



2022

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Recommended Citation

Kimpe, Brenden (2022) "Gail and His Snails," *Floodwall Magazine*: Vol. 2: Iss. 7, Article 56.
Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/floodwall-magazine/vol2/iss7/56>

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Gail and His Snails

Brenden Kimpe

Part 1: The Garden

As the morning sun crested the horizon, it danced over Gail's eyelids and disturbed his slumber. His smooth gray eyes cracked open with a groan. No snail enjoys getting up. The act of leaving the leaf itself was a feat of immeasurable strength and every snail needed to perform it each morning. His comrades awoke around him as the day grew warmer. Gail was basically awake by now. His eyes stretched wide and his body relaxed as he looked around him. It was a good day. It was early, around six o'clock. Just the beginning for Gail.

Gail and his team of mollusks were snails. Big, fat, gray, slimy snails with shells of all colors. Some shells were swirled and speckled, while others were pale or dark in a solid color. Most of the snails were the same in their sluggish body, moist and slimy to the touch but nothing overbearing. They were simple creatures to the human eye, but when you really looked down at them they weren't nearly as slimy or gross as people had said they were. They were magnificent beings of miniature proportion. Ones with varying personalities and food tastes. Some enjoyed tomatoes, while others preferred lettuce. However, many of the escargatoire's members agreed upon one thing. The cucumbers were the prime vegetable in the garden. There was one strange snail named Maurice who only preferred beets. He was a large snail with a massive red shell, and some may even say he was faking his beet-restricted diet only because of his large house. He was always vying for attention. Their varying personalities were vivacious, and all carried similar traits. While they may have been considered docile and slow by human means,

they were quite speedy in real life. It was the humans who were docile in the eyes of the snails. In fact, the snails moved and acted at such a slow caliber compared to the rest of the world, they experienced their own lives in hyper-speed. A minute of their time would only consist of a second on a normal day, quite literally moving at a snail's pace.

The beginning of their day consisted of a practiced regimen of delicate ease. Lazy stretching commenced for at least fifteen minutes in real-time. It took a bit to warm up to the morning and Gail was no exception to the task. Today, however, he was slightly faster. It was around the thirteen-minute mark when he found himself feeling hungry. With a persistence that motivated the others, Gail made his way around the flowerpot to the edge of the garden. They had a real prime spot here. The Murrays took amazing care of their garden, filling it with a wide assortment of vegetables. Starting from one side to the other there were tomatoes: rich, juicy, seed-filled orbs that glistened in the sunlight with evaporating dew. Then there were the potatoes. They were quite annoying for the snails since they had to traipse through them to get to the following rows of lettuce and cabbage, which were quite high on Gail's food roster but not the best. Their crunchy stalks of watery goodness left him feeling a sense of refreshment whenever he chose to indulge. Next were the carrots. They were good but required too much work. The tops of the carrots were only a minor equivalent of tasting the real thing. They were stringy and left a bad taste in Gail's mouth, so he didn't eat any unless there was one already dug up. Alongside the carrots were the beets, which, according to Maurice, were the way to go. Many others disagreed. Finally, there was the holy grail: the cucumbers. They were a viny and sharp textured plant that stretched out across the grass. The bulk of the plants were strewn over a metal fixture that looked like a sideways fence. Cucumbers ranging from small buds of yellow on the vine to large fat green towers of goodness littered the leaves. It took a bit of effort to chew through a vine, but once a cucumber was felled pandemonium ensued. Snails would swarm in hopes of securing a spot. Once you missed out, you couldn't indulge. The one who chewed the vine clean through was usually the only snail who could ever have a seat

reserved. The vines of the plant and skins of the cucumbers had small spines with which to deter predators, but they were no match for the snails. Millions of years of evolution had culminated in perfecting the snail's existence and making them a formidable vegetable-consuming machine. They made quick work of any felled cucumbers and most of any others they could scrounge up. There weren't many of the large, ripe ones. The Murray's usually cleaned the garden of the ripest plants in the late evening when it was cooler outside, making the entire day an equal opportunity for all snails.

The rout was a tight-knit one, but they argued over the taste, texture, and rankings of the vegetables within the garden. It was a sophisticated practice and they sought to compile the best of standards and achievements. Several snails that had come and gone still held records for most tomatoes eaten or carrots unearthed. Many tried to dismantle them. The race to be an overachiever in the realm of consumption and standardization was one that left the snails in feverish exasperation. While they competed in competitions of strength, speed, and gluttony, they were also avid conservationists. They preached a zero-waste mentality and cleaned up most of the vegetables that fell overnight before partaking in the ones still attached to plants. Many of the fallen vegetables of the night were still good tasting once the day came around. They did not compare to the ones within the leaves, nearly lackluster in comparison but still sufficient. They were sophisticated in their tastes as well as their morals. The occasional smattering of disagreements usually ended in thorough discussion. Sometimes even surveys were enacted or votes were cast among them to settle disputes that involved more than one snail. Just last week, Maxine had claimed that the cucumber felled at 1:35 that day had been the best of her life, the most divine. Gail had disagreed. Claims like these were made often. Snails would become overexcited at the meal that had satisfied them earlier in the day and say that it had changed them, that it was revolutionary in its structure, setting, ripeness, and taste. Gail felt he had a more refined palate than that. He had tasted greatness only twice in his life. Once was a tomato he ate when he was a

young mollusk that had changed his view on the vegetable game. It had changed *him*. It was then that he began to develop what he interpreted as a highly refined palate and a grading system for vegetable consumption. Most of it was based on this singular experience that other snails had been present at and could attest to. This solidified Gail's reputation of significance within the vegetable-reviewing industry. The second time had been a year prior to Maxine's claim. Gail had tasted a cucumber that had surpassed any he had ever tasted. The only problem was he cheated.

There were rules among them. A standard law by which all snails must abide. One of these rules was to always share a felled vegetable with fellow snails unless attempting a record, such as the largest tomato eaten by a single snail, which was a seven-gram cherry tomato set by Lester Helms in '93. This was hard to get away with, as multiple snails usually converged on one project. It was also a failsafe to make sure that no food was wasted. If five snails all chewed down five vegetables, there would be far too much to go around. Gail had broken this law. This rule with which he was raised upon. While this law was sometimes broken, there was one law that no snail ever dared to think of breaking, one that could doom all of them for eternity: to consume a vegetable that was still attached to the plant. This was something that could hurt or even kill all of them! See, one of the biggest reasons why the snails participated in their conservation efforts so rigidly was to conceal their presence from the Murray family. Every snail knew how uptight the Murray family was about their vegetables. They're nearly as uptight as the snails themselves, and the Murrays were just as high-strung about pests in their garden as they were about weeds. The snails knew this and therefore did their best to eliminate any signs of their presence within the garden. They had been there for years now, perfecting their tasting techniques, building families, and setting down roots. Gail had endangered them all. Yet, he could not stop thinking of the few bites of cucumber he had stolen from its trunk before it was ripped from its vine. They were the juiciest and most fulfilling pieces of vegetable that had ever graced a snail's mouth. It was the epitome of vegetable quality, and

Gail could not speak of it to anyone. Even comparing it to the tomato of his youth seemed a disservice to its influence.

Gail was tempted every day to bite from vegetables upon the plant. After the cucumber, he had recoiled for a few weeks. He had broken the law, after all. Yet as the days droned on, he could not help but take a bite of tomato here and a leaf of lettuce there. They were all good, some even bordered on great, but nothing came close to the cucumber. He grew bolder in his endeavors until he was munching vegetables on various plants every day. Going off by himself, he would ascend the foliage and scout out the ripest of the crop. Setting off with a few targets each day. He found it to be good exercise and began to think he was getting stronger.

One day, as Gail was setting off for a rather handsome-looking tomato, he heard a cry from within the rows of cucumbers. It was a jubilant cry of wonder and amazement. Someone had discovered something. He made quick work of sliding over to the center of commotion where many snails were now gathered. It was a cucumber, perfectly ripe and deep in its shade of green color. Morning dew still glistened upon it as the group lovingly gazed upon its skin. Not a single bite had yet been taken. As soon as someone began to speak up, all manners and regard for the law were forgotten. It was a writhing mass of wriggling gray worms that worked its way over the cucumber and ate without remorse. Gail was in the back and desperate for a taste. They were more refined than this, he yelled. More distinguished. No heed was paid. Gail abandoned all hope for a peaceful resolution and dove in headfirst. He managed to squeeze his way to the front and snag a single mouthful before being shoved off. He broke from the group with his prize and examined it. One bite was really all that was needed to truly judge the scale of perfection upon which a vegetable has set itself. He slowly pushed it into his mouth and chewed. With a disgusted twist and groan, he spat the piece of cucumber onto the ground. It was disgusting! It tasted like rotted cabbage and smelled even worse, as if a stinkbug had crawled all over it. He had no idea why his friends were going crazy over it but chalked it up to his more refined palate. He

wandered off to his tomato in the distance with a grumble about wasting time.

It wasn't until later that it hit him. A queasy feeling of uneasiness. Like something was nearly perfect but just slightly off. Gail looked to the sky with his mouth dripping juice. He hadn't heard much from the rest of the snails since about midday, and it was getting later in the afternoon. He decided it would be best to work his way back to the group before they turned in for the night. The Murrays could be in the garden within an hour or two. His stroll to the location of the felled cucumber from before was halted by a ghastly sight.

Snails. Dozens of them. They would not have bothered him under any normal circumstances except these snails were all dead. Bloated sacs of gray, yellow, and brown that threatened the expulsion of their insides were tipped onto their sides, shells touching the coarse dirt. Their eyes were shriveled, small balls of skin sucked close to their bodies. It was horrifying. Gail sat perfectly still in horror for what felt like days. There were flies that flickered by and a smell was beginning to rise up into his sensitive nostrils. They wrinkled with disgust and terror. He needed to leave this place. He needed to leave now while he had a chance. He quickly began to shuffle away as he was snapping out of this unrelenting spell. Gail was only a row and a half from his home when it happened. A small pale hand scooped a wad of dirt from beneath him and slowly raised him up to a freckly face. It was a boy. A young one, about eleven years old from what Gail could see. He was smiling at Gail as if he was happy about something.

"Oh boy! I thought Mom had gotten rid of all you guys," the boy exclaimed. "I have the perfect place for you. We're gonna have a great time together." He set Gail among the grass and ran inside the house. There was no need to hurry, for Gail could go nowhere. He could not run and could not hide. Even if he moved twice as fast, he would still not make it anywhere far enough from the boy's piercing gaze. It was over. Gail began to cry with dejected sadness as he was scooped into a glass jar. He looked behind him at the garden as he was brought inside. The sun was beginning to fall, casting an orange glow among the leaves.

He saw his home in the distance. A small clay pot that was overflowing with dirt and weeds that had been forgotten. The boy's mother was cleaning it out with the hose, expressing her disgust. The jar was barren. It contained a few hastily pulled clumps of grass and a single twig to climb that had no leaves. There was no food or water. He looked back upon the garden for one last time and drank in the sight. The leaves, dirt pathways they had carved for years, sections they had deemed the best for vegetable production, and lastly, the vegetables. They were hanging temptations that called out to him. Teasing and taunting him with his failure to keep his friends safe. Vegetables that had given all of them life, but spared only one in the end.

Part Two: The Jar

Gail had no choice but to sit in the jar and watch time go by. This was worse than watching a snail race with no end, he thought. A snail's concept of time was much different from a human's. A small moment for the boy could be a short nap for Gail or an entire conversation with himself. This made the long days within the jar a bore like no other for Gail. The boy would bring in scraps of lettuce and carrot from time to time for Gail to eat. They were sickly, sad-looking pieces of foliage and root that had all the natural tastes of the outdoors rinsed from them. The water in his pop-cap dish was stale and tasted of unnatural chemicals. Gail was sorely disappointed. The days wore on with their unrelenting drone of stretched time, and Gail became a proficient daydreamer. He was able to see the television on the desk on the counter. The little boy, who Gail came to learn was named Chester, often had it open to cartoons with loud noises. They rattled within his skull with a reverberating hum. Gail began to learn how to meditate. Not even the drone of the television or yells from Chester's friends could disturb Gail. He had reached a state of eternal bliss and righteousness. He was at peace. That was what Gail was thinking of when something was placed into his jar.

They were two snails, and Gail just so happened to recognize

them. It was Maurice and Maxine. Two snails from his home! Gail screamed with surprise.

"Oh, my goodness! You guys are alive?! How did you survive the cucumber?"

"We should be asking you the same thing," Maurice questioned. "How did you get here?"

"I— I was scooped up by the boy outside. I've been in here for ages, how did you guys get caught?"

"We were scooped up by the kid too. Nasty fella, ain't he?" Maxine rasped. Her voice sounded choppy and dry. "Since we were on mess duty back at the pot, we weren't out there when the mess with the cucumber happened. But the next thing we knew, the entire place went up. The mom did it. Ripped the whole thing out from its roots and sprayed it down with water. Years of slime and progress, gone."

"Oh my Gast, that sounds awful," Gail said with a cringe. "I'm really happy you guys made it out okay though. I can't believe it. You could have been crushed. How did Chester find you?"

"He got us in the lettuce row, not far from the scene of the cucumber. We had a bit of time when we escaped the pot to investigate. Most had been taken out by mom and thrown, but there were still some. Francis, Bobby, my Gast, Gail—I even saw little Shelly." Maurice was in tears at this point. The silvery drops of liquid were bulging at the ends of his eyes and trailing down their stalks.

"I know, Maurice. I was there when they ate it. I tasted a piece, and it stained my mouth with the most awful taste. I spat it out immediately, but no one else would listen to me. I left shortly afterward and then came back to—" Gail's voice hitched in his throat. He hadn't spoken a word out loud of the scene he had laid eyes upon. It was a grisly moment that had been replaying in his mind for days now and it trapped him within a catatonic state that quickly enveloped him. He was also paralyzed by the fear of his secret getting out. He had broken one of their laws and had single-shelledly brought the wrath of the Murray family mother upon the garden. He was brought back to attention by cries from Maxine.

"I'm trying to talk to him but obviously he isn't listening, his eyes aren't even open." There was clicking and a whistle in his ears. Maurice and Maxine were hooting and yowling in an attempt to rouse Gail from his stupor. Eventually, he came to. He was clammy and cold, slicked in slime that felt thin and unreliable.

"I'm really sorry guys," he gasped. "I can't talk about it right now. I just need some time."

"Time?! We gotta get out of here Gail! This Chester kid is a maniac. He messed me up and made me sound like this." Maxine's voice was rougher than usual. It sounded like a burned-out sandpaper wheel taking on a pencil. It sounded painful.

"What? What happened?"

"He covered me with a chemical. It burned my skin and blinded me. I couldn't see for hours afterward and there wasn't enough water in the world to make my skin feel better. I don't think my slime will ever be the same again. Some of it got in my throat as I screamed. It tasted salty and acidic. It burned." Her eyes quavered as she told the story. Gail thought she was the toughest snail he had ever seen.

"Maurice here nursed me back to health in the tank he kept us in. I barely made it."

"Chester hasn't done a thing to me in the few days I've been in here and I'm not sure why. He hasn't really paid attention to me at all," Gail explained. He knew they needed to find a way to escape but also knew they shouldn't be hasty.

"And all I've had to eat in the past day is lettuce!" Maurice wailed. "I don't want to stick around here any longer than I must. I've seen what that kid can do, and I don't want anything to do with it. I miss my beets."

"So what do you suggest we do then, Maurice? We're in a situation where we could die a painful death and you find time to worry about your stupid beets? They aren't even that good."

Gail was beginning to get angry with the other two snails and knew he needed to slide back a bit. There had to be something they could do within this jar now that there were three of them. The jar felt small now

with two additional organisms. The base was wider than the top and came to a sloping point with a twist-on lid. If they positioned themselves correctly, they might be able to twist it loose. It would be risky business but could secure their freedom. Gail told the other two snails of his plan. Their eyes became alight with rejuvenated hope from the plan. They were slowly on their way toward the top when Chester and one of his friends came into the room with a sinister glint in their eyes. Gail hadn't seen this friend in Chester's room before.

Maxine began to shake uncontrollably as they drew closer. It was as if they could sense their impending doom even though there was no possibility of it.

"He's the one that was with Chester when they decided to hurt us. I think I remember his name as Seth. Or maybe Sam. Yeah, Sam sounds about right." Maurice's voice had dropped off into a dying whisper. He was awestruck at the beings that loomed before him. Chester carried sharp tweezers and a large cylindrical container with a spout. The other boy carried a slightly different opaque white box. They could not see what was inside. There was nothing the snails could do. They were completely powerless against human beings. Unless they happened to carry some powerful disease and then got eaten by one of the boys, but that was unlikely.

"Oh boy, you found two more?" Sam asked Chester. "These things have been popping up all over the place lately. The rain this spring must've really kicked 'em up." His eyes sparkled as the words greedily tumbled out of his mouth as if they were racing to be the first ones spoken.

"Yeah, my mom got most of them with the stuff she bought at the hardware store. I managed to scoop up these three before they could get to it. Those snails really go crazy for that stuff. Stupid things." Chester's voice had changed somehow. As if he was being influenced by some unseen power within him, something animalistic that could be tamed in only one way. In the time that Gail had spent within the jar, he had observed Chester for a long while. He was a quiet boy who didn't have many friends over and liked to read comic books or watch

cartoons. This was a complete shift in personality, a side of Chester that he had never seen before. As these thoughts raced through Gail's mind, Sam uncapped his white box and spilled the contents onto the desk. The sight brought any thoughts within him to a crashing halt. They were snails. Seven dry and painful-looking excuses for snails. They looked tired and starved. Their lips pulled inwards at their mouths as they gasped at Gail and his friends. They were just as surprised as he was. As he met the eyes of a slim-looking snail with a green shell, Gail was flipped over and dumped onto the desk.

"Who are you guys? And what are you doing here?" Maurice asked.

A snail in the front with a pale, cream-and-navy, spiraled shell strained to speak. Her voice sounded like sandpaper and her eyes were mere slits of glistening gel beneath her dry skin. "We are from the Munster family garden. The boy who brought us here has been keeping us for days, touching us with it." Her entire body recoiled as she finished the sentence. The effort of speech wracked her body with spasms of pain.

"Please, don't strain yourself. We're going to find a way out of here." Gail tried to sound promising. As if he had some kind of plan for escape when he did not have the slightest idea. Gail's attention was suddenly directed to a snail that lie in the back of the group. It was the green-shelled snail he had made eye contact with earlier. He had just been picked up by Sam and was moaning loudly.

"Please, Lord, do not touch me with it, I beg you for mercy!" he cried; his thin voice was echoing among the tan walls of the bedroom. "I will do anything for relief! Anything to make it stop! I will never eat a vegetable in my life again. Only grass and dirt for me, Lord. Please, just kill me already and make me stop begging for your kindness like a coward!" His voice had risen to a pleading yell. Gail and the rest of the snails cringed as the noises reached their ears, unable to tear their eyes from the scene. They watched in horror as the snail was placed onto his back, foot facing the sky. Sam then poured a pile of a white, granular substance into the palm of his hand from the cylindrical

container and set it back onto the desk. As he pinched some between his thumb and forefinger, the snails around him began to moan and cry. They were yelling out to their friend, telling him to be strong and think of cabbage in July. A refreshing cup of dew in the morning. Spending half the morning stretching after bed. Comforting things that had obviously been the green-shelled snail's source of happiness. His yell became a whimper as he listened to their hopeful words. Sam's fingers rubbed together above the snail and the grains began to fall upon him. They sizzled as they contacted his already cracked and dried flesh and began to make it crackle and bubble. The grains bounced against his eyes and made them contract into his body in a desperate attempt to escape, as though trying to absorb his eyes within himself. The green snail's attempt at reigning his whimpering failed miserably as they became shrill screams, ones that repeated themselves with fervor and consistency. They were only broken by hasty gasps where the snail gulped his last tastes of the air. The grains eventually fell into his mouth and choked him so that he could scream no more. The salt dried and burned the snail until he was a dead and dried chunk of grey flesh.

It was over within a few minutes or so for the boys, but felt endless to the snails. They had a front-row ticket to the most gruesome and immersive slasher film imaginable. The boys had burned through four more snails before a faint cry from downstairs roused them from their stupor. They both groaned with annoyance and raced out of the room to take their spot at the dinner table.

Brenden Kimpe is a junior at UND who is pursuing English education. He enjoys spending his free time reading, playing video games, spending time with roommates, and conversing with his cat, Marceline.