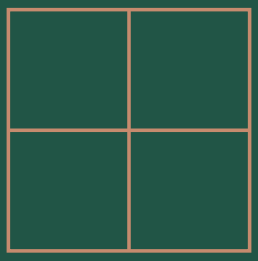

The Relationship Expert

Joshua Seigal

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Joshua Seigal is best known as a children's author and performer. He has published several volumes of poetry with publishers such as Bloomsbury and HarperCollins, and has been the recipient of the Laugh Out Loud Book Award and the People's Book Prize. Joshua's work for a 'grown up' audience has featured in publications such as *Poetry Wales* and *Dust Magazine*, and, of course, is showcased in the pamphlet you are currently reading.

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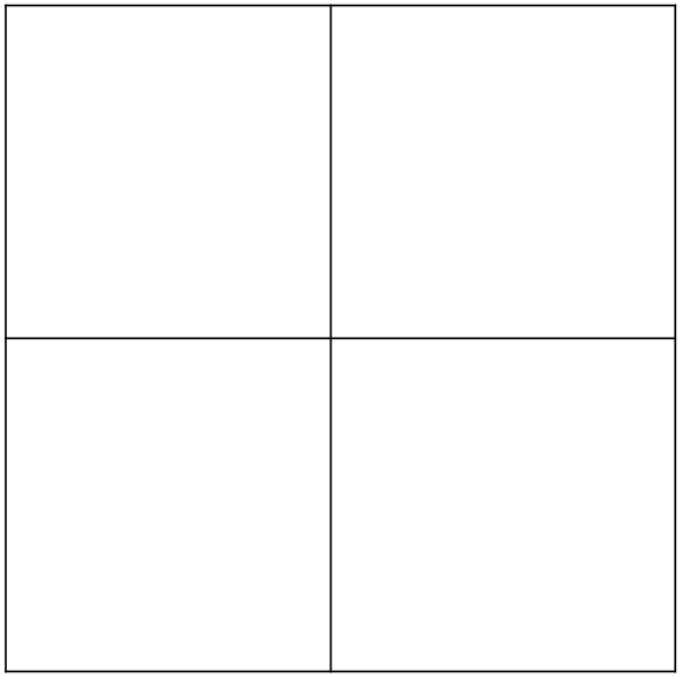
For Carrie, and Us



The Hope

In my hands, I'm holding
this unbearably heavy ball of hope.
Watch me fold under its gravity.

Come, help heft this globe
of hope for me, that I might rest
awhile, and replenish my strength.

Here We All Are

My great-grandfather came over from Odessa
packed into a box in the hold of a ship,
with nothing but a hole through which to breathe.

He had a wife he hated, who hated him,
and they set up a shop in the valleys of South Wales.
Above it, they slept in separate rooms.

When he laughed he made *lokshen* come out of his nose.
His wife had fled the Nazis just before the war,
but her polio meant she could never catch my grandpa

or Aunty Helen when they were naughty.
Digging one day in the family archives, my dad
discovered that my great-grandfather and his wife

were also uncle and niece. Grandpa said that
should this ever get out, he'd never speak to my dad again.
He bore his shame silently, like a lump in the throat

that could not be got rid of. He'd take tots of vodka
when he thought we weren't watching,
and although he claimed not to believe in God

he prayed fervently every night, just in case.
All the books on his shelves were about Hitler
or the Jews, and one time he swore he saw a ghost.

And like a ship the dread traverses generations,
criss-crossing the strata back and forth, from
my sister refusing to go to school to me huddled tight

in the doctor's room; from my mum with a husband
who doesn't understand to my brother
who vanished across the world. Here I am

in a box of my own. Here we all are, trying to breathe,
packed tight together, reaching through holes
as our ghost ship lurches on endless seas.

And So I Write

the word LOVE in my diary, to remind myself
of the underpinning of all the things I do.
I craft the letters with a ruler,

taking great pains to ensure that everything
is smooth, straight, in order. I decorate the word
with a border and I colour it all in, in a way

I haven't done since primary school.
I really want this word to stand out – LOVE.
The unassailable axiom; the uncaused cause;

that than which nothing greater can be conceived.
Until I realise that the letters aren't quite even.
Some of the lines are thicker than others

and if you squint a bit you can see
a slight smudge on the page. The letter O
seems sort of squished, and although the word

is still, recognisably, LOVE, it looks somewhat
misformed, somehow. And so I carry now
this buckled LOVE everywhere I go –

in my diary, tucked tight in my rucksack –
and this imperfection is part of everything I do,
a bold, flawed LOVE on the pages of my days.

Football on the Radio

There he is, my dad, listening to the radio
at the kitchen table. No internet back then,
no mobile phones – I'm lying in my bed

and he's downstairs following the match,
adjusting the aerial to get the right signal,
moving in and out through static and crackle.

Take it in: he's pounding his fists, a whoop
and a clap when we score, a colourful curse
when the run of play doesn't go our way.

And there I am, six years old, downstairs now
on a school night, sitting on his knee,
listening to the match on that little box

and I can't quite work out what's going on
but here we are, and he holds me tight, and
we're winning, we're winning, we're winning.

Second Birthday

For his second birthday we made a tower
on the living room floor, for him to knock over.
My sister, my mum and I, working together,

assembled the building from colourful blocks.
In the morning – the idea went – he would
be brought downstairs, would see the structure

and would rush ahead to push it down.
There he is now, two years old, gleefully shoving
over our wooden tower in the living room

on the morning of his second birthday,
the family all cheering, singing, congratulating.
What could we have known back then

of the towers he would knock down since?
And how could we have comprehended that
no cement would make the slightest difference?

My Grandma During the Cuban Missile Crisis

Kennedy is on the radio but she
has teddies to find and bottoms to wipe.
Only twenty-four, she has three kids

already, all under five,
and a husband working all hours
of the day and night. What concern

has she for Armageddon? No time
to dwell, with that pile of laundry
at the foot of the stairs. A division of labour –

that's what this is. Let others sort
the planet out; she has teeth to clean,
stories to read, meals to prepare.

For what is the world for, if not
for love? And where is love
if not within these four little walls?

Digging Revisited

'Between my finger and my thumb
The squat pen rests.
I'll dig with it.' – Seamus Heaney

You see, I tried this and it doesn't work.
The effort it takes to make an adequate hole
just isn't worth it. It did diddly squat.

I got mud under my fingernails
and into the clicking mechanism of the biro.
The soil clogged it up.

What's more, the plants remain unplanted.
I spent all day digging with this stupid pen
and now the garden's just a mess.

Let's do things properly. Let's get to work.
Give me that spade.
I'll write a poem with it.

Flowers

Someone should probably tell the kid
to stop picking those flowers. Someone
should probably tell him that they were

planted with a loving hand, in this little space,
for everyone to enjoy. I don't know where
his parents are. It's just me on the bench

and him by the flowerbed with a bunch
of bluebells in his mitts. There he goes,
riffling through the foliage, looking for more.

His glasses are held onto his head with one
of those little straps, and I don't think I've ever
seen a smile so wide. Someone should

tell this kid to stop picking the flowers.
And there's me thinking: *go ahead, my man –*
gather the colour while you can...

The Letter

A brown envelope arrived through my
door today. Inside was a letter informing me
I haven't been paying my air bill. I'd been

breathing oxygen for ages, apparently, and
not once had I coughed up for it. The letter said
I now owed several million quid. There was a number

to call in case of emergency, but I couldn't get
through to a living person – just a voice telling me
to press 6 three times for all other enquiries.

But I don't have several million quid,
I protested to myself, my heart nearly thumping
its way out of my chest. *Deep breaths*, I thought.

Deep breaths. I took the letter out into the street.
The trees, with their sweet sweet leaves, smirked
at me. I gave a gulp, felt my insides atrophy.

Maybe This Country

I'm on the tube at night, notebook open
in front of me, absent-mindedly doodling,
when I notice a little girl sitting next to me,

staring right up into my face. She can't be more
than three or four. Her mum, in a headscarf, sits
opposite me. This girl keeps on staring at me

so I turn to a fresh page in my notebook
and draw a little cat, nothing too complicated,
just a pair of circles with some ears, whiskers

and a tail. I tear out the page and hand it
to the girl, who laughs and says *miaow miaow*.
The mum whispers thank you in a foreign tongue

and I like to imagine this girl and her mum
with the cat, as they think, perhaps, in a tiny way,
that maybe this country is not all bad.

The Quotation

'You never know how strong you are
until being strong is your only choice.' – Bob Marley

He didn't actually say it.
I was looking online for the context
and ChatGPT told me the quotation

was commonly misattributed to Bob Marley.
There is no record of him ever
having written or uttered those words

in any format at all.
Those 'inspirational' Instagram posts
were mere simulacra of sentiment –

nothing more than bogus, a sham.
No one knows where the quote came from.
Turns out, Bob was not guiding me

through some of my own darkest moments.
He wasn't holding his hand out to me,
telling me *no cry*.

It was all just empty words.
But then again, words are all I have,
as Boyzone famously said.

The Q&A

Good question. I mainly write poems because it's *fun*.
I've always loved words, and I kind of think poetry is
a bit like playing with words – words are the Lego bricks

and you make models out of them. Those are the poems.
And poetry also gives me the chance to perform,
and to talk to lovely, happy, smiley people such as *you*.

That really gives me a buzz, and makes me feel proud.
And poems tend to be quite short, which suits my attention span.
With a poem you can get a tangible sense of achievement

in a relatively short space of time. It's a good word – *tangible*.
I did say I love words; why not look that one up? Why did I
become a poet? It's a good question, thank you for asking it.

Once everyone leaves assembly, I'll expand on my answer.
It's also because I went to school bang in the heart of the
City of London, and every day I'd pass bankers and lawyers

on their way to work in big shiny buildings, and something
about it made me vow I'd never become like one of them.
Parents and grandparents taught me there was little choice

but somehow deep inside I knew I'd rather die. Maybe
it's also because I tell myself a child's laughter is the purest sign
that my parents ain't laughing but I'm doing *just fine*...

These are some of the reasons I do what I do.
These are some of the reasons I don't do what I can't do.
Love and fear, they inhere in the same chamber of the heart.

Leave the Baby to Cry

The thing is, if you leave the baby to cry
the baby will never stop crying. Sure,
you will eventually hear a silence,

and at some point the baby will fall asleep,
but the crying never really stops.
The baby grows up, goes to school and gets

a job, all the while crying in the deep recesses
of its brain. The baby will learn to stifle the tears
and muffle the pain, yes, but the crying

will never truly go away. Hey – why not
pick up the baby now, the one you've left to cry
for so long it's hurt the both of you? Tell the baby

it's OK, it's OK, those dusty parenting books,
they made a mistake – you don't need to cry
forever. You don't need to cry forever.

The Instructions

have all been written down, but still
she has trouble working the TV. She calls
me up to say the device has turned itself off

again, and could I come over and turn it
back on? *Just look at the notes Nana*,
I say. *I wrote the instructions down for you*.

It's a similar story with the microwave,
with its buttons seemingly designed to
perplex her. The internet is a true enigma.

I just don't know how to manage, now
that he's gone. The place is just so big,
so empty. And the bills, she says. *Michael*

used to sort the bills – now I don't know
what to do. I try to assure her that all is OK,
all is in order, the electricity won't run out,

the hot water won't suddenly go cold.
She hunches into herself. Tired now. Old.
She reuses a tea bag to make a weak tea.

Grandpa David

He agrees to meet on Hampstead Heath –
a rainy Tuesday, the branches bare.
He unfurls his umbrella for us to share.

I become aware of the hip flask in his pocket,
the packet of fags lying close to his breast.
As we synchronise steps, he tells me

it wasn't easy. None of it was easy –
letting his fiancée's family believe he had
a degree; getting up every morning

and donning a suit, to pretend to my grandma
that he had a job. It wasn't easy walking
the streets every day until the sun

went down, then returning to a woman
who he knew didn't love him anyway.
Can you understand why I drink now?

Can you understand why I smoke?
Look, I'm sorry, he says – *I'm touched that*
your middle name is David. And I'm sorry

I died before you were born. Shaking
rain from brolly, taking fag from mouth,
we part ways by the gates at Kenwood House,

and glancing back – I couldn't swear
but I think – he reaches for the hip flask
to have just the one more drink.

The Divorce

Throughout it all, I kept wondering how
she did it. The recalcitrant husband,
the avaricious lawyers – how did she

hold it all together? The full-time job,
the two kids to bring up – how did she
keep the plates spinning? I always imagined

the kids would be the worst of it; the need
to buttress two more lives against the weight
of all hers faced – a back breaking

harsh necessity. That was until I saw her
with them both in the restaurant, the ease
and art with which the light was flowing.

The kids are not the things that break
our backs – they are the only things,
throughout it all, that keep us going.

Eating Swans

I told her that the Queen is the only
person in the country allowed to eat
a swan. She looks up at me quizzically

and asks why anyone would want
to eat a swan. The Queen can do
whatever she likes, I reply – she's the Queen.

So does that mean the Queen *actually* eats
swans? she asks. I've no idea, I say –
it's just that she's allowed to, if she wants.

So why can't I eat a swan? she asks.
Would you want to eat a swan? I reply.
No, she says, but I want to be *allowed* to eat

a swan. I tell her that she is my queen, and for
the rest of my life I will fight for her right
to eat a swan. It's not fair, in this day and age,

that just one privileged person, through a mere
accident of birth, is allowed to eat swans
whilst others are not. I will move mountains

to ensure that she, my niece, my queen, grows up
in a world where she can eat a swan, a world
where swan-flesh is democratised. THERE WILL BE

NO MORE BARRIERS TO THIS DELICACY!!
Or maybe, she says, the Queen shouldn't be
allowed to eat swans. Maybe *no one* should

be allowed to eat swans.
I think you've got a point, I say,
whilst sharpening my carving knife.

The Science

Then the ROCD latched onto percentages,
correlations, success rates. I began to think
of compatibility as something *out there*, to be

discovered. I looked up the tests they say
they have, found Wilson and Eysenck –
all of that crap. Did we have what it takes?

Are we doing it right? What does it say
in the books? What does it say online?
A million hotshots with a million bright ideas –

the stupid ones die off; the fittest survive.
Am I stupid? What did Finkel write?
Is this an equation, and have we been cracked?

Tenacious

I told you that ‘tenacious’ meant tough.
A few days later we went out to eat
and you described your steak as *tenacious*.

That didn’t sound quite right – a person
can be tenacious, but an inanimate slab of flesh,
surely, can’t. I spent the rest of the meal

absorbed in this. Then as we held hands
on the way back, you told me about everything;
about what happened and what he did.

I felt your hand in mine, and knew
that you were still alive. You can call
a piece of meat tenacious if you want.

Damn it, you can do whatever you like.
You can recreate the very foundations of Being.
If you want to call your steak tenacious,

then who am I to object?
And if I want to worship you as a god
then how, I pray, could that be wrong?

Victories

So you got up and fed the cat. That's something.
You hauled one leg, then the other, out of your
pyjama bottoms, and you fought doggedly across

the rugged terrain of the landing. You wielded
your toothbrush like a club. You stood under
the shower's strafe for as long as it took

to deter the enemies under your skin, if just
for a while. You got yourself dressed: trousers,
T-shirt, socks – the kit. You sat for a bit then went

to the shops for milk and fruit, whatever your tired
gut could take. You wrote. That's something.
Even read a bit too. You talked with your wife –

only half hearing through the hounding static,
but you talked nonetheless. You watched
some show about the Vikings. That's something.

That's something. And when the day was done
you dropped heavily into bed, your mind bulging
with a thousand tiny battles, a thousand mini victories.

The Form

She told me to sign the form
but the name just wouldn't
come out. From the tip of my pen

my own name simply refused
to be written. I kept wondering
what the hell was wrong with me,

asked for more paper, tried
again and again, but the letters
wouldn't form the correct structure.

I wrote JOHN
instead of JOSHUA.
John is my dad's name.

My dad's. Not mine.
She gave me new paper.
Said I still had time.

Otter

My mum wants to know why I've never
written a poem about her. She seems
upset. *Is it because all I've handed down*

to you is anxiety? she asks. *No,*
I reply, *you were a wonderful mum*. I think
back to the time in the old house when we

were little, when she set up a little table
in the garden, and she covered the table with
newspaper, and gave us paint and paper

to play with. She didn't have to do this.
I'm painting an otter, I said, even though
the splodge on the page was nothing

resembling an otter. *It's the best otter*
I've ever seen, my mum replied. And she put it
on the fridge, and it stayed there for years,

and she passed on so much more to me
than just anxiety – a mess can be
an otter; a wounded leopard, love.

The Bungalow

I'm twelve years old, playing Super Mario on the N64.
You're seven, in a bungalow half way across the country,
your step-grandfather doing bad things to you.

Sixteen years later we will meet. We will forge a door
and step into marriage. Our roots will intertwine
and I'll trace them back to those times, to the bungalow,

where I wasn't there for you. I wasn't there
to help you, to support you, to fight for you.
I was no less a child than you were, of course, but still –

I wasn't there. How could I have been there?
Let me hold you now, hold the child you once were.
Let me bear it with you. Let me shoulder some of the weight.

The Relationship Expert

now lies prostrate on our kitchen floor.
That PhD from Penn or wherever was not

so penetrating when faced with the bat, was it?
I dealt the blows and you drew the blinds.

It took both our strength to haul the body
to the bathroom. Bones can be tough to break –

I gave them a crack whilst you held the
bin liner open, tying the knot in the way

I've come to know. And after it was all over,
we both scrubbed the place clean with

disinfectant. You called the dude's lab,
said he wouldn't be in tomorrow; I drove us

into the night to dispose of the remains.
I suppose that was the tough bit, the two of us

fumbling our way through the dark, but you
are my wife, I love you, and all else is bullshit.

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‘Here We All Are’ – previously published in *Poetry Wales*

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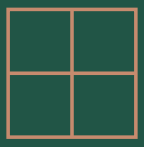

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I LOVE LOVE LOVE your collection. So witty and yet so deep too. I love the surreality of some of the poems and the variety but also the cohesion which I know is not an easy trick to pull off.

— CAROLE BROMLEY

•

What you've written is SO BEAUTIFUL!

— SHERYL PAUL

•

Reading through your poems was a tremendous experience. It was amazing how often the last lines of a poem were like a sudden punch. All of it was powerful and deep.

— ARNOLD ZUBOFF

◆

THE RELATIONSHIP EXPERT

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