

QUAD



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Cover image: Greer Dauphin, *Prayin' Man's Retribution*, graphite on paper, 12 x 3 1/2' (3.7 x 1.1 m).
Page 1 image: Greer Dauphin, *Void III*, graphite and charcoal on paper, 3 x 4' (.91 x 1.2 m).

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EDITORS' TOP CHOICES

Prose: "Blood, Paint, and Rubber," Paul Blom

Poetry: "Church," Madison Underwood

Art: *Untitled*, Juliet Pruitt (pg. 79)

Cover: *Prayin' Man's Retribution*, Greer Dauphin



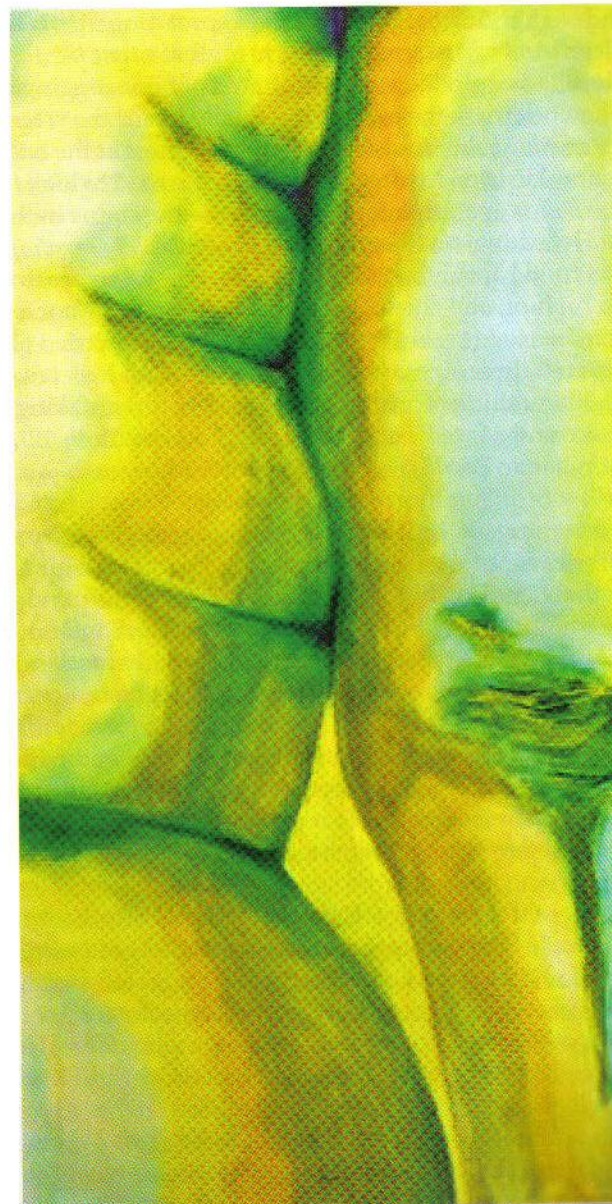
Paul Blom

Blood, Paint, and Rubber

Tom stood at the corner of 12th Street and Gardendale Avenue, running his fingers down the spine of *The Old Man and the Sea*, savoring the touch of the tattered binding as he waited for the stoplight to change. His knees were aching from the long walk from his apartment to the town square, a walk that was getting longer with each passing week. He sighed, wondering how many more walks his fifty-seven-year-old bones could take. Only a couple more blocks until he could find a bench in Brigham Memorial Park, rest his legs, and reread one of his favorite books, simultaneously eavesdropping on the gossip of other Durand citizens. When the light over Gardendale Avenue changed to yellow, Tom shifted and caught a glare of sunlight in his eyes from the large storefront window of Blue Tunes Music, the local instrument-and-repair shop that dominated the corner. He glanced back toward the window as a twenty-something employee in torn jeans and a yellow vest washed the windows, each swipe of his squeegee removing a strip of soapy water and increasing the glare.

Tom glanced down at the book in his hands once more, flipping through the yellowed curling pages. When his eyes returned to the stoplight, it had changed to red, and the pedestrian sign was flashing its little white man, frozen forever halfway to his destination. Tom shut his book and stepped off the curb and onto the crosswalk. It was a warm day with only a few wisps of cloud dotting the otherwise clear Georgia sky. Tom allowed himself a little smile, and at the same moment, he caught a flash of dark purple in his peripheral vision.

He turned just in time to look the driver straight in the eye before the pain tore into his pelvis and abdomen. The smear of purple was sliding across his vision, mixing with the white illuminated pedestrian and the red stoplight and countless other colors. *What's a young girl like that doing driving a purple station*



Juliet Pruitt, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 18 x 36" (45.7 x 91.4 cm).

Pg. 82: Juliet Pruitt, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 18 x 36" (45.7 x 91.4 cm).

Pg. 89: Juliet Pruitt, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 18 x 36" (45.7 x 91.4 cm).

wagon? he wondered, trying to ignore the pain spreading up his rib cage and down into his legs. And *what a strange thing to think at a time like this*, he observed. It felt as if his pelvis had exploded, sending shards of bone digging into every organ in his body. When he struck the asphalt, he finally heard the screeching tires and then someone screaming. He could feel warm stickiness at the back of his head. His book was gone. He tried to lift his head from the road to look for it but could only manage to roll his eyes back far enough to see the statue in the town square.

"Mom! He's down on the ground, and he's barely moving!"

His eyes rolled around and he found the person screaming. It was the teenager who'd hit him, and she was screaming into a cell phone. Behind her on the corner, a man in a jogging suit was talking to 911. Tom tried to focus on the girl, but his brain felt three sizes too big for his skull and his eyes couldn't focus. She was fading out, nothing more now than a red t-shirt and long black cords, hair that rested around a face he could no longer make out.

"Mom! What do I do?"

The girl's words summoned the fragment of a memory. *Mommy, what happens next?* For a moment, he didn't understand why those words had echoed in the back of his head, but the desperation and terror in that girl's voice brought back a memory that had been hiding deep in the back of his mind. He felt empty, drained, and he fought to stay in the present, to stay alert and not lose consciousness, but the more the teenager screamed at her mother, the more distant everything else became. As his eyes slipped shut, even her voice faded out and a memory suddenly flashed throughout his brain like an electric jolt. For the last fifty years, he had forgotten all about the nightmare he'd had with the elephant. He had remembered it as a child, but over the years, it had faded away. By his own teenage years, he had managed to repress it completely. Bits and pieces came back now of the most terrifying nightmare he'd ever experienced, the moment he first came to understand mortality.

But he fought that memory. He pushed them away, back into the depth of his brain where they'd been hiding for so many years. There were a few pieces that surfaced and fought to come together, but he struggled to scatter them so he wouldn't have to relive the desperate lonely moments. Instead of returning to a childhood dream, he focused on the memories of his day. That dream he'd had so long ago had brought with it an understanding of death, and if he was reliving that dream, it might mean he was dying. He couldn't let that happen. Not now. He had worked so hard for the future, and that future was only a few more years away. It could not be denied him. So he fought the memory and concentrated on his day leading up to the moment of the purple station wagon. He concentrated so diligently that soon everything else faded away. Soon, it felt as though he was reliving his day all over again.

Tom's eyes popped open as the fog of sleep lifted. Louis Armstrong was on the radio, but his music-making only lasted seven seconds before Tom rolled over to turn off his alarm clock. The digitized numerals read 7:30 a.m. He rolled out of bed and walked across the room. A quick look out the window of his one-bedroom

apartment fulfilled his hopes for a clear April Saturday. The ground looked dry, and there were hardly any clouds to bother the sun in its slow trek across the sky. The fourth day in a row without a hint of last week's storms. "Looks like another sunny day," he murmured as he went into the bathroom to shower.

By 7:50, he was dressed and leaving his apartment, a book in one hand as he locked the door with the other. His apartment, which was on the second floor, exited onto a concrete walkway with a wrought-iron stairway to the parking lot. As he walked down the steps, he could feel his knees creaking and wondered how many more eight-hour shifts he could endure. At least today was Saturday.

On weekends, he broke routine and let himself sleep in an hour and a half later than usual. Instead of driving across town to compete with everyone else on the way to the Muscogee County Industrial Park, he could enjoy his two free days. He could stroll around Durand's town square, get his blueberry muffin and cup of coffee, and enjoy the *Durand Daily*, the town's only newspaper. Then, it was off to the park, down near the high school, only half a dozen blocks away. He would find his usual bench, at the edge of a grove of sycamores, and he would make a home for himself until mid-afternoon, rereading one of the four books he owned. All four were weather-beaten and falling apart from being read too many times. His copy of *Great Expectations* had belonged to his mother, dead almost twenty-five years now. In high school, his class had been assigned to read *The Old Man and the Sea*, and at the end of the semester, Tom had simply forgotten to turn it back in to the teacher. Next was *The American Collection of the Best Short Fiction of 1972*, an anthology his brother, Charlie, had given him only a few years before their mother's death. Finally, *Toulouse-Lautrec: Biography of a Master*, which Tom had purchased from a thrift store for seventy-five cents last June as a birthday present for himself. Other than a belated card from his sister, Felicia, who lived in Birmingham, the book was the only thing he received.

This month, it was *The Old Man and the Sea* that he carried to the park each weekend where he could read and indulge in one of his most addictive vices: people-watching. He thrilled in observing their interactions, innocently eavesdropping on their conversations. They all talked about inconsequential things, about people whom he would never meet, experiences he might never understand, but he found it somehow peaceful. Sitting there, surrounded by groups milling about, families enjoying each other's company, couples hiding in the shadows to kiss and touch, he never felt alone. And someday, he'd think back on each face and gesture and he'd have the time and money to paint it all, those few snatches of life in Durand that seemed beautiful. Someday, when he was done with work, he would open that box of art supplies waiting for him in the back of his closet. Someday, his fingers would stop aching enough to let him enjoy the feel of a paintbrush in his hands once more.

At the foot of the stairs, he greeted his downstairs neighbor, Ms. Dowsley. Wrapped in a fluffy pink bathrobe, she was busy sweeping the area in front of her door, but she still took the time to wave to him.

"Morning, Tom. How's work going?"

“Same old, same old, ma’am. Chemicals come in, and the rubber goes out.”

Ms. Dowsley pursed her lips and arched an eyebrow. Her hair was wrapped in a towel, which meant she had only recently finished showering. Somehow, though, she’d found the time to put on makeup before hurrying outside to sweep. “Now, Tom, we’re all grown-ups here, and we’ve been neighbors for how many years? When are you gonna drop all this ‘ma’am’ junk and start calling me Carla?” Her fingers strummed the broom handle as she grinned at him.

Tom forced a smile. “Old habits die hard, I guess. My mother always taught me that good Southern boys say ‘ma’am’ when addressing a lady.” He was already turning to head out for the day. He didn’t have time to think about the widow-Dowsley’s graceful form or her fifty-four year-old skin that somehow

remained smooth and firm. “Don’t work too hard, Ms. Dowsley.”

She returned to her sweeping, struggling to rid her stoop of pollen and pine straw. “Don’t be a stranger, Tom. I’ll get you to stay for tea one of these days.” She paused and he was sure that he could feel her eyes on him as he kept walking away. “Just remember to call me Carla the next time you see me, okay?”

But it wasn’t okay. He wasn’t willing to admit that fact to his neighbors, especially on such a pretty April morning. Instead, he kept walking, strolled past his car in the parking lot and turned right onto the sidewalk that followed Baldwin Street toward the Durand town square. No, it wasn’t okay at all because the moment you drop the polite pretenses and really *get to know* a person, you’ve opened yourself up to the possibility of losing them, of hurting them, or of letting them hurt you.

When he came to the intersection of Baldwin and Walsh, he paused and gazed down Walsh Boulevard. A few miles down was Mile Hill Cemetery. It was well out of his sight, but he’d visited enough to know. He pictured the graves of his parents, side by side. As he crossed

Walsh and continued along Baldwin Street, the old resentment welled up inside him as he remembered screaming at his mother while they stood in the family kitchen over thirty-five years ago.

He could still feel the peeling yellow linoleum floor as he dragged his sneakers over it before finally exploding, screaming at his mom because his father was not there to take it. “Dad’s a drunk, ma. That’s it. He wasted his life, and now he’s dying, and it’s his own fucking fault!”

The memory still made him flinch; picturing his mother’s face, looking older than it should with too many gray hairs from working too many hours at part-time jobs in order to pick up the slack for her alcoholic husband. “Tommy,” his mother had said, her voice weak and tired. “Cirrhosis of the liver. That’s what the doctor said. Our insurance couldn’t come close to covering all of the costs to treat him. You know we’ve been doing our best, but costs just keep piling up.”

The letter in his pocket had caused him to hop in his car, leave campus and drive out of Atlanta and halfway across the state, back to his house in Durand. What he had to say to her could not be done over some payphone in one of the dorm hallways. He pulled out the letter, skimmed down to the final paragraph, and read it aloud to her. “If you are unable to pay your outstanding balance to the school, you will not be allowed to register for fall courses. Seeing as how special financial accommodations have already been made for past semesters, we can no longer allow further delinquencies on payment. If this matter is not cleared up *immediately*, you will no longer be welcome at this institution.”

She had been crying then, even as he threw his book bag down onto the linoleum floor where it busted at the seams, sending textbooks, papers, and a few paintbrushes and charcoal pencils fluttering amidst dust. Her back had already been bad then, too stiff and pained for her to keep the house clean. He sighed, gesturing to his ruptured book bag and its spilled contents. “I guess I won’t need *those* anymore.”

He kept his eyes focused on the floor as he spoke. “For the last eighteen months, since we first found out about Dad’s condition, I’ve been busting my ass, loading delivery trucks at night to help pay for classes during the day, to ease *your* burden, so you could focus on Dad. And now I find out...that it was all for nothing.”

As Tom thought back on that day, he hated himself for ignoring the pain of a wife losing her husband. However, he simultaneously hated her for not understanding his own pain and frustration. He hated his father for being a drunk. He hated his siblings—Gordon, Charlie, and Felicia—for having moved away, for being older and able to grow up and get out before things got bad and ruined their lives. But in the kitchen all those years ago, no one had been there to yell at but his mother. “Tell me, ma, why did I work so hard to help pay for school if it was never going to help me in the end?” He balled up the letter from the college and dropped it to the floor. “Shit, I could have been going out every night getting drunk with my buddies instead of going to work. I could have slept in instead of studying or going to class. But here I am. Fucked out of a degree because we have to spend our money on Dad’s drinking.”

His mom reached out to him then, going for his shoulders. He couldn’t tell if she was trying to lean on him for support or about to try to shake some sense into him. He’d swerved away from her in revulsion, as if avoiding a bum on the street grabbing at him for some change. “Tom, don’t you want your father to get better?” Now she was leaning on the kitchen counter, shaking with sobs. “I know this is...hard for you...but he needs *help*.”



"I'm tired of helping, Mom! Parents take care of their kids, not the other way around! I know he needs help, but..." He slammed a fist into the refrigerator door, sending magnets, photos, newspaper clippings, and appointment slips for doctor visits tumbling to the floor. He turned to her. "You know that all I want to do is paint, but the supplies I need cost money. I need a degree!" He grabbed at a random sheet of paper off the counter and balled it up. "I need that slip of paper to get an easy, steady job so I have the time and energy and cash to paint. If I don't go to college, I'm stuck here, another townie, working forty- or fifty-hour weeks just to get by. I got good grades, a measly academic scholarship, student loans, and that's still not enough! Not when my tuition money has to go to Muscogee County Hospital. I've busted my ass so I can get the hell out of here just like you always told me I could." He threw the balled-up scrap of paper to the floor.

"His drinking... It's a disease, Tom. That's what doctors are saying now. He can't help it." She was on her hands and knees, muffling the moans of pain as she collected the objects he'd knocked from the fridge.

He stood there, looking at her bent back and her tears falling onto coupons and other scraps of paper on the floor. He saw the slight dent in the door of the fridge and then looked down at his bleeding knuckles. The rage and terror in his body made him tremble so hard he thought it might never stop. He might never be able to hold a paintbrush again without shattering it inside an angry fist.

He stormed out then and drove back to Georgia State University in Atlanta, but his college career only lasted a few more months. When the end of the spring semester neared and it was time to register for the following fall, he was turned away from registration. He ignored his parents' phone calls and letters and refused to come home. He kept his job loading trucks at night and struggled to paint during the day. Over the summer, he crashed on a friend's couch in a downtown apartment, offering a bit of cash for the rent whenever he managed to sell a painting for a meager fifteen or twenty bucks, mostly to other college students eager to decorate their drab dorm rooms or apartments.

He had been given a second chance, just before the beginning of August, to register for the fall, but since his family had still not been able to pay tuition, his time at Georgia State came to a close, one year shy of a degree. A few weeks into the fall semester, his friend's patience wore thin. Tom jumped from pal to pal, but four more months found him sleeping in his car and bathing at sinks in public restrooms, out of money to give friends for food or rent. When his oldest brother, Gordon, tracked him down to tell him of their father's death, he returned to Durand. He spent a week at his mother's home, consoling her and visiting with the rest of the family in from out of town. Gordon, ten years his senior, spent a week at the Holiday Inn downtown with his wife and their two kids while Charlie, two years younger than Gordon, stayed at the home of a high school friend in Durand. Meanwhile, both Felicia and Tom stayed with their mother. After the week had passed, everyone else went back to their own lives, but Tom had no life to return to. Gordon went back to South Carolina and his consulting firm. Charlie returned to his teaching job in Savannah, and Felicia went back to Shelby County Jail where she worked as a counselor for prisoners.

So Tom moved back into his old bedroom, and the week turned into a month, which became several months. He bounced around from fast food restaurants to landscaping companies and finally found a job as a mill worker at Edelson Rubber Specialists.

They paid at the end of each week at Edelson, and the day he received a check for his first full week, he cashed it in full and placed a deposit for a one-bedroom apartment about ten blocks away from the town square. He packed up his things, even his few remaining brushes and blank canvases, and moved out the same day.

He visited his mother across town once a week, but those visits were usually silent lunches followed by a bit of TV and a hasty goodbye with promises for another, longer visit soon. His mother hung on for about ten more years before completing their twin plot up on Mile Hill.

So Tom kept people at a distance. His siblings had never been very close, and their final connection had been their parents. Now they spoke through greeting cards and occasional Christmas morning phone calls. But even those were pained. Talking to Gordon or Charlie or even Felicia just reminded Tom of how little they really knew him, how much older and more distant they had been when everything had really turned for the worse. It just made him hurt more when he heard their voices and thought back on his days as a part of a family.

Now, the only family members he needed were the ones he watched on Saturdays like this one, and he allowed himself a slight grin as he thought of his bench in Brigham Memorial Park, its wooden slats that would be nice and warm from the bright April sun. Even now, as he walked north along Baldwin toward the town square, he glanced around and noticed dogwood trees in bloom and magnolia leaves that adopting a deep rust tone as spring neared its end. The heat of another approaching summer felt almost revitalizing after the long week Tom had just had. He'd worked overtime nearly every day, and although he was happy for the extra money, it was starting to take its toll. The plant's high ceilings and large expanses of space remained dim and dingy no matter how many fluorescent lights Hayworth, the plant manager, installed. Every Saturday away from Edelson's became more and more of an escape, making him feel like a prisoner enjoying fresh air in the exercise yard after a sixty-hour week of rubber mixing.

The past week had started off slow. He'd gone in on Monday and suffered through the stories of his coworkers as they gloated about how they'd blown their paychecks that weekend. Standing at the mixing tank, he was busy doing the same thing he did every morning, the same thing he'd done every morning for the last God-knows-how-many years. Reading line by line the recipe for the particular rubber compound they had to mix, he would locate the needed

He saw the slight dent in the door of the fridge and then looked down at his bleeding knuckles.

chemical and pour the appropriate amount into the mixing tank. Chemical number 60523—that's sodium oxide—at thirty-seven kilograms. In his head, he imagined he was mixing scarlet 9 to get the perfect shade for a night sky over a landscape.

Darryl Garcia, his Monday morning partner at the mill, had apparently spent his Friday night at a bar, *the bar*, in Durand, simply known as "The Pub."

"Yeah, since I'd agreed to work that extra Thursday night shift for Skinny, I had some extra cash to throw around, so me and my buddies, I bought em all a round of shots Friday night."

Chemical number 40239, carbon black, at forty-four kilograms. Black 4 to darken the scarlet.

"God, I got so friggin' wasted. I think I might have ended up buying drinks for the whole damn place at one point. But hey, I worked hard for that money. I deserved to party."

Chemical number 50642, dipropylene glycol, at nineteen kilograms. Azure 7 for hints of a brighter shade. As Tom cut open the bag and poured in its contents, dust flew up, so Darryl couldn't see Tom rolling his eyes. Besides, he was too absorbed in his own enthralling account of his weekend.

"And hey, it paid off, too. Some girl there got pretty impressed with all the dough I was throwing around. I bought her a few drinks. We were just sitting there at the bar. I lit her cigarette. Girls like that gentleman bullshit, ya know? Anyway, pretty soon, I was cracking jokes like nobody's business, and every time she laughed, she put her hands on my leg and leaned forward, real sexy-like."

Chemical number 80742, plasticizer paste, at twenty-three kilograms. Touches of yellow 11 for faint stars. Every week, he had to listen to the rest of the guys gloat about how they had blown all of their money, as if it was something to be proud of. I got a new stereo. I went to a bar. I took my girl out to dinner, real fancy, real high class. Even the guys who worked in the office up front did the same thing. They wasted their money on toys for kids that didn't need any more toys, or they bought a new car when the one they drove to work everyday had nothing wrong with it other than the fact that it wasn't the latest model. He never dared lecture the office workers, but back in the plant, he'd spent years wasting his breath, lecturing the plant workers on what he did, saving every penny, only spending on the absolute necessities. Because you never know when you're gonna get fired or when the guys in the suits are gonna walk in and tell you that your wages don't fit into their numbers game anymore, that the Edelson deck of cards had to make room for some more kings and queens, so the twos and threes just had to go.

"I can't remember the rest of the night too well. All I know is that when I got back from the john after throwing up—just a little, probably something I ate, cause Lord knows I can hold my liquor—she was gone."

Chemical number 50314, sulfur dioxide, at thirty-one kilograms. As the day wore on, he forgot about color as the numbers and chemicals dominated his focus.

"Why don't you try savin' for retirement, Darryl?" Tom was still pouring the last of the thirty-one kilograms when he felt the words slipping from his mouth.

"Shit man. I'm only twenty-eight. Maybe you gotta worry about stuff like that, but not me." Darryl was finally lending a hand and reaching for a box containing packets of the next needed chemical. "I mean...no offense, Tom."

Tom nodded as he tossed the now-empty bag into the industrial-sized trashcan beside the mixing tank. "Everybody's gotta start saving sometime. I've been savin' up since I started here." He watched Darryl pour the last of the packet into the tank. Zinc sulfide at eleven kilograms. "That the last one on the list?"

Darryl nodded and Tom walked over and pushed the "mix" button. Two red lights atop the tank began flashing and a brief horn blasted, warning those nearby to avoid placing their limbs anywhere in the vicinity of the machine as a pipe pushed the contents of the tank downward, condensing and heating the chemicals.

The two of them stepped away and walked toward the gauges on the far end of the machine. Darryl watched the pressure gauge while Tom watched the timer. Three minutes, thirty-five seconds. That's all it took to change one thing into another. They stood there silently, watching the pressure build and the seconds slink past.

They had about ninety seconds left when Darryl broke the silence, or what could pass as silence in the noisy plant. "Don't you ever go out and party, Tom? I mean, I know you're getting up there in years, but everybody's gotta go out and blow a few bucks now and then. Am I right?"

Tom didn't dare take his eyes off the clock. If the compound was mixed for too long, it'd burn and be useless. If they took it out too soon, it wouldn't be dense enough, but once you take it out of the mixer, you can't put it back in. It just wouldn't mix right after being exposed to the cold air. If you stop watching the clock for just one second, it might malfunction and you'd never know. You'd just be stuck with a batch of useless rubber, good for nothing but the trashcan.

So he stared straight ahead as he answered. "Darryl, I'm fifty-seven. I've been pinching every penny all my life. Not because I'm cheap. I enjoy life, and I don't begrudge anyone anything. But I work hard for my cash, and I won't let go of it easily. I don't wanna die penniless. I wanna be able to live comfortably one day." There was about forty-five seconds left. "In three years, I'm gonna be able to retire. I'll have enough saved up so I won't have to work anymore. No more grabbing at other people's hours. No more offering to come in early and stay late. No more having to get up and come in no matter how tired or sick I feel." About twenty seconds left. "Then, I can go do all the things I've denied myself since I was a kid. I could have all the time in the world to paint. Time and energy and the stuff I need to paint right up until the day I die, and I wouldn't even have to worry about having to go all over Durand and trying to sell any of it. I could even move outta Durand."

The horn went off and the lights flared briefly again as the time ran out. Tom already had his hand hovering above the "mix complete" button, and when

the horn sounded, his hand came down on it. The metal piston lifted slowly, and the two listened as gears beneath the machine pulled the conveyor belt upwards, lifting the box in which they had poured the various chemicals. The box ascended on the belt high above the machine and to the opposite end, pausing briefly before turning over and dumping out its contents, about 120 kilograms of condensed rubber, compound B-53. Soon, the tremendous block of rubber would be flattened into sheets and then cut into strips for processing.

"Where you thinkin' of movin' to, Tom?" Darryl asked as he wiped sweat from his face.

Tom turned away, checking off the first compound on their list. With his back still to his coworker, he replied, "I don't know. Maybe Florida. My brother lives there and says it's beautiful. I'd like to get a place near the beach where I could walk right out onto a little back patio and paint. I've always wanted to try to paint the ocean."

Over his shoulder, Tom heard Darryl's response. "I didn't know you were into that artsy stuff, Tom." A siren went off somewhere across the plant as another mill completed its first batch. "Man, if you wanna paint, just get yourself one of those watercolor sets at the Dollar General. Paint me a pic of that cute secretary in Personnel. See if she won't let you paint her naked." When Tom turned around, Darryl was staring straight at him. His expression was dead serious. "Chicks go for shit like that, man."

"Should we move him?" Mom! What do I do? *Mommy, what happens next?* Chicks go for shit like that, man.

The thought of the twenty-something secretary in Personnel made Tom think of the teenager behind the wheel of the purple station wagon, the teenager now asking whether or not she should move him. He was still on the ground, but people were crowded around him now. He'd relived so much of his day already, memories of memories, and time was running out.

Someone was telling everyone else to stay back, to let him breathe. Don't move him or it could increase the bleeding. Just wait for the paramedics to arrive. Good, he had more time. He didn't want to die, not yet. And he wasn't ready to relive that nightmare of his childhood. So he forced his mind to submerge back into the events leading up to the accident, holding off death just a little longer.

As Tom continued down Baldwin, his fingers were clenching imaginary paint brushes. He'd given up so much to guarantee a future of painting. His time in Atlanta, struggling to survive with part-time jobs and painting, struggling to live the kind of life he wanted, had proved to him once and for all that such a life was possible only with enough savings. As he looked around at the other various people walking through downtown Durand, the storefronts and scattered houses, he smiled. Durand inspired him, but it did not allow him to paint. The few times he had attempted to paint in his apartment, he'd been unable to get numbers and chemicals out of his head. His knees and fingers and back ached too much from work. He ended up throwing his paint brushes across his cramped living room,

praying that he'd have enough money to escape this world to one where he could be free.

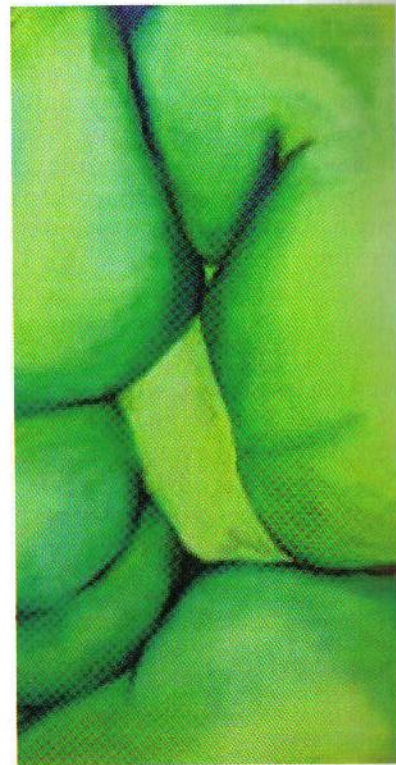
He pulled out his pack of Camel Lights and retrieved a cigarette. His one vice, his one frivolous allowance, was an occasional smoke. But at least these were buy-one-get-one-free at the Shell Station down the street from Edelson's. That's forty cigarettes for \$3.80, or nine and a half cents a smoke. He could allow that.

He'd enjoyed a cigarette earlier on his walk and finished it just as he crossed 13th Street, still heading north. Now, after another block, he crossed 12th and then turned left to follow the sidewalk west along 12th Street, the northern edge of Durand's town square. He lit his second smoke of the day and savored it, watching the smoke flurry through the air of the warm April morning.

At the northeastern corner of the square, as he waited for the light to change, he turned and looked across the street to admire the statue in the center of the area, the inevitable hero that stands in every square of every small town in America. This one was Lieutenant Colonel William Dobbs with rifle held high, leader of some heroic regiment that saved some plantation house from burning during the Civil War. Tom sighed and turned back to the street, wondering what his own legacy would be. The light had changed, and after crossing Westbrook Road, he followed the sidewalk up to the doors of Vince's Bagels. Tom had never cared for bagels, but this was the one place he'd go for his Saturday morning coffee and muffin.

Vince Stetson, a man who was balding faster than his comb could cover, already had his Saturday morning usual ready: a large steaming cup of black coffee, a single blueberry muffin, and the Saturday issue of the *Durand Daily*. Tom quickly paid him the usual four dollars and fifty cents before sitting down at a table on the outside patio.

He ate his muffin briskly, and then set to the business of enjoying his coffee while reading the paper, letting his gaze peer over the edge of the paper to watch the occasional passerby. It was 9:23 when he finished and tossed the paper into the trashcan beside his table, still early with plenty of time to get to the park before it got too hot. He leaned back in his chair and pulled out his pack of Camel Lights, deciding to indulge one last time before crossing Gardendale Avenue and heading for the park.



Have you ever really lived? That voice in the back of his head was getting stronger...

As he puffed on his cigarette, he thought back on the week. That first batch of rubber with Darryl had gone alright, and so had the rest of the morning, but that afternoon, Darryl had accidentally cut himself with his knife while slicing the rubber into strips. From then on, the week had just gone downhill.

Darryl was out for the rest of the day, so Tom had been forced to work alone. During the Monday night shift, some idiot had accidentally dropped a pamphlet of rubber-mixing instructions into the tank, ruining an entire batch of rubber. At the Tuesday morning meeting, Tom had volunteered for the extra hours someone would have to work to play catch-up on the discarded product. Another guy had called in that day and was out the rest of the week with the spring flu. It had been a hard week, even for Tom.

Lately he had been feeling his age. Spending all day on his feet, walking around the plant and carrying around heavy boxes or bags of chemicals was wearing him down. His knees' complaints could not be ignored much longer. And each morning, when his alarm clock went off playing whatever happened to be on K95.3—Smooth Oldies for Startin' Your Day Easy—he felt less and less rested from his seven-hour sleep. For a few years now, he had been counting down, counting down the years until he reached sixty, until he'd have enough in the bank to spend the rest of his life as a retired man. Recently, however, he'd begun counting down the months until the next holiday, the days until the end of the week, the hours until the end of the day, the minutes until the next break.

Was he just spending his days watching the clock, counting down until he could rest again, sleep again? He took another puff of his cigarette and, shaking his head, exhaled the smoke, discarding it along with his momentary doubts. It didn't matter. He'd worked hard and given up a lot. He'd said no to going out for drinks or wasting money at restaurants, and that had caused him to lose chances at being more than coworkers with the people he knew. He had his job, and he had his apartment. And he had his dream. In a few years, he'd be a free man. Then, maybe he could have some fun. He'd do whatever he wanted. He'd paint and not worry about money or the future anymore.

Fun required money. Being sociable required money. Having friends and keeping them required money. As a student in Atlanta, how many times had he tagged along with friends to a restaurant, claiming that he wasn't hungry when it came time to order, munching down free breadsticks or nachos, drinking water, bumming cigarette after cigarette to distract himself from the delicious food the rest of the group was enjoying? Once the phrase "Are you gonna finish that?" became a mantra, he began to feel a bit self-conscious concerning his lack of funds. He stopped tagging along all together, time passed, and his friends drifted away. He didn't blame them. It was inevitable. Friends are only your friends for as long as you spend time with them, interact with them. Enough time passes, people

change, and friendships wither and die. He had made his choice. So instead, he locked himself away. Instead, he focused on his grades and when his father died, he focused on his job and became the best rubber mixer that Edelson Rubber Specialists had.

He would not die like his father, a dead-beat who'd left nothing but a mortgage for his wife and four children, whose dreams had been drowned in vodka and vomit years ago. Tom cringed every time he went into work because the bums he worked with reminded him of his father, bleary-eyed and hung over, cutting corners on the job and blowing their paychecks, never thinking of anyone but themselves, never considering the future.

Have you ever really lived? That voice in the back of his head was getting stronger and stronger. *When have you worried about anyone but yourself?* He flicked his cigarette into oblivion and glanced across the street at the statue dominating the square. The cold eyes staring out of a gigantic gray body vaguely reminded him of something, but he pushed the thought away. *What happens next?* He lit another cigarette, chain-smoking for the first time since his high school days when he had first picked up the habit.

As he smoked, he avoided meeting the gaze of the statue across the street. Sure he'd been tempted. There'd been pretty girls and parties, drugs and alcohol, and other expensive luxuries that would eat into his savings and delay his departure from the grimy world of the rubber plant to somewhere better, somewhere brighter, a place where he could spend his days and nights in front of a canvas, painting scenes he'd stored in his memory from countless hours at the park benches. He was happy now, wasn't he? He had a mostly comfortable apartment, the unofficial title of "best rubber-mixer around," and the peaceful hours in between Friday at five and Monday at eight.

The tufts of clouds were moving faster now as a cool breeze slid bits of pine straw down the sidewalk. Savoring one last inhale from his cigarette, Tom rose, taking his copy of *The Old Man and the Sea* with him. He turned right from Vince's Bagels and headed for the corner of 12th Street and Gardendale Avenue. He walked briskly, more hastily than usual, as if the wind was carrying with it the fears and doubts of fifty-seven years spent planning for the future in total disregard of the present.

He stopped at the intersection, waiting to cross Gardendale as the cars flew by. An employee in front of Blue Tunes Music was slowly wiping away the soap and water from the large window looking out onto the square. The sound of the squeegee made Tom wince as the morning sunlight reflected off the window and into Tom's periphery. When he instinctively glanced back at the window and toward the glare, his breath caught in his throat.

Over the employee's shoulder, Tom could see a distorted reflection of the statue in the square. Lieutenant Colonel Dobbs had his rifle raised to his face, aiming and ready to fire in Tom's direction. The soap and water running down the window elongated the soldier's rifle and truncated his body. His coattails were elongated as well, like a short wispy tail eternally caught in the breeze.

Tom's fingers, formerly stroking the binding of *The Old Man and the Sea*, faltered. He turned away from the window, eager to get to the park and lose himself in the town's latest news and gossip, eager to watch other people live as he counted down the days until he could join them and live through his painting.

The light had changed, but Tom stepped off the curb too eagerly. A young woman driving a purple Ford Taurus station wagon had slipped through the light just as it changed. As he turned and saw her face, locked in a cringe of what was about to come, he felt the impact of the car striking his body and sending it through the air. Despite the searing blades slashing through his body as he flew toward the surface of the street, he was also vaguely aware of the fact that his knees had stopped aching altogether.

Tom struck the asphalt and set to the task of maintaining consciousness by thinking back on his day, his very life, in order to stave off death. And as he lay there in the street, bleeding externally and internally, he recalled the memory of being struck by the station wagon. He could see himself sent tumbling into oblivion as the teenage girl screamed and the car screeched to a halt. He could smell burnt rubber from her tires and, for a moment, wondered if he'd ruined a batch of chemical number 45227, lithium carbonate. Or was it burgundy 9? Folks in the painting business had nicknamed this particular color "Bubbling Blood." After all, the tone and texture was perfect.

And as he thought back on that final moment before he struck the asphalt, he could no longer find the energy to fight off the memory of the dream that had stalked his subconscious since he'd been a child.

The elephant. The dream. He had stepped off the curb, and now the elephant was coming. The dream was back once more. When Tom was a child, every Friday night had been pizza night. His whole family, with the exception of his father who was usually out late with his buddies at some place called "The Pub," would stay up late watching old movies and eating pizza from Big Nino's, "the best pizzeria in all of Durand!"

One Friday night, after gorging himself on sausage pizza, Tom had gone to bed and had woken up hours later, screaming for his mother and asking her questions she couldn't answer. In the dream, he was about to get another slice of sausage pizza and reaching for the box while the rest of his family watched a horror movie on TV, something about vampires from some place that sounded like Pennsylvania, only different. He couldn't have been any more than six or seven because he remembered wearing his hand-me-down Superman pajamas. The rough material had always itched against his skin, but he didn't care. He was Superman, after all, and what's a little itchiness to the Man of Steel?

As Tom reached to open the pizza box, however, his gaze was caught by the cartoon on the top of the box, a fat man's face smiling beneath a chef's hat. Below a thick, curled mustache, the man's large grin revealed teeth on which should have been written "Big Nino's!" in bold red letters.

As he stared at the cartoon logo, he saw the words had changed, barely fitting amidst the chef's gaping grin. Instead of "Big Nino's!" the words now stated a proverb that Tom had learned in school only a few days earlier:

"Elephants never forget." Before his eyes, the letters melted and ran until they were dripping from the chef's teeth, teeth which suddenly looked longer and more pointed than before.

Suddenly, he realized he could no longer hear the television in the background. He gaped on in fascinated terror as the blood-sucking pizza chef grinned up at him and continued to transform amidst its world of white cardboard. The chef's hat tumbled off but caught on the chef's nose and hung there as his curly Italian mustache exploded, covering the entire head and hat in a thin layer of gray whiskers. The two sharp vampire fangs were still growing, longer even than the fangs of the vampire in the movie. The rest of his teeth disappeared and the mouth shrank as the two fangs continued to lengthen and thicken. The chef's hat began to elongate, fixing itself firmly to the chef's face but also reaching toward Tom who stood there quaking in his Superman pajamas, wondering why he could no longer feel the scratchy carpet beneath the feet of his pajamas or smell the greasy aroma of cooked cheese and bread in the living room.

He backed away, tearing his eyes from the face on the pizza box, but as his eyes traveled over the white expanse of cardboard, they met nothing else. He tore his head in every direction and found himself in an endless white emptiness. The furniture, his family, the television, all of it was gone, as though someone had slung a bucket of white paint upon everything but him.

In the distance, the thing that had once been the cartoon on the pizza box stared straight at him. Tiny hints of whiskers covered the gray face. Two pale eyes were barely visibly among a face dominated by gigantic ears flapping on each side, a pair of tusks jutting outward, and a long curling trunk that had once been a chef's hat. Tom could see the elephant stepping toward him like it was stepping out of an invisible fog. As it came fully into view, he saw that the face had grown a body. The elephant was approaching.

Elephants never forget. The words written in blood were gone now, but the phrase echoed amidst this white room that was more than a room. The voice was not the voice of his teacher, Mrs. Costello, who had first told them the proverb of the elephant and its ability to memorize and obey various commands. Nor was it the strained voice of his mother or the slurred voice of his father.

It was now echoing around him, but it was also booming deep inside his brain. The elephant was still coming, and the voice was getting louder. The trunk was reaching out toward him, and the tusks gleamed with a white that was even brighter and purer than the white void in which he was trapped. *Elephants never forget.* Now, the words seemed to be coming directly from the elephant's colorless eyes, pale and doleful and full of knowledge.

Amidst the echoes, some other piece of knowledge was forming itself in Tom's mind, something he didn't want to understand. One day, each and every one of us is going to die. One day, your body will shut down, you will stop breathing. Just like you've been taught in science class, the world will keep on turning as it shoots around the sun, and people will keep on living their lives, *without you.* You will have ceased to exist in this world.

But what would happen next? Would it be the elephant, which somehow did not seem threatening despite its size and the sheer terror it inspired in him? Would it be the emptiness, cold and white and everlasting? Or would it be that monster he had seen first? Did pain and blood wait for him after that final moment when his life must end?

The elephant had come closer, but it was fading in and out, at times disappearing altogether and leaving Tom alone inside this endless white expanse. Sometimes, when it reappeared, it looked less like the elephant and more like the vampire from the beginning of his dream. Whatever it was, if it was anything at all, it was getting closer and closer, and Tom couldn't handle it anymore. His pajamas were heavy, coated with his sweat and urine as the fabric clung to his body. *Elephants never forget*. Shame made a fist with terror and punched him in the gut as Tom lost all control of his body and screamed into the void in a desperate struggle to drown out the echo and escape this hideous world.

He lashed out, clenching at the air, trying to fight off what he knew was inevitable. His eyes sprung open, but the whiteness was replaced not with the darkness of his bedroom but with an empty sky. As he regained consciousness, he realized that the dream had been fifty years ago. He was surrounded by the swirling shapes of a purple station wagon and a girl in a red shirt with long thick black hair. The wetness near his waist was not urine from wetting the bed in terror as a child. It was blood, and he was dying.

And as he lay there in the street, noticing the passersby counting the minutes since they'd called 911 and wondering how long the paramedics would take, the distraught teenage girl, the pain turning his veins into liquid fire, he thought back on his day. He remembered everything he had done that day, that week, all his life. And finally, he thought back on the elephant and his dream, still wondering what it all meant, still wondering if his life had been wasted, still wondering what was to come after he gave up his last breath. The dream he'd forgotten had come back, and that meant he was dying. His hand curled into a tiny fist, wrapping around air, grasping at an imaginary paint brush. He wondered what he looked like from above, wondered if he'd ever be able to paint a scene like this. The last thing he ever saw was the face of the statue in the square, its features distorted and elephantine in the reflection off the station wagon's windshield.