



Blue  
Mesa  
Review

CONTEST  
2015 fiction poetry non-fiction

JUDGED BY:

Antonya Nelson + Julie Carr +  
+ Wendy C. Ortiz

\$500 PRIZE AND PUBLICATION  
\$12 SUBMISSION

## Really Living

By [Charles Boisseau](#)

May 1st, 2015

Like 177

Tweet

[Back to Issue](#)

**B**y now we've loaded three washing machines and need quarters for dryers. I feed bills into a slot on the wall, coins clatter out, and one rolls across the tile floor to the feet of my brother standing in front of a plate-glass window. He kicks it back as if it were a miniature hockey puck.

It's Christmas Day 2002. Pat and I are at Happy Suds II Laundromat, the only ones here except for a man nodding off on a plastic chair in the corner.

I load the dryers with Pat's damp garments while he repairs to the sidewalk; I hoof after him, shielding my eyes from the blinding sun, now over the Sandia Mountains to the east. The cool Albuquerque air stings a little and carries the scent of pinecones.

"Man sins against everyone and even God," he says, continuing a discourse on human nature. He cups his hands to block the wind and lights three or four matches before his cigarette fires up. "It's not like with animals. Is there a good or bad pig? A good or bad horse? They're all good."

"What are you talking about?"

He exhales plumes of smoke from his nostrils. "All people are bad. They are just out to help themselves."

"God helps them who help themselves," I say, mockingly.

"My psychiatrist told me that once and you know what I did?" Pat says with a gleam in his eye. "I reached up and helped myself to a pack of cigarettes on his desk."

The day before, I flew in from Austin and drove a rental car to the De Anza Motor Lodge, the flophouse Pat moved into a few months back. I stood outside his door and heard voices from the television. I knocked and nothing stirred. "Hey, Pat. It's me. Open up." Nothing. "Pat!" Finally, the door swung open and Pat poked out of his cave as if expecting danger. His cow-licked hair was matted and a thicket of beard hung down his chest. He looked markedly older and heavier. I entered the darkness and reached for a wall switch. A bare bulb cast dark shadows, and roaches and water bugs scattered among heaps of trash and dirty clothes. Brown splatters stained the walls and I smelled smoke and urine. The staticky TV with wire-hanger rabbit ears displayed snowy images of a commercial for a car dealer. A floral bedcover was kicked down to the foot of the bed and a flat gray pillow with no case lay at the head. No table, no chair. A coffee can overflowing with butts and ashes sat atop of a torn Bible and a Batman comic book. I peeked in the dank bathroom: smelly, leaky faucet, rust stains. A thin towel, underwear, and spent cardboard toilet paper rolls on the curling vinyl floor. No medicine cabinet, no shower curtain, no place to hang a towel.

"Damn it! How can you live like this?"

When Pat called during the summer he sounded afraid. He had been kicked out of a Nob Hill motel and didn't have money for a new place. He was no longer welcome at Mesa House, a group home where he had lived for many years. The community mental health organization that ran Mesa House had assigned him a caseworker, managed his money, and allowed him to pick up his meds every day, but they had banned him from its residential program for breaking rules: no smoking in rooms, no unauthorized guests, and mandatory attendance at demeaning classes devoted to topics such as balancing a checkbook and accessing the bus system.

I felt strangely honored by his call and wanted to reward him. He came to me instead of our mom or one of our seven brothers and sisters. And yet I knew he was playing me off the others to get the best deal.

“What happened to the money you had at the beginning of the month?” I asked, referring to his Supplemental Security Income check, money that goes towards his \$425 rent.

“Vicky must have ripped me off. She was born without the knowledge of good and evil. She has no conscience. I think she swiped everything I had.”

Vicky is his imaginary wife.

“Let me see how much I can send,” I said. I was not rolling in dough.

“Well, hurry! I’m in a tight situation. I wish you were making good money like Tiger Woods,” he said.

After we hung up, I emailed Nancy, our sister who collects the sibling contributions we send to Pat every month. We each are supposed to pitch in \$20. I don’t always get my check in the mail.

“His case manager said there was no reason that Pat couldn’t take better care of himself!” Nancy wrote. “You’ll be sorry if you bail him out. It is his choice to live like he does. We shouldn’t be enablers! He is capable of doing laundry and cleaning his apartment. He’s living in filth and it makes him upset and he has to make a decision to do something about it.”

I mailed him fifty bucks.

Outside the laundromat, Pat couches his lack of initiative in the cloak of being unpretentious and non-materialistic.

“I’m not into appearances,” Pat says. “All I need is Coke and cigarettes.”

“That’s bullshit! When you were kicked out of your old place and you called me you were desperate. You wanted money and a place to live.”

“Yeah. Well. I need to get some more smokes,” he says, fingering his crumpled pack. “I’m down to two.”

“What kind of life is this? Is what you are doing really living?” He ignores my questions and paces the parking lot. He draws his last puff and flicks his cigarette into the street. “Do you want to just die?” I ask.

He narrows his hazel eyes, obviously irritated. “Who the hell are you to tell me how to live?”

We are two of nine children from Cincinnati, Ohio. Pat is the oldest. Our parents, June and big Pat, raised us Catholic, more or less. Dad was a local radio personality and an entertaining storyteller. They say he never knew a stranger. He also was a drunk. He physically and emotionally abused Mom. Twice she went to court to have a judge order him confined to mental hospitals. He was diagnosed with manic depression.

Little Pat had the best seat in the house to watch our parents split and the family break apart. He must have been around 12 years old when this all came down. He felt responsible for the needs of eight younger brothers and sisters who craved one of two things: either to be left alone or given attention. I checked the second box. I idolized Pat. He was smart and funny and courageous and handsome, and he seemed to care more about me than just about anyone else. A few times I sat on his lap and he read about Isaac and Esau and Samson and other characters from our illustrated book of Bible stories. He taught me about box scores and how to catch a baseball and once took me on a date with Linda, his girlfriend, to a drive-in movie theater. We watched a science-fiction show, *Fantastic Voyage*, about a medical team miniaturized to destroy a blood clot in the brain of a brilliant scientist.

In the fall of 1970, Pat left for Ohio University, earned great grades, and planned a career in law or urban planning. Two years later he was shattered after suffering a mental breakdown, a cacophony of voices drumming inside his head. The family lore goes he was on a mountain in Arizona, took some LSD, and talked to God. A rolling thunder followed him everywhere after that. In time, the doctors diagnosed him with schizoaffective bipolar disorder. There were suicide attempts, arrests for minor offenses, and a felony for supposedly trying to kidnap a boy at the Cincinnati Zoo. He was found not guilty by reason of insanity. He conjured up his own family: a wife named Vicky and children including a daughter named Music. In 1987, he escaped from Cincinnati's insane asylum, Longview Hospital, hightailed it west, and wound up in Albuquerque. Meanwhile, the rest of us scattered like marbles across the floor. I landed in Texas. I rarely visited but sometimes mailed a card for Christmas or his birthday. He called collect, usually when he needed money. On good days he was coherent and buzzed happily with life. But mostly I couldn't follow what he said. Over the years I paid him no mind. I left him for dead.

After a couple hours doing laundry, we load up the car and climb in. "I'd like to go to a meeting," I say, picking up the Albuquerque Alcoholics Anonymous schedule from the floorboard. Earlier, I had found it online and printed it out. There were several meetings nearby, including one starting at noon at the Desert Club, only a few blocks away. "You want me to drop you off at the motel?"

"I go to AA meetings, too," Pat says.

"Really? I didn't know that." The thought of Pat having a drinking problem never entered my mind. "Well, let's get on over there."

I'm a little excited, to tell the truth. Sharing an AA meeting could be a good thing. I've been sober some ten years now, and I begin to picture us as brothers-in-arms, recovering from the family disease of alcoholism. We cruise a deserted street looking for the address for the Desert Club when I spot two men shooting the breeze outside a square adobe building.

A faded sign above the door shows a triangle inside a circle, the universal symbol for AA. We get out and as we approach the door Pat touches his forehead and immediately grabs my arm as if he forgot something.

"Shit, I forgot I was kicked out of this place. I think I'm banned."

"What for?"

Pat shrugs.

He probably freaked out some AA fundamentalists, the old guard who don't cotton to crackbrains dropping in and disrupting things and raving about lunatic stuff. This isn't a mental health ward or a homeless shelter. We're here to talk about how drunks stay sober.

"I bet you no one will say anything."

We find the pot and pour coffee into Styrofoam cups, enter a large meeting room, and take seats in metal chairs at folding tables arranged in a square. There are only six or seven other sad sacks here with nothing better to do on Christmas. We read the 12 steps and recite the serenity prayer. The usual stuff. The guy who leads wants to talk about powerlessness. Pat cradles his cup. A few hands go up.

"I was always looking for something better. Nothing was good enough," says a young man wearing a gray hoodie and a scruffy beard. He seems in fresh wonderment about escaping whatever sinking ship he was on and clawing onto this little dinghy. Leaning forward, he rests his elbows on his knees, clasps his hands, and speaks to the floor. "I never was comfortable just being in the present moment." He looks up and catches my eye. "Drinking was my way to escape. And it became my God."

I lose my train of thought as Pat gets up and starts wandering the room. What is he going to do? He has all my focus. He walks out and I hear the front door open and shut.

After the meeting, I find him shuffling around on the porch, carefully smoking a cracked cigarette.

What now?

Hanging out in his hovel is out of the question. I had earlier spotted a trail leading to the foothills of Sandia Peak. "How about we take a little hike?"

"Nah, I don't wanna," he mumbles.

"Come on. I don't want to go alone. It'll do you some good."

"Go ahead. You can drop me off at my place."

"But I want to spend time with you."

I continue to drive and we turn on Central, a seedy section of old Route 66 that bisects the city. He looks out the passenger window. We pass Pussycat Video and the Leather Shoppe, which advertises fantasy leather and sexy lingerie. I notice a sign for a tattoo parlor named Pain is Living in the Moment. Pat picks a fleck of tobacco from his tongue.

"I'll buy you a carton of cigarettes if you go."

The bribe works.

We drive to the interstate, where I remember seeing a discount tobacco outlet. I buy a carton of American Spirit and as we walk back to the car he tears open the cardboard box and forces a pack out of a small opening. He lights up as we hit the highway to go to the trailhead.

We make our way up a crushed granite path. It's heavenly. Sage bushes, yucca, and cactus line our way and the towering peak beckons.

Pat is a lumbering creature.

"How about we make it to that ridge?" I ask, pointing to where the trail begins a steep incline.

After about five minutes of irritatingly slow walking, he stops. He is out of breath. He leans on a boulder.

"Go ahead," he says in a defiant tone, waving me off. "I'm not going any further."

I walk on for about ten minutes, turn around, and find him looking toward the horizon, smoking an American Spirit.

Back at his motel room, he opens Christmas gifts from Mom and our sisters, flinging wrapping paper to the floor. Among the presents: an electric toothbrush. Pat's teeth were yanked out years ago, and he usually goes without his dentures. He always complains they hurt.

"What happened to your dentures?"

"I can't find them."

**T**he previous day, I won the battle to go to a barber to cut his hair and trim his beard. He sat in a high chair and a wide-eyed stylist started clipping. After finishing the job, she pulled the white sheet from around his shoulders as if performing a magic trick. "I should have taken before and after pictures," she said, smiling and looking to me for approval.

Pat's worn 50-year-old face looked puffy and his neck oddly bright white from lack of exposure to the sun. He gazed in a mirror, then looked away and walked out. In the car, he said he looked heavier without his long beard.

We drove to a Walmart and loaded up on three pairs of pants, five shirts, socks, boxer shorts, and some boots. He brought me a pair of dress slacks. "They don't cost much more than those," he said, pointing a yellowed finger at the jeans and work pants I had been putting in our cart. We purchased a pair. He appreciates high-quality things.

I bought a hamper, a jumbo-size box of laundry detergent, and a mesh laundry bag so he would have a way to haul his clothes on a bus to the laundromat after I'd gone. I also picked up a metal hook and, when we returned, attached it to the inside of his bathroom door and hung up the dirty clothes bag. This was all part of my plan to make sure he had places to put his stuff. Clearly if only he had these magic places he would live in a clean, orderly, and tidy world.

I folded his new duds and placed what would fit into the narrow dresser drawers, clearing a space on top for the rest. I ran over to the office and retrieved a broom and filled plastic bags with garbage. Pat wore a path on the carpet and smoked.

"Come on. Can you at least hold the dust pan while I sweep?"

Later, Pat napped and I returned to Walmart and bought a chest of drawers, a shower caddy, hangers, and an adjustable rod to hang things in the closet. And nail clippers. His long curling fingernails sickened me.

**O**n Christmas evening, we go to a restaurant in Old Town.

“Can I have a steak?” Pat asks.

“Sure, whatever you want.”

Our plates arrive and we dig in. The steak was a mistake. He fills his cheeks and works the meat with his gums. Tired of working the cud, he opens his mouth and drops pieces of ribeye into his hand and puts a pile on the edge of the table.

Afterwards, we drive up the mountain and the city below becomes a grid outlined by lights. A fresh snow left a silent white world halfway up. The tires make tracks on a two-lane road carved into rock as if by a giant corkscrew.

“Pat, can I ask you something? What happened back when you had your break?” I had never asked him about it.

“I was a sophomore in college. It was the best time,” Pat says. “I had friends all over and I was dating Linda. There was always something to do. And I met my good friend Rick Driscoll.”

Linda was sweet and soft-spoken and had long, straight, shiny brown hair. I remembered Rick, a black-skinned hipster with a towering Afro.

“That summer I mostly hung out with Linda and worked at the zoo,” he says. “Then that fall I didn’t go back to school. Rick and I took a trip to Montreal in my car. Remember that Impala convertible I had? It got strange. I was in the backseat of the car and Rick was driving. I was reading the Bible and on the radio was ‘it’s going to be a bright, bright sunshiny day.’ I got born again while I was reading the 17th chapter of John.”

I picture him as a wide-eyed 20-year-old spread across the backseat, focused on the words lining the pages of a dog-eared Bible.

“There wasn’t any doubt: I was really one with God and going to heaven,” he says. “When we got to Montreal I smoked more weed—I kind of thought at the time that marijuana got me closer to God. I had some friends in Arizona, so we decided to drive there. I was thinking of joining Children of God,” he says.

“Wasn’t that was a cult?”

“Yeah. Jon and Michelle discouraged it,” he says, speaking of our next oldest siblings. “Jon called me an idiot. Said I ran hot or cold with this religious crap. Michelle wasn’t any help. She was an atheist even then. In Arizona, I started to hear voices.”

“Like what kind of voices?”

“Sometimes it was screaming. ‘You’re evil and damned, a sinner,’ ” he said, his voice trailing off.

Late one night I heard the ominous talk around the picnic table in our kitchen. Pat was in trouble and Mom was taking a red-eye flight to Tucson to pick him up. The next evening, Mom and Dad pulled into the driveway in separate cars. In the yellow glow of our back porch light, we filed down the back steps to check him out, with Madeline, the fourth-oldest, leading the way, followed by the rest of us banshees: Nancy, Bob, me, Barbara, and Denise. Not home were Jon, the second-born, who was in the Navy, and Michelle, on a high-school field trip to Washington, D.C., after she won an essay contest.

Pat emerged from a car in slow motion. He was a big-eyed, shell-shocked, shuffling, fragile thing.

“What’s wrong?” Madeline asked, distraught.

“Shush! Not now,” Mom said, a determined look in her eye, holding Pat’s arm. She helped him up the steps as if they were trudging through waist-deep water. We led him upstairs and he splashed down on a bed.

We learned that Pat raised such a ruckus on the way back from the airport that Mom had to pull over on the shoulder of the highway. He insisted on riding with Dad the rest of the way. He didn’t want to take sides. Will he be okay? we asked. Dad speculated. He understood mental illness firsthand and I knew that every day he took some pill to control his lurking mania. But the explanations didn’t make sense. So Pat flipped out; will he sleep it off? Mom, a cigarette dangling from her lips, made herself busy in the kitchen. Then Dad drove off into the darkness.

In the morning, Pat sat on our orange-and-green plaid couch and stared into space. He was not there.

I continue to drive, taking in Pat’s words. Stars fill the black sky. He is telling a lucid story. He is the one with the severe brain disorder, but I’m the one who is clueless about his disease. On visiting days during his spells in mental hospitals we played Ping-Pong, and in the spring of 1982, just before he was imprisoned, we shared an efficiency in inner Cincinnati, a block from The Hole, in a neighborhood dominated by boarded tenement buildings and petty criminals and rummies, plus occasional sightseers looking for the birthplace of William Howard Taft.

“You stared into the mirror for hours at a time,” I say, recalling the days after he came back from Arizona. “One time you locked yourself in the bathroom and we had to bust the door open and stop you from slitting your wrists. Another time you were on the roof and threatening to jump off.”

“I remember hearing you cry,” he says. “You were crying in the next room and I heard you as I lay on my bed. ‘What happened to Pat? What’s wrong with Pat?’ ”

I squeeze his shoulder. The road to the top of the snowy mountain is blocked by a barricade. A sheriff's deputy opens his car door and gestures for us to go back. I make a U-turn and we descend.

The next day, Pat calls my room a little after ten o'clock. He must be using the De Anza office phone.

"I'm hungry. You better hurry up if you are going to have time to do things before your flight leaves."

He sounds lively.

I check out of my hotel and drive over. The first thing I notice is that his bed is made and has a new bedspread.

"I called the office and got a new one. They're going to vacuum the floor later."

Before eating, we drive to Mesa House for his morning dose of medications.

Pat wanders the rec room and gulps his pills with water from a paper cup, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, and leans close to the TV. *Wheel of Fortune* is on. Three or four others sit on sagging couches. A guy with Coke-bottle glasses held together with masking tape stares at me. A bald man with an oddly shaped head talks about seeing a horse on a highway chasing a farmer on a tractor. A woman in a baby blue tufted bathrobe sleeps with her mouth open.

Looking over a sheet of paper on a clipboard, I pull out my notebook and write down the meds he is taking: Depakote, Zoloft, Levothroid, Risperdal, Zyprexa, Paxil, and Lipitor. Later I look on the Internet to learn about the drugs I'm unfamiliar with. They manage manic episodes, depression, thyroid problems, and symptoms of schizophrenia, anxiety, and high cholesterol.

He is a walking chemistry lab. The medicines gut him out and keep him under wraps. They are imposed to provide some semblance of peace, but the tradeoff is the amputation of his spirit.

"How does Pat compare with your other clients?" I quietly ask the woman doling out pills on a plastic cafeteria tray from behind a counter. "I mean, the number of pills he takes, compared with others with schizophrenia or schizoaffective disorder?"

"It's not unusual. Some take 12 a day," she says matter-of-factly.

For breakfast Pat suggests the Hurricane Diner, a restaurant that he nixed previously because it was smoke-free and he couldn't smoke inside. This is a gift.

As soon as we get in the car he turns to me and says he is willing to sign the paperwork so his case manager can talk with me about his condition. He has steadfastly refused to discuss anything substantive about Pat's case, maintaining that confidentiality laws required Pat to first sign the authorization form. "But it's only for you," Pat says. "Don't tell Jon."

"Okay, okay," I say, suspecting there isn't anything to this. He probably resented something Jon told him and it would pass.

Just as we were about to walk in, Pat stops and looks at me with worried eyes.

“What’s the matter?”

“I just remembered. I was kicked out of this place.”

“When?”

“I dunno. A while ago.”

“Come on. They won’t even recognize you without your big ol’ beard.”

Inside, a customer sitting on a stool at the counter notices Pat. “I like how you look,” she says cheerfully. She probably has seen him shambling around town. Crazies have a way of sticking out. Pat giggles and we sit down at a table. He does look pretty sharp. Groomed hair, trimmed beard, new shirt, pants, and boots. We order pancakes, bacon, and coffee.

“And I wanna large Coke,” Pat tells the waitress. “I had a dream last night,” he tells me. “I begged on Central Avenue and made \$750. I thought I was a successful businessman.”

The waitress brings the drinks and he slumps down to level his mouth with the top of his glass to slurp his Coke.

“I do sometimes,” he says.

“What?”

“Beg.”

He mentions going back to college.

“How about first making your life more manageable?” I say. “Get a part-time job and maybe save money to move into an apartment someday? In six months or a year from now you could get a place of your own. I’ll come back and help you move. Promise.”

Pat gums his bacon.

“And you need another set of false teeth.”

“False teeth hurt.”

“And a pair of eyeglasses. How can you see walking around?”

“I don’t need glasses. I see good enough. See what I want to see.”

“Can you read that sign over there?” I ask, pointing to “No Separate Checks” on the wall across the room. I’m a nag.

“Stop talking,” Pat says.

He bumps chairs with a white-bearded patron at the next table and nearly spills the man’s coffee. “I started back to college eight times but never could finish,” Pat tells the stranger, who calmly takes in Pat. “You gonna eat that biscuit?” Pat asks, pointing to the neglected item on a small plate.

“Good morning,” I say, interrupting. “We’re brothers and I’m up from Texas for a visit.” I smile disarmingly.

He tells us his name is Rex and he retired and moved up here not long ago from Waco, Texas. We talk for about 15 minutes and I size up Rex. He is mid-60s, neighborly, playful, and even informative: did we know that Waco was once *Hueco*? “Spelled H-u-e-c-o,” he says with pink cheeks and a bright smile. He is Santa. Might he be willing to check on Pat after I return to Texas? My flight departs in a couple hours and I worry about keeping in touch after I get home. It usually takes a week or more to reach Pat because he doesn’t have a phone and you have to leave a message with his case manager. I had discarded the idea of buying him a cell phone. He’d lose it.

Before I can ask for Rex’s phone number, he excuses himself and rises with check in hand. He pays up and takes off.

Then it hits me.

“What if you got an email account? I could set one up for you.”

I’m a genius. Pat could keep in touch by using one of the computers at the public library or at Mesa House, where they have a desktop machine for clients to access email and search for jobs.

“I can’t afford that,” Pat says.

“It’s free. We can get you a free email account.”

“Nah. I don’t need that.”

“If you go back to school you need to learn how to use email. It’s how they do things these days. Every student has one.”

“Email she-bee-ba-dee-mail.”

“Come on. You need one.”

He pauses. “Sometimes they do ask me for my email,” he says. “I always say I don’t have one.”

“See. You could use it.”

“I don’t know what one is for.”

I’m all pumped up as we head to a copy center across the street from the University of New Mexico campus. I rent a computer for an hour, open up Yahoo.com, and then switch seats with Pat, wanting him to learn firsthand. He doesn’t know what to do with the mouse. He claws the plastic oval, his fingers failing to find the buttons on its side. I can’t fathom someone not knowing how to hold a computer mouse, like someone not knowing how to button a shirt. His gnarled, nicotine-stained hands have entropy, rigid things that can only perform select functions: holding cigarettes, aluminum soda cans, cups, and plastic forks, or yanking on his pants, lighting matches, scratching his balls. I imagine it’d been years since his hands gripped the wheel of a car, felt the cool sheets on a freshly made bed, held a newborn child, petted a family dog, touched a woman’s breast.

“Hold your hand to conform to the mouse,” I say, placing his mitt on top of it.

“Okay, good. Now move your cursor here,” pointing to a place on the screen to click to fill in his personal information.

“What’s a cursor?” he asks.

His eyes dart, not focusing on the blinking square. I press a button to move the cursor. He needs a username and a password. I explain what they are and we find that patboisseau is already taken, so he chooses fpboisseau: “FP” for his initials, Fitz Patrick. We use 072652 as his password, the digits of his birthdate. He hunts and pecks letters and numbers to fill fields. I introduce him to the tab key. But the exercise is excruciating and I can’t take it anymore. We switch places and I finish setting up his account. Before we go I snap a photo of him sitting in an office chair next to a monitor. It seems historic: his first email account. He smirks a little. I drop him off at his motel and leave him with the newspaper employment classifieds. I promise to return and I drive to the airport.

A few days later, I send Pat an email and ask him to write me back. I don’t want him to forget his new computer skills. Weeks go by. Not a word. It was a pointless exercise. He is as likely to log on to a computer as he is to drop and give me 40 push-ups.

Then one afternoon I receive a message from fpboisseau:

**C**harles

Thank you the best christmas present I’ve gotten in a long while. Seeing you I’ve heard from the marvel underground that the boy wonder is fighting all alone. Why don’t you pick up an issue of that comic this month. Batman is expected to return with or without any comic book help. Goodbye your entange brother patrick.

**T**he email is time-stamped 12:38 P.M., February 16, 2003. It’s the only one he ever sent.