The Great Lake Review
-Fall 2002-

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Table of Contents

Cover artwork: Mysterious Thailand by Christopher Denkers

4 The Good Stuff by Pamela Rogers
14 Score by Melissa Anne Stefanec
15 Black and White Study by Ann Aurnick
16 What You Ask For by Scott Leiderman
32 Photograph by Daniel Cooper
33 Photograph by Kim Trela
34 Untitled Poem by Nicole E. Darcangelo
35 Say by Abigail J. Davis
36 A Father's Love by Michael Olenick
41 Hole in the Sky by Colin Abele
42 I am She by Jessica Capton
43 On the Boat by Greg Shemkovitz
53 Sakura by Eric Kainass
55 Black and White Study by Ann Aurnick
56 Not a Porcelain Doll by Rachel Stark
57 My Professor by R. Charles Bergan
61 Every Writer by Tomas Hoffman
63 Tears by Sara Wall
The Good Stuff

I remember the day I first met Willie Johnson in his dank, dreary cell at the Huntsville State Penitentiary back in ’87. Normally, Death Row inmates were considered dangerous and unsuitable candidates for rehabilitation but Willie’s record of good behavior earned him the privilege of being selected for the prison’s literacy program. I was an assistant professor at the Sam Houston State University and relatively new to the project. Whatever uneasiness I felt about volunteering at the prison quickly vanished when I saw Willie’s smile light up his face as he stood up and warmly offered his hand. His grasp was firm but gentle and his soulful brown eyes twinkled as he said in a gravelly voice, “How ya do Mr. Wilson? Nice to meet ya sir. I is sure grateful to ya fer givin’ up yer time an’ all. Here, set yerself down right here in this ol’ chair.”

As I placed my books on the small, dimly lit desk Willie sat on the edge of his cot, which all but disappeared under the long, lanky limbs that sprawled out from his slender physique. I smiled at him and said, “Willie, we can forget the formalities in here. You can just call me Mark.”

He nodded and smiled from ear to ear revealing several missing teeth and said, “Why yessir, Mr. Mark. Anythin’ ya want. I jez glad yer gonna be learnin’ me some good stuff. I always been wishing to read ya know.”

His sincerity warmed my heart and I found it hard to believe that this man was a cold-blooded killer who shot two security guards in the head during a bank robbery in 1983. Although I didn’t realize it at the time, that was only the beginning of my painful exposure to things that I found unacceptable and hard to believe. Now I know differently. Looking back, it was Willie Johnson who taught me the “good stuff” including the meaning of a friendship that has flourished over the past fifteen years.

During that time, I’ve come to learn a lot of wonderful things about Willie. How he stubbornly waited to marry his sweetheart, Bernitta, until he got a better paying job in Houston; one with benefits that would enable him to properly care for a family. How he worked long nights for a janitorial service while she worked days in a local doll factory so each of them could equally share in the parenting responsibilities of their growing family. How after ten years of marriage and careful financial planning they were finally able to move from the dingy, cramped quarters of the east side tenements into a rented two-story house that provided the space and security necessary to raise four young children and care for his widowed mother.

All of these things were a testament to his honorable character and the strict principles that governed his life. Yet his most endearing qualities became visible during his stories about growing up in the poverty of East Texas, a state openly hostile to blacks, entrenched in practices of segregation and stubbornly clinging to remnants of the Jim Crow Laws and the ideologies of the Ku Klux Klan. Those early experiences taught him to become invisible in order to survive in a world where he didn’t belong. The same strategy still served him well in the harsh realities of the Texas penal system, which I quickly discovered was yet another world where Willie Johnson didn’t belong. He was the unfortunate victim of mistaken identity who, due to the lack of education and finances, was pronounced guilty until proven innocent by a corrupt, racially biased, and overly taxed system of justice.

At the time of the robbery, Willie had gone downtown early to get some errands done before starting work. Since his dark navy blue uniform resembled the attire worn by the three men involved in the foiled heist, he was immediately seized by police two blocks from the crime scene and dragged back to the police van. Upon seeing Willie, Hal Thompson, a senior loan officer at the Houston Savings Bank, burst through the crowd while pointing at him and shouting, “That’s him. He’s the third man. I saw him shoot the guards and then exit the building. He killed Stevenson and Roberts. Nail the son of a bitch.”

Since two of the robbers were also killed in the shootout, only the third man
who escaped could verify Willie’s innocence and he wasn’t about to lose his scapegoat. Subsequently, Thompson’s eyewitness testimony at the trial sealed Willie’s fate while ensuring his own promotion to the position of branch Vice President. Shortly thereafter, Willie was sentenced to death by lethal injection and sent to the Ellis Unit where he joined over 450 others also awaiting execution. His overworked and underpaid Public Defender promised to begin the appeal process promptly, but nothing had been accomplished by the time I met him four years later.

After meeting two days a week over the next two years, Willie graduated the literacy program and became the first of his siblings who could read and write. It was one of his proudest moments because now he could send letters to his children and they could read them to Bernitta and his mother. He knew that wouldn’t stop them from making the 70 mile bus trip every weekend to see him, but at least he felt like he was finally doing something for them in return. Since his completion of the program, my visits also became restricted to the weekend visitation schedule, which provided a good opportunity for me to become acquainted with his family. It didn’t take long before they adopted me into the Johnson clan, along with my wife, Karen, and my two children, Kelsey and Matthew.

As the appeal process dragged on, Willie became more concerned about the welfare of his family. It upset him greatly to learn that his mother had also taken a job at the doll factory. He hung his head in shame and said, “What kinda man I be that I can’t provide fer my own kinfolk. Alyssa and Willie jr. be teenagers now. Franklin and Charlie, they still be young boys. When they need their Daddy, where do I be? I be right here. Stuck behind these damn walls, no good fer nothin’ or nobody! As useless as a three-legged stool. It ain’t no good for settin’ off so why keep it around? That woman 0’ mine be better off to git herself a new man, a real man that’ll tend to her needs and keep the family together. Instead I rot in here while my Mama, she be in her sixties now, works ten, twelve-hour days to help make ends meet. For three times now they move to smaller places. They can’t afford no mo’ nice places. Peoples treat them bad cause they don’t want no murderer’s kin ‘round their neighborhood. I is ashamed to be me.”

After losing his first appeal, Willie’s spirits sank for a time because he had to begin the process all over again. He picked up his tattered copy of the Bible and said, “I try to git some soothin’ from this here ol’ book but I got to thinkin’ ‘bout what kinda God fergets his own. I ain’t no Job ya know, though I try to be fer the sake a my family. I can’t help but git angry sometimes. Seems my whole life I been at the back of the bus. No matter what ya do, all the peoples sees is yer blackness. In here, the inmates cut ya if ya don’t stay wit yer own kind. Mostly, they jez keep us isolated so no one git killed, except fer the times we gotta do work. The guards ain’t no better than the lot of us either. They especially like to rattle the black folk. They talk down on ya, spit right in yer face, call ya “boy,” an give ya a whuppin’ jez fer kicks. Ain’t no different now after all these years. Most times I git tired of fightin’ fer who I is but then I get to remembrin’ that I gotta keep walkin’ the line.”

One of the most amazing things about Willie, however, was his ability to rebound from a bad day. It wasn’t in his nature to stay angry or become bitter. In view of his situation, I couldn’t blame him if he did. But whenever the subject came up in our conversations, he always took me back to his Grandma’s story about the moths. He’d pause reflectively for a moment, clear his throat, and then retell his fondest childhood memory.

“My kinfolk wuz farmin’ peoples who went to all kinda places. Mostly we jez had a little shack to sleep in at night. We wuz all crammed in there, my Grandma and Grandpa, Mama and Daddy, and all us kids. Funny thin’ wuz there wuz always a lot a big ol’ spider webs hangin’ round cause we didn’t have no screens or nothin.’ At night, Grandma and Mama would be fixin’ the holes in our clothes and I’d set there jez watchin’ those silly moths fly right into the candle flame. Sometimes they do git stuck right there in the wax. Other times they sizzled and popped in one bright flash an wuz gone. The rest usually ended up
tangled in a web, beatin' their wings til that ol' spider done come down an gobble 'em' up. All he ever left wuz a hollow shell. We'd find dozens of 'em' on the floor under the web."

Willie would stare at the table as if he was still mesmerized by the flame that burned in his memory. Then he'd get a solemn look on his face as he continued with the story.

"Grandma always say the spider don't like the shell cause it wuz the outside of the moth and it don't matter none. No, he likes the inside cause that's where the good stuff is. The same is true with peoples. The trick is not to let nobody gobble ya all up. Ya gotta protect yer good stuff, no matter what happens. We has to be true to who we is meant to be or else we no better off than those moths who dive into the flame. You see, they is givin' up and lettin' the flame change 'em'. In the end, it burns 'em' up and they is no mo.' If that happens, what's it all fer? My Grandma wuz smart to be warnin' us 'bout the spider an the flame. The world's got plenty of both and they up to no good. I always be remembrin' that. It gits me through these bad times, ya know."

And for Willie, there was never a shortage of bad times but somehow he always pulled through. In 1994, he was ambushed by a rival gang while on kitchen detail after the evening meal. He suffered three stab wounds, one of which collapsed a lung, in addition to a broken nose and collarbone, before the guards were able to intervene. During his stay in the prison hospital and the subsequent month spent in solitary confinement as a penalty for fighting, Willy was denied any privileges including visitations, personal mail, and access to his books. Worst of all, he missed the opportunity to see his eldest son, Willie jr., on the day he graduated from high school. By the time we got to see him again he appeared much frailer than before due to excessive weight loss and mental deprivation. His ebony skin, now pallid and dehydrated, sank deeply into the recesses of his skeletal framework and looked like a dried animal hide or a grape that shriveled on the vine. From that point on, he couldn't speak without wheezing and the smallest amount of activity left him with shortness of breath.

The following year I was offered a full professorship at Northwestern University in my hometown of Chicago. Although the move meant the end of our weekly visits, Willie insisted that I accept the position. He said, "A man gotta be true to hisself an do the best he can fer his kinfolk." When he noticed my hesitation he added, "Besides, I yer elder by ten years. That means you gotta mind me some." He also reminded me that he was perfectly capable of writing me letters and in return, he expected to receive an autographed copy of the current book I was writing. Once the world of reading was opened up to him, Willie devoured any book he could get his hands on, especially history books. Sometimes he would recite all of the war trivia he had learned in the interim between our visits. Quite to my surprise, he also became a devoted fan of my research on the investigative methods of forensic anthropology even though the reading was laborious to someone lacking a sufficient background in the subject. Nonetheless, he was proud to read my first three books with the assistance of the dictionary and other reference materials I obtained for him when he completed the literacy program. I greatly admired his enthusiasm for reading and promised to deliver the very first copy of my book in person. By the end of that week, I reluctantly accepted the new position with a heavy heart. Two months later on the plane to Chicago, I wrote Willie the first of many long letters.

Over the next five years, I flew in to see him whenever I got the chance and frequently had the pleasure of staying with Willie's family. The rest of the time we relied on the mail or Ma Bell to update each other on current events. As a result, I accumulated a pile of Willie's letters that contained a wealth of autobiographical material rich in historical and social significance. With Willie's consent and assistance, I began work on a novel in which all of the proceeds would go to his family. That was the only time I ever saw him cry. When he lost his last appeal, our joint project became the driving force that sustained us both through the final eighteen months before his execution date.
On June 6, 2002, I flew in to see Willie for the last time. In the letter I received three days before my flight, he stated that it was ironic how his execution was the same date as D-day, the invasion of Normandy that changed the course of World War II in Europe. His father had been disabled in that war and returned home in September of 1943. On June 16, 1944 Willie Samuel Johnson was born. To Willie, the coincidence was a sign of closure to his life; one that sealed the special bond he had shared with his father. He bemoaned the fact that he never got to serve his country as his father once had done. “I wuz wan tin’ to go wit the others to Vietnam but the army wouldn’t have me cause they sez I the only male left of my kinfolk. Since my Daddy never healed proper from his war wounds he couldn’t work none. It wuz left to me to care fer him, my Mama, and my five sisters. Peoples sez I wuz lucky but I always feelin’ kinda poorly ‘bout the whole thing.”

I was relieved that it brought a measure of peace to the most turbulent time in his life. When I met with him that afternoon, we both agreed that his observation provided the perfect ending for our book, which had been earmarked for publication the following year. Willie took delight in the final chapter of his fifty-eight years and it gave him the courage to keep “walkin’ the line” with dignity during his remaining hours.

After spending the better part of the morning with his family, he expressed to me his deep concern over his youngest son, Charlie. “That boy worries me Mr. Mark. His anger is gonna gobble ‘em’ up an steal the good stuff he got inside. I can’t go peacefully, knowin’ that he’ll mind yer words. Will ya talk to ‘em’ fer me? Look after him as best ya can? He already twenty-one but he got no goal for hisself. Alyssa and Willie jr. be fine cause they got family of their own now. And Franklin, he be happy wit his job working construction in the city. But Charlie, he don’t want that fer hisself. I can see it in his eyes. He only works construction to please his older brother and his Mama ‘n’ me. I be thinkin’ that maybe he likes using his drawing skills. I seen his sketches an they be real nice. He got the gift ya know, jez like his Grandpa done have. Maybe you can git him into one of those fancy programs at one of them higher schools of learnin’ that yer always talkin’ ‘bout. Alls I need to know is that ya’ll show ‘em’ the choices he got in this life. Then I can go to my rest happy.”

After I told Willie that Charlie was like a son to me and I would do everything in my power to help him find his own path in life, Willie’s hands began to tremble. Patches of perspiration soaked through the blue chambray shirt of his prison uniform. His face became somber as he looked up at me and said, “I is beholden to ya fer all ya meant to me and my kinfolk over the years. Ya give me the gift of readin’ an writin’ an yer lookin’ to care fer Bernitta and Mama with our book. At seventy-six, I know Mama won’t be long to follow me but at least I know she git some comfort in this life. An Bernitta, she be the only woman I ever loved mo’ ‘n’ life itself. I glad to be knowin’ that she have what she be needin for so long a time comin.’ I can never repay ya fer yer kindness an friendship.

The knot in my throat left me speechless so I nodded, squeezed back the tears, and rested my hand on his shoulder. We sat silently, staring at the floor until the guard came and told me it was time to leave. Willie would shower and eat his favorite supper of fried chicken, dandelion greens, and black-eyed peas with a side of buttermilk biscuits and sweet potato pie for dessert. This would be followed by a visit from the prison chaplain and some quiet time for meditation.

At 9:45 p.m. Bernitta, Alyssa, Grandma Johnson, and I were ushered into the witness-room. At Willie’s request, his sons waited in the lobby because their presence would make it more difficult for him to keep “walkin’ the line.” Seated on the other side of the partition were the families of the victims, members of the press, and the city officials who wanted to view the proceedings. At 9:50 p.m. the prison doctor, chaplain, and executioner escorted Willie into the room. He was strapped onto a gurney and needles for injection were inserted into both arms. At that time he was asked if he wanted to give a final statement. His eyes became
glassy and distant when he looked over at our window. A look of panic and confusion flashed across his face as the words caught in his throat. He began to hyperventilate which intensified his wheezing. I felt nauseous and lightheaded, as if I was going to explode if I didn’t help him somehow. Instinctively, I stepped up to the window and pressed the palm of my open hand against the glass.

Willie’s eyes immediately focused on it and his breathing gradually relaxed. He swallowed hard and said, “Ail I want to say is that I ain’t never killed no one. I needs ya all to know that so I can go to my rest peaceful. I already say what I be thinkin’ to my kinfolk. There ain’t no mo’ I got left to say.”

With that, he forced a smile, gave me a quick nod and then turned away. I heard a click as the executioner turned on the machine. The sound of its hum echoed through my head like the amplified sound of heavy footsteps on the wooden stage of an empty auditorium. Everything seemed to be happening in slow motion. I closed my eyes and said a prayer to whatever was out there, if there be anything at all. Behind me I could hear the sobs of Willie’s women. Another click and then silence. Willie Samuel Johnson was pronounced dead at 10:00 p.m.

The night air was cool as it brushed against my sweaty face and my legs felt like lead as I walked to the car. Off to the side of the parking lot I saw Hal Thompson and two companions walking towards a limousine. He was currently a councilman for the city of Houston and was serving as a Mayoral Appointee to several prestigious boards and committees. Their raucous voices reverberated off the concrete walls that surrounded the prison facilities. As I turned my key in the door lock, I overheard Thompson say, “Hey, who the hell knows if he was the right man or not. We know he was the right color and that’s all that matters.” The others concurred and all three burst into laughter. Then Thompson added, “Since it’s an execution night, McGuffy’s Bar and Grill is offering their famous “Killer-Burger” special. What do you say we grab a couple on the way home?” The other two cheered the idea as they got into the car.

I could hear their muffled laughter as the limo pulled away and for quite a while I stood there completely immobilized. Hot tears streamed down my face and seeped between my trembling lips. I could taste their saltiness on my tongue. That was the first time I ever cried. Then I heard a distant, repetitive sound that drew my attention. Like a faint ping or a gentle flutter. Curious, I looked around for the source. Movement near the lamplights that lined the lot caught my eye. There were dozens of moths flying around the high intensity lights, crashing their bodies into the glass globes. I stayed there for the longest time and thought about Willie’s “good stuff” and I couldn’t help but smile.
Score

Red. Encasement, coming out of my mother. The puddle on the floor I hung above, and at last the prick on my heel. After, the purple fading from my lips—as red as my mother’s nipple.

An apple for a lady, scraped knees and ladybugs. Crayons and checkmarks; stripes but not stars, my hand on my chest in loyalty. Crete paper in February, which led to roses down the road. Runny noses and hair ribbons. Tomatoes from grandma’s garden and the roof of her house.

Becoming a woman, the color my heart bled the first time I loved and lost. The calluses that cover it after my years. Red eyes that retaliated and summer sunsets on a lake. Tides of rage that overwhelm trembling hands. Scares, scars, cheeks after saying hello for the first time. My first car, a newborn’s face and my brother’s hair. Knuckles after a motherly battle. Two tongues on a first kiss. Misunderstood passion in the dead of night, silk sheets of confusion. Light that peeks through the window to shed light on the lies of the night, love that sets fire to everything it touches. Winding rivers of volcano spit, flesh torn from my bones by blood-covered teeth. Waning sunlight before a calm dusk. Hate so burning it leaves room for no other. Twenty red years and I’m still coming out of my mother.
Scott Leiderman

What You Ask For

Not a drop of color could permeate the clouds that had forever settled over the old coal-mining town of Calamity, West Virginia. Settled in 1850, not much had changed from mid century mark to mid century mark. Everyone was born in Calamity, everyone lived and worked in Calamity, and in the end everyone would die in Calamity. That's just the way things were, and nothing would change that.

Winston tried to explain this fact to his eldest son Vince, but he would not hear any of it. He was a stubborn little ingrate, he could never see any other perspective other than his own. Why didn't Vince understand that he had to stay and work the mines, and there was no other way about it?

"He's bullheaded Matilda!" growled Winston. "That's all there is to it. He inherits it from your side of the family I bet. Your father, god rest his soul, was just like him. He has this nasty independent streak about him."

"Remember what the good book says, dear," replied Matilda, his wife of 22 years. "Revelation 14:12. Here is the patience of the saints: here are they that keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus."

"Even so. The big guy upstairs never had to deal with this little hellion!" said Winston, as he flipped the newspaper to the sports section.

"He'll come to his senses eventually. Now finish up your steak and eggs. You'll need your energy to finish building Timmy's playhouse. Let me tell you, our little angel is outside right now playing with that kitten he found last week. He's like a little veterinarian, nursing him back to health, feeding him, cleaning him off, it's just the cutest thing you've ever seen. Take a look."

Winston looked out the kitchen window and watched as their youngest, Timmy, sat in the front yard, playing with the black and white kitten.

"And he's smart as a whip too, I'll tell you," said Matilda. "I spoke with his teacher, she even said so too. Maybe we'll have a doctor in the family! Wouldn't that just be the greatest thing?"

"As long as he opens his practice here, it's fine by me. Dr. Daniels is getting up in years anyway."

The two turned around just in time to catch Vince grabbing an apple and attempting to sneak out of the kitchen undetected.


"Good to see that you've decided to join the living today, boy," replied Winston, in his usual gruff tone.

"Yeah well, I figured why not," said Vince, as he took a seat at the kitchen table.

"Don't get smart with me, boy."

"I wasn't being smart."

"You best not be talking back to me."

"And what if I am?" alleged Vince.

Winston rose up and slammed his hands down on the table, knocking his plate to the floor.

"You're disrespectful boy! I won't have that in my house!"

"I didn't do anything!" screamed Vince.

"Don't lie to me! You show me some Goddamn respect! And don't think I don't know what you were doing last night! Running around town with the rest of those hoodlums doing God knows what!"

Vince stood up and kicked his chair back from behind him.

"My friends aren't hoodlums! Don't call them that!"

"They're good for nothing, just like you! You drop out of school, and instead of getting a job and making something of yourself, you sit around here like a goddamn bum!"

"How exactly is working in a mine making something of myself?"

"Those mines put a roof over your head and food on your plate and..." Winston began to cough violently, falling down to his knees.
“Winston!” Matilda exclaimed, grabbing a glass of water and kneeling down by his side. Vince looked on for a second before grabbing his coat and leaving the house, slamming the door behind him. Winston sipped some water and got back up to his feet.

“He’s worthless, and that’s what he’ll always be,” said Winston.

The truck barreled down the dirt road. If Bill were late with a delivery one more time, the boss would have his head.

“Now remember Killer, your going to have to guard the fortress from the commu, commu...bad guys. The bad guys. And the Martians too. They’ve got big green heads and ray guns, but it’s ok because the fortress daddy is building is ray gun proof.”

Timmy would have continued briefing his guard cat, but was distracted by the yelling inside. A moment later, Vince burst out the door, throwing on his jacket and pulling out a pack of cigarettes. Vince was so cool. Timmy told all his classmates about how cool his brother was. His brother was cooler than Captain Ziff and the Lone Ranger combined.

“Where are you going Vince? Can I come with you? What’s with all the...”

“Zip it squirt,” answered Vince, as he pulled out his lighter and lit a cigarette.

As Vince headed down the road towards town, Timmy decided that it would be a good time to teach Killer how to fetch. He’d have to know how to fetch so that when the bad guys invaded, Killer would be able to leap into the air and grab the remote control triggering devices before they set off the nukes.

As Vince stomped down the dirt road the dust and nicotine filled his lungs. What was his father’s problem? Why was he always on his case? He’s seventeen years old! No one can tell him what to do anymore. And his friends are not hoodlums. They just liked to have fun. This town is so pathetic. They don’t know what fun is. Mailbox baseball. That’s fun! Driving down the roads, bashing in mailboxes with a bat, that is a heck of a lot of fun! This town needed people like him to shake it up. It’s so boring otherwise. A little bit of random chaos never hurt anybody. Wow, that truck is going fast.

Matilda smiled as she stood at the window watching Timmy toss his baseball into the road. It was so cute, watching Timmy try to get Killer to get the ball. Aww, it looks like that kitten doesn’t want to play. Boy, that truck looks like it’s in a hurry. Timmy, wait for the truck to pass before you get the baseball. Timmy, watch out for the truck honey. Matilda struggled to get the window open, but it was jammed. The truck kicked up dust as it flew down the road. Get out of the road Timmy! GET OUT OF THE ROAD!

“Timmy!”

“They say that there is a reason for everything. Even in times of sorrow such as these, we must remember that the lord has a plan for all of us. Great and small, old and young. And while we must celebrate the life of Timothy Edward Jameson, we must also mourn what will never be. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust.”

The mourners surrounding the gravesite and threw soil on top of the small casket. It was only three and a half feet long, and two feet wide. Not much bigger then a trunk.

“Amen.”

Matilda continued to cry as she knelt by Timmy’s tombstone. She hadn’t stopped crying since the accident occurred. Her eyes were red and puffy, and at some points her chest felt like it would cave in. All the women of the town took shifts staying by her side, taking care of household duties, helping anyway they could. Meanwhile, Winston and a group of guys from work found the truck driver and beat him within an inch of his life. He wouldn’t be running any more kids over, that’s for sure. In fact, he wouldn’t be doing much at all. Just blinking and struggling for his next breath for the rest of his days. The men felt that a little mob
justice once in a while never hurt anyone. Other than the truck driver they almost killed. But he deserved it.

“This was going to be your fortress, wasn’t it Timmy?” asked Matilda, as she stood alone in front of the playhouse in the Dead Woods. They were called so because nothing ever grew on those trees. Not a single leaf. The only semblance of life among the gnarled Sequoias was the playhouse. Matilda had insisted that Winston finish building it. He even threw on a fresh coat of white paint, which made the playhouse stand out even more from its surroundings.

“You were going to fight aliens with Killer. You were going to be so wonderful. A doctor. We were going to have a doctor in the family.”

“Matilda!” called Winston, interrupting her conversation.

“Yes ... yes dear?” replied Matilda. She wiped the tears from her eyes as she turned around. Matilda didn’t want Winston to know that she was still crying after all these weeks. But she just couldn’t help it.

“I just got a phone call from Mike Abbot down the road. And Marshall. And McCullough!” said Winston. “And they all had the same complaint. Vince’s been vandalizing their property! When that no good little rat comes home I’m going to...”

“Dear, please be easy on him.”

“Easy on him? Are you joking?”

“He is the only son we have.” Matilda sobbed, letting the tears flow.

Winston put his arms around Matilda. She buried her head in his chest, weeping. He held her tighter. Something had to be done.

“I’m telling you Bill, I can’t take much more of this.” Winston said, before finishing off his beer. “It’s killing me to see her in this state.”

“It’s a terrible situation you’ve got going for you right now,” replied Bill, the bartender at the Styx Inn, Calamity’s premier watering hole. He focused his good eye on his patron, while his lazy one inadvertently looked away. “So you want another round?”

“Sure.”

As Bill headed back over to the tap, the phone in the back room rang. Bill went to answer it, letting the door slam behind him. Winston continued to indulge in the complimentary pretzels. Only a moment had passed before he felt a burning sensation on the back of his neck. He turned around and confirmed his suspicions. The only other customer in the Styx was watching him from his seat in the far corner of the bar. The moonlight shining in through the window illuminated the dark figure. He wore a black suit and a black fedora. Just looking at the guy sent shivers up the burly coal miner’s spine. Winston quickly shook off any signs of fear, reminding himself that he was twice this guy’s size and had nothing to worry about if they came to blows.

“You have a reason that you’re eyeing me, boy?” asked Winston. “Cause if so, you’d best say it to my face instead of ogling me from over there.”

“I’m sorry to hear about what happened to your son,” answered the man, his inflection and tone not shaken in the least by the threats of the coal miner. “May I join you at the bar?”

Winston was taken aback for a second. “Umm ... sure.”

The man stood up, and made his way over to the bar. He didn’t walk as much as he seemed to slither. Like a snake, his upper body seemed to lead the way as he moved, with his lower half following behind. He extended his hand, and out of thin air, he pulled out his business card.

“Nice parlor trick there,” said Winston.


Winston took it, but now that he had the opportunity to see him up close, he gave Faust a once over. His skin was a stark white, and he looked like he hadn’t eaten in years. When they shook hands, Winston could see every bone, joint, and vein bend and pulsate. But the most disarming feature was the man’s eyes. His pupils were as
black as the coal in the mine.

"Winston Jameson."

"Oh, I know about you, friend," said Faust.

"Is that so," Winston retorted.

"I've been passing through this town for many a year. In my line of work, you get to know people."

"And what industry would that be exactly..." Winston paused for a second before adding "...friend?"

"I am but a simple businessman, peddling my wares here and there. Doing this and doing that for folks like you. If there is a service that needs to be rendered, I'll be glad to perform it. For a price, of course."

"Of course. But that still doesn't answer my question. What is it that you'll do?"

"Your wife Matilda is still crying you know," hissed Faust. "Even as we speak she's bawling her eyes out at the kitchen table."

Winston grabbed Faust by the collar and slammed his head down onto the bar. His hands were shaking as he continued to apply pressure to Faust's neck. Winston stood up, getting better leverage and balance. He leaned over and spoke into the ear that wasn't pressed against the oak bar.

"If you ever speak of my wife again, I'll kill you. Now answer my question. Who the hell are you?"

"I am but a simple businessman," said Faust. The tone and volume of his voice didn't alter in the slightest. "And I can change things. I can make things better. You can have young Timmy back."

Winston pressed down harder on Faust. "You're full of shit! He's dead! That means he's gone forever! He isn't coming back!"

Still unwavering,Faust continued. "But he can, my friend. He can. If you'd let me up, I'll be more then happy to work out a contract for our deal."

Winston pondered Faust's proposal for a few moments. This can't be happening. It's impossible. But... He slowly let up on Faust, who rose back up like nothing had happened.

"There isn't any deal yet," muttered Winston.

"Not yet. Not until we speak on the terms," said Faust, who opened up his suit jacket and pulled out a scroll of paper. He handed it to Winston, who took it tentatively. Winston unrolled the scroll, a hand written document in gothic font, and read it over.

"I therefore, under sound mind and judgment...one for one...bah! What does this all mean?" asked Winston.

"It's quite simple. A life for a life. I'll bring Timmy back, and all you have to do is provide me with the consent to take another in his place."

"Who then? Who would replace Timmy?"

"Why Vince, of course," said Faust, who stated the trade as calmly as one would tell the time.

"Vince?! No! Never! I couldn't!" exclaimed Winston. His head was spinning. He leaned against the bar to regain his balance.

"Of course you can, Winston! Let's face facts, my friend. Vince has wasted his life. You've said it yourself. He's worthless and that's all he'll ever be," cited Faust. "But Timmy on the other hand! Timmy has his whole life ahead of him! He's going to do great things. He's going to be a doctor! He'll take over Dr. Daniel's practice, and stay in Calamity forever. Just like you want. Just like Matilda wants. It would make Matilda so happy to have her little angel back. Isn't that what you want, Winston? For Matilda to be happy again?"

"I don't believe this is happening. I can't believe this."

"Believe it, my friend! Now sign on the dotted line, and change your life forever!"

Faust pulled a ballpoint pen out of his jacket pocket, and put it in Winston's shaking hand. Winston placed the contract on top of the bar, his hands still shaking. Two inches above the contract, Winston hesitated.
"I don’t know about…"
"Do it for Matilda."

"Vince!"
"I don’t know what happened," exclaimed the truck driver. "He just appeared out of nowhere! I’m so sorry."
"What’s happening daddy?" asked Timmy.
"Go inside Timmy! Matilda, take him inside! NOW!"

Between sobs, Matilda complied, dragging Timmy into the house. As the truck driver continued to apologize profusely, all Winston could think was that it had worked. Faust was for real.

10 Years Later

"Good morning mother, good morning father. I hope that the day finds you well," said Tim. By the time he had hit high school, Tim had grown weary of being referred to as Timmy. It was fine for when he was a child, but once he had hit puberty, it just seemed demeaning.

"How did you sleep, Tim?" asked Matilda. Even though she was a little grayer on top, she was still the same devoted wife and mother she had always been.

"Very well, thank you for asking mother," replied Tim, as he sat down at the kitchen table for breakfast.

"I can’t believe it! It happened again!" said Winston, looking up from the newspaper. Time had taken its toll on Winston as well. He had a bit less hair and a bit more of a gut.

"What happened, sweetheart?"

"They found the body of another girl." A couple of "Oh dears," and "That’s terrible" circulated around the table. For the past month, almost half a dozen teenage girls from all over the county had been raped and murdered.

"This is the fifth victim. Her name was Barbara Sue Brady, and she was from Haventown," said Winston, as he continued to read the article. "And what’s worse, he cuts them up too. Keeps parts of them as souvenirs or something.

"Enough! I don’t want to hear it anymore," said Matilda. "Haventown. That’s just north of here though."

"Do they think it’s the same guy doing it?" asked Tim. "Like a serial killer? We’ve been studying Jack the Ripper in history class. Fascinating subject, really."

"You stop right there, Tim. There is nothing interesting or fascinating about these lunatics. They should all be locked up and the key should be thrown away," proclaimed Matilda.

"Is that so, mother?" said Tim.

"Don’t talk back to your mother, boy," said Winston, stepping into the fray.

"Yes. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to speak back. But part of studying medicine is not just studying the body, but the mind as well," said Tim. "Well, I better get going. Can’t be late for class."

"Sure you can Tim! Ha ha! You’ve already gotten into college. And what a college! John Hopkins! Have I told you how…" Winston would have continued, but began to have another violent coughing fit. They had gotten worse over the years. Matilda and Tim rushed to his side.

"Winston, are you alright?"

Winston got the coughs out of his system, and took a few deep breaths before saying "Yes, yes, I’m fine."

"Father, once I become a doctor, I promise that I’ll find a cure to whatever it is you have," said Tim. "I’ve got to get to school though, but I’ll see you later."

Tim got up, kissed his mother on the cheek, and walked out the door.

"He’s such a good boy, isn’t he?" said Matilda, as she began to clean off
the kitchen table.

“Sure is.”

“And I know it’s your day off, but I want you to disassemble Tim’s old playhouse. It’s gotten disgusting, attracting all sorts of vermin and animals.”

“Ok, ok. Never knew rats were attracted to wood though. Must be using it for a shelter or something.”

Winston made his way through the Dead Woods, stepping over branches and muck. In one hand, he had his axe. After all these years, he was still able to spot the playhouse from 50 yards away. Even though the paint was peeling, and the wood had been battered by the elements, it still stood. As he got close to the playhouse, a horrible smell almost knocked him back. The structure and the surrounding area reeked of decay. Winston pulled out a handkerchief and held it to his nose.

“Matilda wasn’t kidding when she said this thing was going to hell.” Winston said, as he reached for the door. Just when he reached to turn the handle, Winston’s wrist was grabbed and pulled away. He turned to see Timmy standing there.

“Jesus Christ boy, you damn near gave me a heart attack!”

“I’m sorry father. Didn’t mean to scare you. But may I ask what you’re doing?”

“Just checking out the old playhouse. Your mother wants me to take it apart. The thing is just about ready to go,” said Winston. “And shouldn’t you be at school?”

“I forgot my books, and I saw you in the woods,” said Tim.

“Oh. Ok.”

“Do you mind if we wait until I get home from school? We can do it together,” said Tim.

“Sounds good to me. Tonight, this house comes down!”

The sun had set, and Winston and Matilda were getting worried. “It’s just not like him to be this late,” sighed Matilda. “I hope he’s all right.”

“I’m sure he’s fine. But he better have a damn good explanation.” Replied Winston.

“Winston! Watch your language.”

“Sorry. But I wasted my whole afternoon waiting for him so we could take apart that playhouse. You know what though? I’m just going to go do it myself.”

“Ok. But when Tim gets back, we’re going to give him a good talking to.”

Winston was about to go over to the shed and grab his axe, but then remembered that he had left it leaning against the playhouse. It was pitch black out though, so he grabbed a lantern, lit it up, and starting making his way back through the woods.

“Hello?”


“Oh how are you doing this evening, Lou?”

“Not too good. Anne Harmony was found dead this afternoon.”

“Oh my! That’s terrible. She was such a sweet girl. I think she was in a few of Tim’s classes.”

“It’s such a tragedy. And they think it’s the same guy whose been doing it all over the county,” said Lou. “And what’s worse is that some of her... her innards were missing.”

“I don’t believe this. What kind of human being would do something like that! And what kind of parents must they have had. Now I’m really worried. Have you seen Tim around?” asked Matilda. “He went to school today and never came home.”

“No, but I’ll keep a look out for him.”
Winston once again approached the decaying playhouse. The smell was still there, but Winston tried his hardest to ignore it. He looked around the playhouse for his axe, but it was nowhere to be found. Did he bring it back to the shed? No, he definitely left it here. He must be losing it in his old age. Winston opened the playhouse door, and the smell was twice as bad inside. Winston stepped back a few yards and dry heaved. It smelled absolutely putrid in there. He lifted up his lantern and forged back towards the playhouse, illuminating what was inside.

Body parts. Organs. A liver. A spleen. A pancreas. Assorted innards. All of which were partially dissected. The table inside was covered in dried blood. Medical books were piled in the corner. An anatomical chart was hung up on the wall, and different sections had been checked off, corresponding to the organs present in the playhouse.

“Oh my lord...” shuttered Winston. He turned around, and ran right into Tim. In one hand was a canvas bag, and in the other was Winston’s axe.

“Excuse me father. May I pass by?” asked a calm and composed Tim. Winston could barely get a breath out, much less form a coherent sentence, so Tim took his father’s silence as a yes and walked past him. He unzipped the bag, and pulled out Anne Harmony’s heart.

“Now this is what I’ve been looking for. That Harmony girl, let me tell you father, when people said she had a big heart, they weren’t kidding. Her heart was six percent bigger than the national average. Could of given her a defect later on, but I guess she won’t have to worry about that from now on, will she? Ha ha!”

“What have you done Tim?” asked Winston who was finally able to speak.

“What do you mean, father?”

“You, you murdered all those girls.”

“So? I needed specimens. How else am I supposed to become a great doctor if I don’t practice practice practice?” said Tim. “Oh yeah, remember Killer? Remember how I said he ran off one day? Well...I lied. He was my first experiment.” Tim pointed to the wall next to the door. Killer was pinned up against the wall. Completely disemboweled.

“You’re insane.”

“Well, we all have to make sacrifices for what we want. Some more than others,” said Timmy, as he grabbed a ballpoint pen and checked off the heart on anatomical chart, as simply as someone would check off tomatoes on a shopping list. Winston began to have another coughing attack.

“Why father, that cough of yours sounds worse by the day. And you know what, I’m going to do something about it. Just come over here,” Tim raised the axe. “And I’ll examine those lungs of yours.” Winston ran back towards the house.

“Some people just don’t know when to listen to their doctor,” sighed Timmy, as he took off after Winston.

Winston was out of breath by the time he made it back to the house. He ran in through the back door, locking it behind him.

“What’s wrong?” asked Matilda. “You look like you just ran a marathon!”

“Call...the...the...”

“Who?”

“The police. It’s Tim. He did it...” wheezed Winston.

“Did what? What are you...” Matilda would of gone on, but the power went out, and they were shrouded in darkness. Through the corner of his eye, Winston saw that Tim was cutting the power line. Sparks flew, illuminating Tim’s steel gray eyes, staring back at him. Matilda picked up the phone.

“The line’s dead.” The sound of glass shattering filled the room, as Tim began to wail on the windows of the back door with the axe.

“Tim! What’s gotten into you?” asked Matilda.

“Get away from him Matilda!” yelled Winston, finally catching his breath.

“Let me in the house, mother!” said Tim, as he continued chopping away at the door. Before Matilda could answer, Winston pulled her away, towards the...
bedroom. They slammed the bedroom door behind them, just as Tim broke through the back door. The couple began to barricade themselves in the room, pushing any furniture they could move against the door.

“What’s going on, I don’t understand!” cried Matilda.

“Don’t you get it? Tim did it. All those girls were him!”

“I don’t believe you! You’re lying!”

“I saw the evidence with my very eyes,” said Winston. “He just killed the Harmony girl today!”

“Oh God!” sobbed Matilda. She ran over to the dresser, pulled out her rosary beads, and began to say the Lord’s Prayer. In the background, the sounds of axe slowly but surely cutting through a solid wood door could be heard.

“I didn’t want this,” Winston screamed.

“Of course you did.”

Winston looked around, and saw Faust standing in the middle of the room.

“How did you get in here?”

“Oh come on now, Winston. I think you’re smart enough to figure that one out,” replied Faust. “But this is what you asked for. Tim’s going to be a doctor!”

“Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name,” chanted Matilda, as Tim broke through a small section of the door.

“Come on out mother! Come on out father!”

“You lied! You said you would change things for the better!” bellowed Winston.

“Perspective, my friend. Perspective. I did say I would make things better, but I never said it would be better for you!”

“You sick son of a bitch!”

“Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven…”

“This is truly a case of the pot calling the kettle black. I’m not the one who traded one son in for another! I may have facilitated the deal, but you are the one who signed on the dotted line. You are the one who signed away Vince’s life!” said Faust, pointing his bony finger directly in Winston’s face. Tim continued to make progress with the door, chopping off another huge section.

“Shut up! Shut up!”

“Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us…”

“Your problem Winston Jameson is that you have a limited view on the world! You can’t see past the town of Calamity! And you’re blind past today! If Vince had lived, if you had allowed him to live, he would have gone on to become a great writer! But that will never be! You’ve damned yourself and your entire family! And that is a burden you must carry forever!

“Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from all evil. Amen.”

Tim broke through the barricade.
Title: Untitled
Artist: Daniel Cooper

Title: Lake Ontario beach on OSU campus
Artist: Kim Trela
the thunder in her heart is apparent to me
the soul in her eyes beams like the sun
you can feel strength in her presence
her love is like an ocean
calm under the faint blue sky
and rough with the changing tides
looking in her eyes you know the depth is there
i am drawn to her presence
wanting to know more with each thought
her laughter is a rainbow, each color shining through
yet you know the sadness is buried
aching in her heart waiting to be set free
her courage is her shield
unwavering from her spirit
i am no where close to uncovering her wonder
and i could only hope to be able to
for she is guarded by a beautiful fortress
within those walls lies exquisiteness beyond imagination
we are more alike than meets the eye
maybe someday we will find out

Say

by words are caged in the memories of past lives
buried from my soul
as if i’ve spoken them before
Making me feel wiser than the owl
who flies from place to place
searching for a spot to nestle
and speak his chant of who
the same question i ask every day
to anyone who ever said i’ll be
someone special to someone

i don’t know what that is like
to be in love
i thought once but that was obsession wrapped in
blanket of affection
now i search for the man to love me
fully and unconventionally
i found a boy once who entered my heart
stomped around, left
and returned again to enter
with honest intentions
i can’t leave me vulnerable to the snake that
bit me once, twice, six times without
being wary and loose in how I feel
now
i've fallen into the arms of another
sweeter still and foreign enough
to tempt me to leave the safe clutches of home
or the boy's arms
it all depends on what day it is
and if the moon is full
now my wisdom fails me
after i said so much
and learned nothing

A Father's Love

Charlie Mack stood by the side of the road, seabag in hand. His face was
dusty from travel and wear. He spit and grimaced, biting down on his lip. There
hadn't been a bus for hours. He looked down the road and saw nothing. No lights
or glint, just a dark and lonely road. It felt good to be outside, he thought. He had
hated the jailhouse.

The cool breeze of a Texas evening swirled by him, at times even chilled
him. He removed a brown jacket from his seabag, pushing aside a small teddy bear
with rust colored stains on it. His face tightened upon seeing the bear; he fought
back the sudden emotion and breathed hard through his nose.

He knew he was trying to run away but he couldn't stay in this town. He
had too many memories here. Everywhere he went he saw them. He remembered
walks in the park and playground events. His baby's first steps had been at a picnic
in the town square. He tried to fight the somber thoughts but they kept coming
faster and faster. Images of happiness shredded by the tears of misfortune. His wife
had died giving birth and he had been off in another county assisting in a drug
bust. He was too busy being "the hero" to see her die. He hated himself for that.
He hated himself for missing her death. He hated his desire to save the day.

As he began to sob he remembered all the bad things he had done to her. He
wasn't the perfect husband but he did love her. So often he made her cry herself to
sleep. If he could just have those moments back he would change them. She knew
he loved her despite his failings as a man to show it properly. She had often
reminded him of the good moments they had shared; homemade pasta and wine;
weekends spent in pajamas. He never got the chance to tell her he was sorry. He
never had the chance to hug her as hard as he could and show her how much he
needed her. How much he loved her.

She had blessed him with a baby, he softly remembered. She had given him a
beautiful little girl whom he decided to give that love to. Never would his baby be
without a caring father. He felt he could make up for the sins of the past by treating his baby like gold.

Charlie saw headlights coming in his direction, but they turned and he sat down. His dirty face was streaked with tears, giving the impression of a sad clown. He wiped them away and they just streaked in another direction, now resembling war paint. He stared up at the sky and wished his family back.

He named the baby Veronica, after her mother, and she lit up his life. He taught her how to walk, how to talk and especially how to play. He loved his little girl so much, sometimes even going so far as taking days off just to take her to the park or to go get ice cream. His love was reflected in her eyes, she adored her daddy.

He cringed as another pang of sorrow and remorse took control of him, this was the part he hated. The recollection that he wanted to rip from his memory. He remembered walking downtown with Veronica holding his hand. She clutched her teddy bear as they walked towards the park. He had a kite he was going to teach her to use. He had special ordered it online; it had her name on it.

A drunken man ran the light that they crossed under and hit them both with his big Texas Cadillac. Charlie was cursed to vividly remember the accident. He remembers his little girl flying up and the confusion as it all happened so quickly. He remembers hearing his own leg snap as he made contact with the bright green Cadillac. He remembers crawling over to where his little girl lay broken and crying. He stroked her hair as an ambulance whistle sounded in the background. She looked at him as if he could fix it. As if daddy could make it all better. He remembers the blood coming out of her mouth when she said “daddy” for the last time.

The drunken man swaggered out of his car and started stumbling and yelling that the light was green. People swarmed the scene and eventually the ambulance came. It took three emergency technicians to pry Veronica out of Charlie’s arms. That was after they sedated him.

Charlie awoke in the hospital, his mangled leg burned but he didn’t really feel pain. The doctor told him that the nerves are dying and that he would be paralyzed in his left leg. Charlie barely heard a word he said. He remembers crying at the wall. The doctor then told him that his baby had died at the scene. Charlie knew this but didn’t shed a tear. Instead a fire flared up inside him. It began in his heart and worked its way into his soul.

He buried his little girl, attending her services in a wheelchair. He held them privately; no one was invited or informed. Veronica was buried next to her mother. The services were held on a damp morning. For weeks afterward Charlie had dreams about the one thing that haunted him about the funeral, the thing that forced him awake at night screaming, the mockery of the child size coffin.

After the accident he was medically retired from the county police department, they wished him well. They gave him a party with balloons and a card. He could see the sadness in their eyes. He didn’t return their sentiment. He didn’t speak much anymore to anyone. He sat angrily in his wheelchair. Everyone pretended not to notice when he left the party early by snapping on his leg brace and hobbling out of the station house.

He drove for hours before finding himself parked in front of the drunken mans house. The green Cadillac had been repaired. Charlie’s face contorted when he glimpsed the man walking past a bay window in the front of his home. He became enraged and hobbled out of the car and up to the front door. He rang the bell, bringing the drunken man to the front porch.

“What do you want from me guy? My insurance company is taking care of everything” yelled the man from behind a screen door.

It was in this awkward moment that Charlie decided to kill the man. He leapt at the man through the screen and tore the screen in half. The man staggered back and fell as Charlie entered his house. Charlie was on him in an instant. Choking him as hard as he could. His hands and fingers were pressed into the man’s neck flesh so hard that Charlie could feel the man’s pulse in the palm of his own hand.
The man fought back weakly, seeming like an antelope in the jaws of a tiger; somewhat accepting his fate. Charlie didn’t stop choking the man until long after the man stopped breathing. He didn’t stop when the man convulsed and writhed. He held on until he heard some bells ringing from the local church. He began to cry. He walked down the street to the church and sat on the steps, still crying. A few hours later the police came and arrested Charlie. He went quietly. In their actions he could see that they understood. He waived a trial and plea-bargained. He remembers spending most of his time in prison drawing pictures of his little girl and beloved wife.

Charlie stood by the side of the road, the bus drawing closer to him. He felt his left pocket; it was full of painkillers. He got on the bus and asked the driver to wake him when they got near the cemetery. He dozed off after that.

A while later the driver thumped him awake. He nodded politely and Charlie exited the bus. He hobbled across the graves toward his family plot. The wind picked up, blowing a mist that wet his white tee shirt. Charlie found his family and sank to his knees. His eyes moistened and he pulled the painkillers from his pocket and swallowed a palmful. He gazed at the tombstones and then kissed each one on their engraved names. He lay back and wait for sleep to gently reunite him with his family. The soft morning sky began to show as Charlie rapidly convulsed. His arms clamped tightly to the bear and ring on his chest, he let escape a soft moan and died.

Colin Abele
Jessica Capton

I am She

She'll make all your nightmares come true
The ones that wake you up hard and sweaty
Wondering where the fuck you thought that up.
She'll strip herself down to the bare,
Nude for you to sit there and do as you please.
Don't you worry about her though; you know she means nothing to the world.
She brought it on herself
She's the one, the one who lead you here,
Here to this place in the dark where nightmares come true.
Disregard the tears falling down her dirty stained cheeks,
Ignore her bruised heart and the sullen face
It's all a trick to make you feel ashamed,
Ashamed of the torture you bring upon her.
Just break through her body, rip her apart
Don't you worry about her though; you know she means nothing to the world.
She brought it on herself
She's the one, the one who lead you here,
Here to this place in the dark where nightmares come true.

Greg Shemkovitz

On the Boat

The spoon and saucer rattled to the rhythm of my nervous leg. I fondled my coffee mug, my eyes scanning the room around us. Maggie sat in her seat across from me at the small kitchen table, skimming the morning edition. I glanced her way, just as she lowered the paper and shot me a look. My brow lifted. Her glare focused on the vibrating spoon.

"Could you?" she asked.

My leg stopped, and the room went still. The only noise came from the wind rattling the drainpipe outside, and the crinkling of Maggie's newspaper between her fingers.

Aside from the bedroom and the bathroom, my apartment was one room, half living room and half kitchen, where we were sitting.

I opened my mouth, and my voice cracked with long-built intensity.

"That's it! On the boat."

She, of course, laughed at this, just what I didn't want. Not this time at least.

"Gimme a break, Clay. How many people are you going to put on that thing?"

She gave a condescending chuckle before taking another sip of her coffee, and returning to the Local Interest Section of the paper.

"No really, you're on the boat."

"For what?"

I had no answer. She looked at my blank expression and took another sip of her coffee.

"Okay, fine, I'm on the boat."

She rolled her eyes and flipped to a different section of her paper.

This had become much harder than I had originally conceived. Being on the boat wasn't just being on the boat, and I could see that she wasn't playing along.
For nearly twenty years, I've been collecting a written list of Hollywood stars, music icons, politicians, television identities, professional athletes, and most importantly, ex-girlfriends, and placing them all on a boat. This boat can't be found anywhere but sailing the seven seas of my morbid mind. It's my boat, containing all those I deem undesirable, and I plan to sink it before I die. For the most part, I've thought long and hard about each person on the list, before making each decision. I've made some hasty choices on occasion. Nevertheless, I have yet to regret any of them.

For instance, it was hard to swallow when I learned that my uncle was abusing his two daughters. Once I saw the bruises though, it was bon voyage to Old Uncle Ernie. Yet, it only took the waiter at Laurie's Diner to forget my pickle, and he was out to sea.

The boat is designed to accommodate as many people as I choose, and never to see land again. I see it as the eternal resting place for all who board the boundless vessel. From starboard to port, bow to stem, packed with anyone from Streisand to Marilyn Mason, from Shelly Duvall to Cher. And I have fun with it. Celine Dion? Try Celine Di-on the boat. That's right. She was spared the inevitable fate of the Titanic, only to plunge into the raging seas of my subconscious. She isn't sinking alone though. Just ask Leonardo DiCaprio.

My first victim, Christopher Walzcahk, never saw it coming. We had gym class together at St. Bonaventure Elementary. Back before dodge ball was eliminated from the activity roster, and kids had the chance to whip a universal ball towards one another's head at break-neck speeds, I'd take liberty in zeroing in on scrawny little Christopher Walzcahk. I loathed the way he laughed like he had a perpetually runny nose, and his incessant need to gloat about his high grades and perfect attendance. I even despised the milky-white residue that collected in the corners of his mouth. So, when I got that big, rubber ball, and Christopher stumbled by with that ungainly physique of his, running as if his legs were never introduced to each other, I'd send that ball sailing toward his head with intent to destroy. One day, he finally confronted me about my obvious focus of aggression. All I could do was throw my thumb through the air like an umpire calling an out, and command, "On the boat."

It's not as if I give these people the silent treatment, or hiss at them in passing. I merely do it for my amusement. Now, when I see these people, I can smile and wave, knowing that in my little world their lives are that much more unpleasant.

And there have been times when I'd make amends, giving the poor souls a chance to redeem themselves. Though, never have I intended on removing anyone from the boat. Never. I express my sympathies, wish them the best, but keep to my word. This pass or fail system has its loopholes, but much like the boat, it's mine, and for once, I have the final say.

"Listen, Maggie. I'm serious this time. Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

As if she didn't even hear me, Maggie gently raised a hand to my cheek, leaned across the table and kissed my forehead.

I sat stunned for a moment, wiping the moisture from my brow.

"Honey, look, I really think we need to talk about this."


"Not really. The way I see it, in a month I'm gone. That's it. I can't handle a long distance relationship."

"We've worked this out, Clay. You'll be three thousand miles away. And for every day you're gone, that's eleven miles."

"What? What the hell kind of reasoning is that?"

I got up and poured more coffee into my mug.

"When I'm done with this shoot, who knows what's next? They're lookin' at me for two other films. That can mean anywhere from two to four more years," I reasoned.
“Good, I’ll take care of the kids,” she countered.

She looked up, with that scrunched smile of hers, and dipped it back down to
the front page of the news.

“We can’t even decide between New York or Los Angeles, and you’re
thinking about having kids?”

“Well, when you get a few solid jobs, I’ll quit teaching, and we’ll have
ourselves a little ocean front place in Malibu.”

“You say it like Spielberg’s dialing our number right now.”

And like that, the phone rang.

We had been through this before. For months I had been looking to end this
relationship, with as few casualties as possible, and she wasn’t making it easy. I
tried getting her to dump me. I’d go to the store for groceries, returning late at
night, furnishing stories about two-dollar hussies, and all-night poker matches,
stumbling around in an indolent haze, hoping she saw me as nothing but a burden.
Instead, she would call my bluff, laughing with each night’s spectacle, trusting that
my imagination was much stronger than my need for cheap thrills.

I decided I’d try to win her father’s hatred. I was determined to end the
relationship without being the antagonist. Before long, he would forbid our dating,
and I’d be off to Los Angeles, free of any ties or ridicule.

Anytime her parents invited us for dinner, I’d purposely run us late. When we
had plans to see Cats, I lost the tickets. The night before her father and I were off
to see the Jets take on New England, I left the tickets in my dirty jeans. The washer
did the rest.

I don’t know if biologically one person’s body shape can differ from another
so much that they tolerate more grief, but if that’s the case, then her entire family
was a phenomenon to physics. Everything, I mean, everything rolled off their
backs with ease. Whether it meant our being late allowed her mother’s bread
stuffing to sit just that much longer, making it as succulent as the recipe promised,

that we missed the devastating rain and freezing winds that plagued the thou-

sands of fans who shivered through New England’s massacre over the Jets. I
couldn’t win. I tried though. I gave it my best effort.

Someone somewhere once said, “It’s better to have tried and failed, than to
not have tried at all.”

You can’t hit the ball from the bench. So, I stepped up to the plate for one last
at bat.

After the second ring, Maggie answered the phone. I could tell from the
sudden squeal in her voice that it was her friend Colleen. I never liked Colleen,
especially when she called while I was trying to end a long relationship with my
girlfriend. Oddly, despite Colleen’s annoying giddiness and incessant chatter, I
never summoned her to the boat. At the rate she was going though, she was next in
line.

I listened as Maggie gabbed on about the latest news and sorted small talk
about what herbal diet she was contemplating next, as if she even needed it. She
was oblivious to my feelings.

I was being too passive, as if, with all the time spent trying to end this
ridiculous relationship, I lost my fight. She was walking all over me, with her
laughing and giggling, just shoving my empty motives in my face.

I watched the coiled phone cord dance across the floor, as Maggie paced the
room. Following the cord to the receiver, my eyes settled on her smile. I couldn’t
stand it.

I ripped the phone from her grip, and hung it up with authority. She gave me
an appalled look.

“What’s gotten into you?”

“Jesus, Maggie. I’d think you’d have the decency to say, ‘Oh, I’m sorry,
Colleen, but I’m sort of busy right now. Can I call you back?’ But, no, you could
care less.”
“Care less about what? You’re going on about nothing.”

“I’m trying to make you understand that in two months, I’m going to be nothing but a memory. You understand that?”

Maggie retreated to the couch, where she sprawled out with a magazine.

“I understand you’re not thinking clearly. You’re obviously under a ton of stress. Go for a walk, play your guitar, or go back to sleep. In any case, get your mind off this shoot.”

“Hello! You’re not hearing me. I’m telling you, it won’t work. You think email and the occasional phone call’s gonna keep us together?”

“I’d like to think you’re going to call everyday.”

I laughed at that. I wasn’t about to call her every single day, not on a cinematographer’s wages at least.

I started cleaning up the kitchen, but found myself finished after the mugs were clean, and the counter wiped.

“I’m going to call Colleen and apologize for your indecency. When I return you better have something good to say.”

She went into the bedroom and closed the door.

I sat down in my favorite chair next to the couch, found an old crossword puzzle book among the magazines on the end table, and began scrolling through it for an unmarked puzzle. Maggie was always leaving them incomplete. It drove me absolutely crazy finding puzzles half-finished. She would do three or four words before moving on to the next. I was tempted to ask her if she ever finished a puzzle in her life, but I really didn’t see much sense in it.

Minutes later, she emerged from the bedroom wearing jeans and my gray hooded sweatshirt. Her hair was up in a bun with little strands hanging loose, which she’d try to tuck behind her ears. She looked adorable.

“Are we calm now, Mr. Grumpy?”

I gave her a glance from the corner of my eye.

“Clay, honey, I don’t see any sense in giving up what we have. Why not give chance, see if it works, and go from there?”

She came up from behind me. I was still searching for a clean puzzle in book. She began to work my neck and shoulders with her warm hands.

“Do you know the statistics?” I asked with little enthusiasm.

I ran my clammy hands through my bed-disheveled hair in frustration.

“Four out of five long-distance relationships fail. That means that we have a forty percent chance of making it.”

She slid her hands down my chest, and rested her chin on my shoulder.

She kissed me on the cheek. I sighed.

“The least we can do is try,” she pleaded.

“I would love to, Maggie. Really, I would. It’s just that I don’t see us making it through this.”

She put her lips to my ear and whispered, “I love you.”

I closed my eyes for a moment, letting the words sink in as the softness of her breath caressed my ear.

Out of all the women I’ve dated, and there have been quite a few, Maggie’s the one I respected the most.

When we first met, I was a regular at a little coffee shop called The Topic, where Maggie’s boyfriend, Lance, happened to do weekly poetry readings. I learned from his short pieces on women, and later his attitude towards me, that Lance had a tendency to be overbearing, and oddly, overprotective.

Maggie and I both appreciated history, and found ourselves in lengthy discussions about the ancient near east, while Lance spent his time nursing his café mocha. One night, after discussing how the water affected the fall of the Roman empire, Maggie called it an early evening and left me with Lance, who by this time was giving off more steam than his mocha. It didn’t take long before I found myself knee-deep in ramblings about how I was invading on his territory, and that my presence was no longer welcomed. I assumed he meant Maggie as the territory,
and that he was just being jealous. So, I let him vent, and kept my mouth shut, that is, until the next time I saw Maggie.

A few days later, Lance had new material about lost love to spew at his audience, and I was plunging into a whole new relationship that would last more than two years.

You’d think that after that long I’d be able to honestly admit that I loved her. With the exception of my mother, I was never able to admit my love to anyone. Only in times of deepest pleasure did I feel the impulse to tell Maggie I loved her, but I didn’t. That was impulse, nothing more.

I never understood the idea of love, or as some call it, the sanctity of love. If it meant giving my life for her, I gladly would. Although, given the nature of the situation, I would like to think that instinct would have me give my life for anyone. And I don’t love everyone.

People in love act like they’ve never learned how to function in public. They tend to lose their bearings, making faces at each other from across the table at diners, polluting our ears with terms of endearment. Young couples should come with a disclaimer: May cause irritability, headaches, and nausea. Use only as directed.

If two people love each other, that doesn’t necessarily mean they’re meant for one another, and visa versa. Many of our friends told us that we were perfect for each other. They said that we clicked. I don’t know if that’s true or not. I’m hardly the judge of perfection. I just know that it’s much easier to slip into oversized pants than ones that fit just right.

When I opened my eyes again, Maggie’s head was still resting on my shoulder. I glanced at the book opened to an incomplete puzzle. Almost immediately I noticed number twenty-four across. Maggie watched as I ran my finger down the page to find the word Dinghy. There were eight spaces.

Maggie chimed in without thinking, “Yacht?”

I thought for a second and answered, “Schooner.”

“Oh, it’s the same thing.” she said playfully.

“Not really, but they’re both...boats.” I muttered, while the book dangled in my fingertips.

I sprang from the chair, nearly tossing her to the floor.

“What’s with you, Clay?”

I threw the book to the couch and began to pace between the kitchen and the living room. I played with my bathrobe strap, searching for the right words to end our tenure with ease.

“This is ridiculous, Maggie. I’m sorry, but I have to end this. I hate to be the bad guy, but if that’s what it takes, then so be it.”

Maggie got up and brushed herself off. She walked over to me and reached for my arms to keep me still. Our eyes met. Her hands ran up and down my arms, like a mother comforting her discouraged child. From afar, it must have looked as though she was trying to keep me warm, and in a way I’m sure she was.

“Sit down, relax. Let’s talk about this. I know we can work this out if we just try to understand each other.”

She was right. I hated her not knowing how I felt. I just hated even more to have to express it.

I yanked my arms from her grip.

“Don’t you see, Maggie? Put a few thousand miles between us, and we’re lost. There’s no use in trying anymore. I can’t waste an opportunity like this. My career is finally taking off, far away from here, far away from you. Can’t you understand that?”

I sat down on the couch, dropped my head into my hands, and sighed in exhaustion. From the way she was standing with her hands searching for something to hold onto, I could tell that she realized what was happening. It was our first major dispute, and the outcome was looking bleak.

She slowly walked over to me, and reached out for my hands. She
crouched down to meet me at eye level. I gazed into her beautiful green eyes, and
for once, I had the courage to get lost in the depths.

She stifled a tear and whimpered, "No, I can't."

My head sank forward, and our foreheads met.

"I can't either." I replied, with a long exhale.

We both sat staring at our joined hands for a brief moment. I could feel her
body trembling. I took a deep breath, catching the scent of her hair, with the musty
smell of my sweatshirt. It cleared me right up.

"Tell me, Clay. Please say it. Just this once."

I raised my head and looked her in the eye. I could see them welling up.

My next three words would determine if those tears were of joy or of sadness. Her
quivering breath made me shudder. My heart skipped a beat.

Her gaze felt like a wrecking ball to my defenses. I closed my eyes,
hoping to escape her love. I wouldn't admit it then, but I was flattered. To be loved
by someone as wonderful as her was a miracle. I knew that. I also knew that
flattery was no reason to stay, especially if I really didn't love her in return.

My mouth fell open, letting those three words cascade from my tongue,
joining her tears in descent.

"On the Boat."
Her white skin
shines like sun
as limbs carve her way

Towards no destination
only away from herself
only away from herself.
Not a Porcelain Doll

Rachel Stark

Take my hand
Kiss my cheek
Hug me
Touch me
Do not just walk around and gaze at me
I promise I will not shatter upon your touch
Ask me questions
Let's talk about life, beliefs, emotions
Please do not surround me with silence
I know things
I have seen things
I have thought about things
Happiness, Sadness, Love, Anger, Compassion, and Wonder have all coursed
through my blood from time to time just like you
When you look at me like that, I want to scream, I want to cry, I want to laugh
For I do not understand why you will gaze at me and then walk away
I am not a porcelain doll

People seem to love to talk about what inspired them when they were children. It could have been a song or a speech or, in the case of a friend of mine, a lap dance. Then again, I haven't seen that friend since the infamous "Wine and Cheese" incident of 1995. For me, it was the messenger, not just the message. It came in the form of a professor of mine when I was a college student at a prestigious university. At least that's what it said in the pamphlet. Truth be told, it was three buildings and a broken gym. Sunroof my ass, they forgot to build a ceiling. There was a history building, a communications building, and a theatre building that doubled as the maintenance guy's tool shed. They couldn't think of a violent or fearless name for our football team. They instead went with something that would strike annoyance in the hearts of our adversaries. We were the Leaky Faucets. The dorm building was out of state. A bus would come every morning and actually take us farther from the school. I didn't quite get it, but it was only forty cents a bus ride. That was a good deal back then. But where was I...

His name was Dr. Interesting. He was neither. He was a short man with buckteeth and a mole that looked like Ingrid Bergman. The irony was he had never seen Casablanca. He wore corduroy pants that were too loose and a sports jacket that was too tight. He reminded me of a big balloon at a Thanksgiving Day parade, mainly because he always tried to hover fifty feet in the air. Some days he would be successful, and others he wouldn't. That was the kind of guy he was. He had a rock garden, but he always complained of a bad harvest. He knew the song O Danny Boy by heart, but only in Latin and could only remember it on Tuesdays. This was very weird because he wasn't Irish. He said he came from a country that was around for six nonconsecutive weeks in the 1940's. We now call it northern Wisconsin. His father, Harry Interesting, was well known for being the originator of the frozen hamster. His mother had absolutely nothing to do with the Spanish-American War.
He taught major historical events on the side.

His biggest class was the study of Rochester, NY in 1929. I asked him what happened in Rochester, NY in 1929 and he replied “Nothing. That’s why you should learn it. History is not always a series of events.” You couldn’t argue with him. No, really, you couldn’t. He developed a rare syndrome in which he only hears Dueling Banjos (not the Earl Scruggs version) when someone talks to him. It was frustrating. He was a huge Earl Scruggs fan.

His classes were always at 5:30 in the morning. They were offered for no credit and filled no prerequisites for any major. He taught the theatre styles of the tasting impaired. His communication classes consisted of an hour and a half of his students asking, “What d’ya say?” to each other. He taught speed-reading to farm animals in his spare time. His office was in the middle of a field near a major highway. He would only meet with you if you could effectively chase him down and hit him with a tranquilizer dart. To him it showed worthiness and was the only way he could write off tranquilizers on his tax forms.

He saw Star Wars thirty six times because he kept looking a way and missing the very end. He hopes someday to catch that squirrel.

He said he knew his place in life. One day, I asked him what is it and he replied “To the left.” He wrote a book a long time ago. Unfortunately, he wrote in a code he didn’t know. He has spent the rest of his weekends trying to decipher it.

He was the head of a department in which you had to guess the name to major in it. I was one of three students to correctly say sandwiches. We were a small group. John Almost had an elbow infection that prevented him from saying the letter r. Simon had no last name but as a substitute he would draw a picture in the air of a bunny. Each morning, we would meet at the dairy farm where the graduate students worked. We walked to class with backpacks and notebooks. No pens or pencils, Dr. Interesting would not allow them. He thought that the blank paper would be a reminder of what happened that day, as long as it was well organized. He was equipped to teach every major that the college had to offer.

much to the dismay of the other professors. He would walk in on other classes already in progress and begin to teach the origins of the plus sign as it relates to jazz-fusion. He had as much tenure as you could get, although he tried fruitlessly to be allowed “double tenure” in which he could teach well after his death. The courts threw out the case when Dr. Interesting, representing himself, used sock puppets as Exhibit A.

I asked him a question after class and he invited me to his home for dinner. He lived above a combination bowling alley / parochial school his brother owned. His wife was six foot eight with a balance problem. He had twins born four months apart. In the corner was a mocking bird. She was preparing a burnt turkey, so all she could offer was dark meat and dark meat. She served a red wine made in the distant future. I got to tell you, we are in for a good year. An old woman dressed in black sat at the head of the table eating noodles. I leaned over to ask Dr. Interesting who she was.

"Is this your sister?"

"No", he replied

"Oh, this must be your mother."

"Nope", he said before he bit into his soup. (It was tough soup.)

"Your wife’s sister or mother?" I was starting to run out of options.

"Umm...No and no," he said after a pause.

"Well, I said politely, “If you don’t mind me asking, who is she?”

"We don’t know," He simply replied while fighting to cut his soup.

"I’m sorry, How’s that?"

"She came to us three years, four months and...eighteen days ago," he said as he looked at his watch. “She speaks no English, but she pays the rent on time and she got the kids ready for their pinochle tournament."

"Oh, I didn’t know you had rooms to rent here"
“Neither did we,” he replied. “Thank God she came or we never would have known.”

After the meal, the two boys, both named Al but with different pronunciations, went to play out in the front yard. I took this opportunity to ask him what I had always wanted to ask him. “Why did you decide on teaching?” He replied, “I didn’t like lawn darts.” He then excused himself from the room to make sure his sons weren’t biting each other. Shelia leaned forward and replied to me softly, “He always loved teaching. It’s in his blood. His grandfather instructed artists in suffering. On our first date, he explained to me the evolution of houseplants. You know, you are his favorite student.” I asked why and she simply said, “You remind him of himself when he was young…”

I left the house as the whole family fell asleep to their favorite album “Traffic Jams in D major”. I walked home just as the sun was coming up. I realized finally who I was and where I belong. To the left. I got to my dorm and collapsed on my bed. My roommate was just done typing his paper for his Intro to Asian Contraceptive class. He asked me where I had been. I honestly didn’t know how to respond. I just said to him I went for a walk. As I left for the shower, I found myself singing O Danny Boy. At least I knew it was Tuesday.

This is dedicated to all the teachers who inspired me. As I look back, I realize that it is the most eccentric ones that make the biggest impact on their students.

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Tomas Hoffman

Every Writer

Every writer is an alcoholic.
He may not drink, he may never have taken a sip,
But he still craves negation of predictability and accountability.

Every writer is a heroin pig.
He longs for the automation of opiate dreams,
And the simplicity of primal motivation,
Needing to do, rather than Wanting to.
Stealing, selling, repeat.fuck caution,
They ignore distraction with admirable hate.
Dark deeds, one answer.

Somewhere, everywhere, a man gets up again to work.
Coffee, drive, coffee, work, eventually sleep.
Meanwhile the writer slips into his home while he is away making the rent,
He steals his television, his toaster, and his wife's jewelry,
Only to love what he has done if he is praised.

Every writer remembers being young and naive.
But every writer is never naive right now.

Every writer loves himself.
It's the vanity of words,
He never runs out of things to say.
Occasionally he will pretend to be speechless for aesthetic value,
But sex is the only motive.
And when the world stops reading his work,
When they stop listening to his word,
He merely has to please himself.
Every writer is a gambler.
In alternate geography, past tense,
He loves having lost 3 weeks pay at the track.
He can't elegantly compose without debt looming over his head.

Every writer hates mirrors, but they all own at least one.
Every writer is God.
Existentialism...why not?
Religion is someone else's book.

Writing is the promissory note to organized religion,
An IOU for immortality,
To avoid the work of pre-modernity.
Remember guilt?
I don't.

What the writer sees is what the writer gets.
But what the writer sees, is never what you get.
It may sound lovely,
But you weren't there.

Every writer is a liar.

Don't believe me,

Text is a euphemism for lie.

Sara Wall

Tears

Salty droplets, cascading down from deep
And endless pools of color.
The release of contained emotion
Flowing, escaping, here then gone.
Ones of joy, ones of pain, uncorked like a bottle of champagne.
A silent show of unheeded feelings;
The breathless unveiling of forgotten others.
Love, greed, agony, frustration.
Four to choose from, and yet an endless
List still unmentioned.
Causing embarrassment beyond comprehension,
They're the object of cruel taunting and tormenting;
The proof of long-gone memories,
And the tale of what once was of essence.
Peeping out after constant prodding and invasion
into human sensitivity,
Comes the action of release... called by many names
And yet the same.
A simple word for such a huge range
Yet one that sums it up quite well.
The word sits perfectly upon my tongue,
Took for granted and yet so valuable.