farmer
mending a fence or fixing a barn
Augie stops to help,
being careful never to accept food.
Instead, he brings along Army rations
that he shares with the family
or what's left of a family.

When Augie finally goes home
he finds his girl, Wanda, waiting for him
at the Greyhound station.
She had met every bus,
two a day, for a month.

Augie on a Good Day

Its six months Augie's been sick.
He's turned care of the chickens
over to Wanda. Tom and Mary Ellen
move a bed into the parlor
which is now Augie's sick room.

A hospice nurse comes in three times a week.
They send in an aide on the other days.
Augie fights this at first
but when he sees how hard
Wanda is working
he is glad to have them.
He also finds he likes the sponge baths.

Resistance wasn't about Augie being afraid
to admit he was dying.
It was more about
having strangers in the house.

On good days, Augie sits in his recliner.
Tuesday, he even has the aide
help him out onto the porch
but it was too cold for him
to stay outside for more than a minute.

Max Comes to Visit

“Max is here to see you”, Wanda says.
Augie is asleep, but opens his eyes for Max
as wide as the morphine patch will allow.
Max is holding his seed cap in one hand,
a wad of cash in the other.

“I scraped together this much,” Max says,
putting the money on the side table
next to a lunch that Augie has ignored.
“It’s half of next year’s lease.
I’ll get you the rest as soon as I can.”
“This is enough,” Augie says.
“Put the rest into that tractor
or you won’t be cutting no fodder this year.”

Max has a watery eye. He nods.
A silent moment passes
that neither man is uncomfortable with.
“What’s it like Augie, knowin’ I mean.”
He looks down at his feet,
thinking he’s foolish
to ask Augie such a question.

Augie says, “what’s it like for you, Max,
to wake up in the morning
and pretend you’re not dying?”
Max feels about an inch tall.
Then Augie starts to laugh,
laughs at Max until Max
can do nothing but laugh
at himself too.

Wanda comes into the room,
wiping her wet hands on her apron.
“If you boys can’t behave,
Max’ll have to go home.”

“I’m about to leave anyway, Wanda.”
I think my friend can use a rest.”
The men’s parting handshake
each of them knows,
is a goodbye.

Augie in a Coma

There is sound, voices maybe,
so far away they can't be heard,
like they were traveling through water
rather than air.

There is light, but not enough to see by.
Augie is standing in a field.
The air around him is lighter
than the air he is used to,
and it smells sweet, even
sweeter than a fresh first cutting.

There is movement from a direction
Augie has never sensed before.
He would like to sit down
in the long grass
but his legs will not bend.

The nurse says to Wanda,
"I think it's time
we call the kids to come home."

Augie Dead

Augie is at the back edge of the cemetery
behind the Methodist Church.
He's next to the fence
that divides the church from Hanson's pasture.

Tom picks the spot, thinking it's close
to Hanson's cows, that Pop will like that.
Augie's neighbors are some old graves
with headstones that huddle together
against the cold. Several of them
are from the year, 1918,
five years before Augie was born,
the year the Spanish Flu
took so many children.

The first weeks go pretty easy for Wanda.
There are a lot of people around.
Mary Ellen is up every weekend
even in the worst weather.
Tom stays at the farm for two weeks.

He takes Wanda into town,
buys her a new refrigerator
that makes ice all by itself.
He swaps out the old rotary phone
for one with push buttons
that he spends an afternoon programming.
Wanda refuses to let him
replace her washing machine.

There are early signs of spring.
Mary Ellen is coming up later
she says, with a dog that needs a home,
an Australian shepherd
that loves to herd chickens.

About The Author

David Jibson grew up in rural Michigan. He is a graduate of Western Michigan University and Michigan State University with an M.S.W. He began studying and writing poetry after more than thirty-five years as a Social Worker, ending his career with a non-profit hospice agency in north-western Michigan. David is the editor of Third Wednesday Magazine, a quarterly journal of literary and visual arts, a board member of the Poetry Society of Michigan and a coordinator for the Crazy Wisdom Poetry Circle in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

