# The Worlds We Leave Behind

## Books by A.F. Harrold

*The Imaginary*
Illustrated by Emily Gravett

*The Afterwards*
Illustrated by Emily Gravett

*The Song from Somewhere Else*
Illustrated by Levi Pinfold

*The Worlds We Leave Behind*
Illustrated by Levi Pinfold

*The Book of Not Entirely Useful Advice*
Illustrated by Mini Grey

For slightly younger readers

The Greta Zargo books
Illustrated by Joe Todd-Stanton

The Fizzlebert Stump series
Illustrated by Sarah Horne

# The Worlds We Leave Behind

A.F. Harrold

*Illustrated by* Levi Pinfold

BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in Great Britain in 2022 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © A.F. Harrold, 2022
Illustrations copyright © Levi Pinfold, 2022
Title typography copyright © David Wardle, 2022

A.F. Harrold and Levi Pinfold have asserted their rights under the Copyright, Designs
and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author and Illustrator of this work

'Some Are Born' by Stevie Smith from *The Collected Poems & Drawings of Stevie Smith*
(© the Estate of Stevie Smith, 1966) is printed by permission of Faber and Faber Ltd

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or
transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system,
without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-5266-2388-1; TPB: 978-1-5266-2386-7; eBook: 978-1-5266-2384-3

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Printed and bound in China by C&C Offset Printing Co. Ltd, Shenzhen, Guangdong

MIX
Paper from
responsible sources
FSC® C008047

To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters

*For Michael Groom, Alex Bell and James Heywood –*
*for the wild woods we knew back then*
A.F. HARROLD

*For Isaac*
LEVI PINFOLD



# CONTENTS


| | |
|---|---|
| MONDAY | 3 |
| MONDAY NIGHT | 29 |
| TUESDAY | 31 |
| TUESDAY NIGHT | 82 |
| WEDNESDAY | 94 |
| WEDNESDAY NIGHT | 151 |
| THURSDAY | 165 |
| THURSDAY NIGHT | 184 |
| FRIDAY | 230 |

# Some Are Born

*Some are born to peace and joy*
*And some are born to sorrow*
*But only for a day as we*
*Shall not be here tomorrow.*

Stevie Smith
from *The Collected Poems*
*& Drawings of Stevie Smith*
(Faber, 2015)





# MONDAY

Hex wasn't entirely sure how the girl had come to be hurt.

That morning he and Tommo had got on their bikes and they'd headed over the level crossing and down the hill, down to the woods.

On a map, the woods were a fat finger pointing away from town.

A brook ran through the middle and the trees formed a strip, a couple of hundred metres wide on either side, but dwindling

and narrowing, closing in and petering out the further you went. Beyond them, on the left, was the road that led off to the next town. Beyond them, on the right, were wide, flat farmer's fields.

It wasn't big enough to get lost in, but it *was* big enough to forget yourself in.

The trees towered over you, little specks of blue twinkling high above like stars in the night sky, saying nothing.

As smoke and squeals had poured off Hex and Tommo's brake pads at the bottom of the last road, they had seen the girl in her front garden.

She was some years younger than they were. Down the bottom of the school, probably still in the infants, while they were up at the top.

She was called Sascha Something-or-Other and had been sat on the lawn of her front garden pretending to read from a book to her toys. ('Pretending' only because Hex couldn't believe the story was actually in the book, which looked like one about tractors.)

'There was a prince who killed a giant,' the girl had said, 'and he got sent to prison because killing is wrong, and when he was in prison he fell in love with the prison boss's daughter, but she wouldn't marry him because he had killed a giant and killing is wrong. But he said, "The giant was going to eat the king," and she said, "The king should be more careful." And she married an apple and ate it all up and was happily ever after. The end.'

The front door had been open a crack and they'd heard

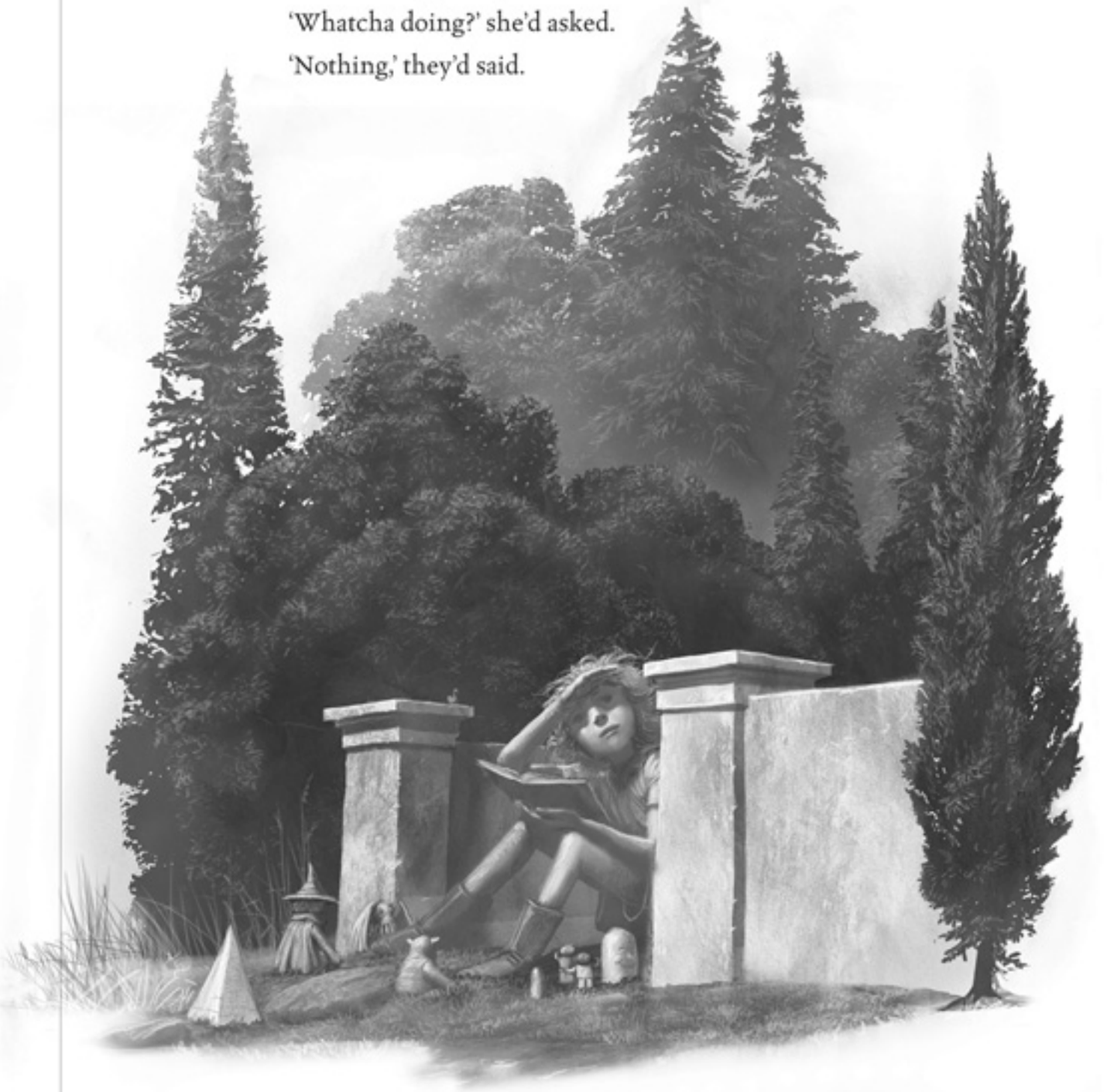


distant voices somewhere inside.

She'd lowered her book and looked at them, squinting at the sun and shading her eyes with a hand.

'Whatcha doing?' she'd asked.

'Nothing,' they'd said.



But she'd asked again and so they'd told her they were going into the woods. There was a rope-swing set up on the high bank, over the brook. It was a good place to spend a hot day.

'I'll come,' she'd said, putting a plastic horse between the pages of her book and laying it down carefully on the grass.

'Nah,' they'd said.

But she'd just stood up and brushed her bottom with both hands.

She'd sniffed her palms and said, 'Mmmm, don't you love that fresh smell?'

She'd probably meant the grass, but it was still weird.

Tommo and Hex had looked at one another at that point. A half-chuckle, nervous and uncertain.

'Nah, you're OK,' they'd said, shaking their heads.

Pulling their bikes up they'd walked off, not looking back.

And she had followed them.

They hadn't invited her, hadn't forced her, hadn't encouraged her, hadn't *wanted* her to come, but there she was, a little kid suddenly in their care.

And now they were in the woods and it had all gone wrong.

Hex often wondered why adults insisted on there being *reasons* for things.



That didn't match the world he saw.

Sometimes he'd stand up in class, in the middle of doing something else, and point at a squirrel out the window or do a little dance or ask a question about something they *weren't* studying that day, and the other kids would laugh, and Miss Short, his teacher (or, ten minutes later, Mr Dedman, the head), would look him in the eyes and say, 'What on earth did you do that for, Hector?'

And he'd shrug and say, 'I dunno,' and they'd tell him he was being smart and answering back, but he was simply telling the truth.

As he stood there, in front of the head's desk, sometimes an answer *would* come – something like 'Because I thought the squirrel was about to jump' – but these *reasons*, these *answers*, only ever came to him *after* the event, only when he was interrogated about it. They were never there in the moment.

And it seemed most of life was like that – you did things and then thought about why you'd done them later on, when someone asked, or when you got caught, or caught out.

Even with Tommo, they'd meet up each morning and just see where they ended up.

Today they'd ended up in the woods, with Sascha at their heels.

They'd walked their bikes down the twittern, the alley that ran between two houses at the end of the close, down to the edge of the woods.

There was a bin for dog owners and a sign that said the local council were being ever so generous by not selling the place off to build more houses. And there was a path in, under the trees. Well-trodden earth, made bare by feet, out of the sunshine, into the shade.

They'd been here a hundred times before, over the years, so they hadn't hesitated as they'd gone in, turning at all the right places, Tommo panting and rattling his inhaler as they climbed uphill, between trees, heading to the bank above the stream. With, to their almost-amusement, Sascha following, running round their ankles like a puppy, asking questions, laughing, singing.

Her eagerness had been embarrassing, and Hex had felt that embarrassment settle on him like a bird on his shoulder (it had almost looked like worry). It had pecked at his ear and said nothing.

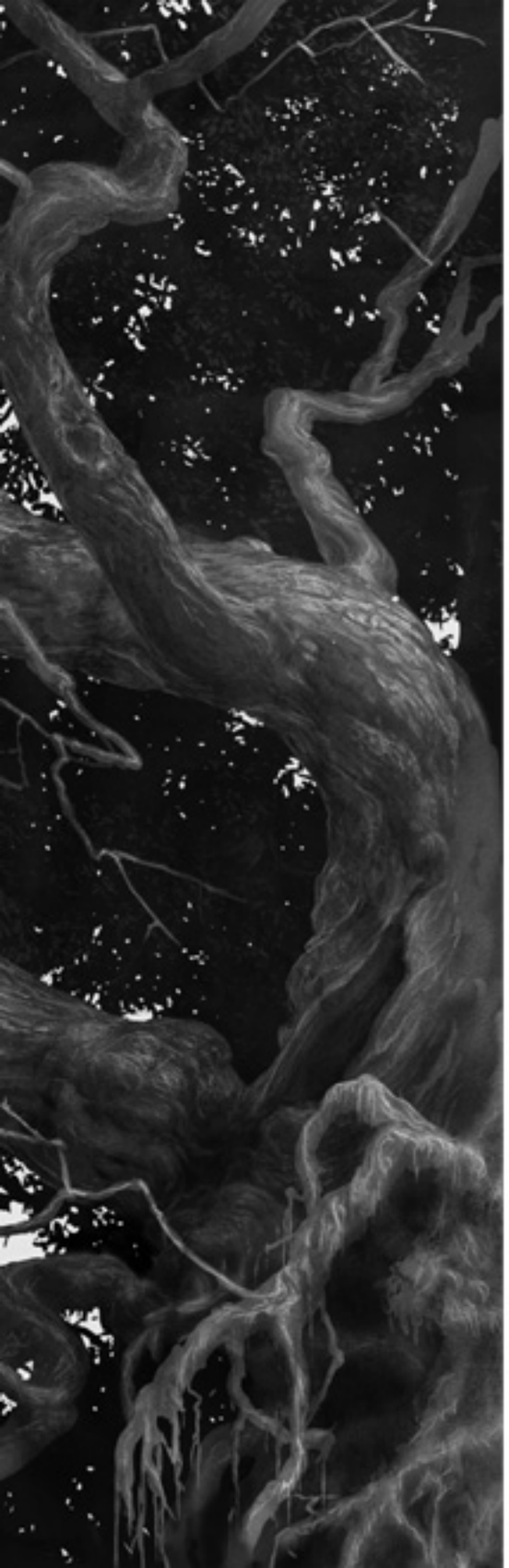
Eventually they'd dumped their bikes on the ground.

There was a big tree, an oak, right on the edge, on the high lip of the riverbank. Its roots stuck out of the mud wall below, like rungs on a ladder.

From one of the high branches someone had tied a rope, a tatty thick blue nylon rope. And at the bottom of the rope was a crossbar, a sturdy stick held in place by a fat knot.







Below that, curling round at the base of the high bank, was the brook, a spotty dark mirror snaking through pale earth.

It hadn't rained for weeks, a long, dry spring after a sharp, cold winter, and the water was low. Pebbles poked dry heads into the air.

You could scramble down, using roots as footholds, and that's what Hex had done.

He'd got the crossbar in one hand (it had been at about head height), and had pulled it behind him as he climbed back up the bank.

At the top he'd cocked his leg over the wooden bar and, just as Tommo had shouted, 'Oi, I was gonna be first!' had pushed off.

'Geronimo!'



Sometimes Hex dreamt about flying.

He'd be running along the street or in the school field and he'd jump, just a normal jump, a hop-skip-and-a-jump sort of jump, and he'd stay up.

With a thought, with a push of his will, he'd rise a bit higher.

Not flying like a superhero, arm out in front, cloak flapping behind, but just like a boy who's jumped and decided not to come down yet.

And he'd steer, turn back and rise up higher, over his friends below, and look down on the black, tarmac-ish school roof, or at the tiled roofs of the houses, and will himself on, light and happy, between television aerials and on, up, out, over the town.

And that was all there was to the dream, that freedom and the feeling of joy, never an adventure,





never a drama, never anyone shouting or wanting anything.

If the people below were pointing at him, if they were saying something, he never noticed – it was just him in the air with the wind in his hair, touching his toes on the crests of the roofs as he pushed off to sky-run some more.

But then, always, sooner or later, he'd wake up.



The rope-swing was the closest real life brought him to those dreams.

The freedom at the end of the upswing, as gravity forgot about you for a second or two … before it called you back, and then the acceleration in the mouth of your stomach, fluttering as you zoomed down … and through … and up again … the riverbank calling you back and then … the pause, again, at the top, where you could reach out and step off … but you don't, and you plunge back down again … The speed, the speed, the joy.

(It was different to the feeling on the swings down the rec because of the coarse rope in his hands, the irregular, knobbly stick under his thighs, the organic creak and sway of the thick branch above, the green light of the trees all around, the *risk* of relying on some stranger's knots holding the whole experience together. It was like being a caveman, not a boy of the present with schoolwork and tests and a bedtime.)



He'd swung over the stream half a dozen times before Tommo had grabbed him, and they'd swapped places, and he'd watched his best friend close his eyes and grip the rope, and Hex had guessed how Tommo felt and had laughed again.

And then Sascha had said, 'My turn now.' And she'd bounced on her toes saying it, a stripped twig in her hands, which she waved like a magic wand, and her words became a command for the boys.

Hex had felt something in the world shift slightly to one side as he'd held the crossbar and Tommo had hoicked her up and helped her hook her legs over. First one, then the other.

They had held her there, in the air, by the great oak, her feet up off the ground, a vast open space before her, the stream below, the far-off trees on the other side, and just space, space, fresh air between here and there.

'You ready?' Hex had asked.

And for the first time there'd been something like nervousness in her eyes.

But he'd let go by then, just before Tommo did, and so she'd spun round and round as she'd swung out.

And she'd said nothing.

And the forest had said nothing.

And the brook below had said nothing.

And then Sascha had laughed and the silence went away as she pendulumed and pirouetted high up in the green woods.