Sketch

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The Boatman

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The Boatman

—a rendering—

by

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Journalism 4

A T THE END of the dock, in a wooden chair whose paint the weather of forty seasons had left faded and chipped, an old man sat hunched over a fishing pole. To his left, tied to the side of the dock, a rowboat like all other rowboats used on northern lakes sat motionless in the water. Behind the lake, the dock, and the old man, a three-room cottage was surrounded by pines and overgrown grass. The shadows on its walls blended, like the twilight with the night, and darkness fell.

A chill, hampered by the lack of a breeze, drifted slowly in from the lake, as the sounds from the woods died into silence. The old man did not stir from his huddled slouch as the light at the end of the dock snapped on; the suddenness of shadows only made him blink a few times, breaking his gaze into the water. The tip of his fishing rod was lost in his eclipse, but that was no matter; the fisherman had long forgotten his hands held the pole.

A small red light appeared from behind a wooded point across the lake, moving slow and smooth over the water as it followed the shoreline. The faint, mechanical gurgling of an outboard motor, set at trolling speed, grew louder as the bow light and then the silhouette of the boat approached the dock. As the craft neared the shadowed dock and the old man, the motor coughed and was silent.

"Any luck, Harry?" a voice called from the boat as it drifted past.

The huddled fisherman straightened slightly, tilted his head up from the water, and squinted into the darkness. He said nothing.

"Is that you, Harry?" the man asked again, speaking over the yards of water as if he were right next to the dock, for it was very quiet and his voice was clear, almost loud.
"Who's there?" the old man asked.
"Harry. That is you. Any luck tonight?"
"No. No luck. Is that you, Jim?" His voice was tired, indifferent. Even the silence around his words couldn't conceal the distance from which they were spoken.
"Yes, it's Jim. How are you making out, Harry?"
"Oh . . . I'm getting by, Jim. I'm getting by." The old man straightened a little further from his slouch and caught the handle of his fishing pole as it rolled from his lap. He felt the coldness in the air for the first time.
"I'm sorry about Virgie," the man in the boat said, relying on the silences and darkness to cushion his words. "The wife and I sent you a card last week, when we heard. We still haven't told the little one, yet. You two were like grandparents to her."

The old man blinked his eyes, which were moist, curled his lips inward and nodded toward the red light.
"Take care, Harry. We'll be over tomorrow to see you." The man jerked the cord of the motor and the boat lurched away from the shadows of the dock and the old man. He watched the light grow small and finally disappear around another point. Then he faced the water in front of his chair, put his fishing pole beneath his folded hands, and again slumped forward under the weight of his grief.

A mist began to rise from the water, and soon the surface of the lake was lost under a grey shroud. Above the eastern shoreline a half moon sharpened the silhouettes of the trees. The old man, except for an occasional, unconscious shiver, did not move. Several hours passed.

As the moon neared the western shore, the sound of dipping paddles broke the stillness. The fisherman looked up from his slouch and watched as an ancient rowboat moved through the mist toward his dock. The boat made no wake, nor any perceptible disturbance of the water. Only the oars broke the shrouded surface, and to the old fisherman, they seemed to be the only things holding the craft to the water. The pilot of the boat, its only passenger, pulled on the oars with smooth, effortless strokes; but his
manner, the posture of his back as it hunched and straightened, was one of weariness.

When the bow of the boat reached the circle of light cast around the dock, the pilot dropped the blades of his oars deep into the water and stopped. He stood and turned to face the fisherman.

"I was hoping I would not have to return so soon."

"It's you again, isn't it," the old man sighed. "I don't want to see you. Go away."

"I'm afraid neither of us has a choice. I go where I am told, and you are sitting here, as you were told."

"I was told nothing, by you or anyone. Only Virgie, only my wife. I am here to see her. She said she would come back."

"Your wife is not coming back, fisherman, but you will see her again, soon. I understand your sense of loss, but it is needless. Be still in your grief."

"How can one so young understand the grief of an old man?"

"Though I do not look it, I am many, many times your age in years," the boatman replied. He looked middle-aged, almost youthful. His features were dark, his hair and eyes brown, and over his skinny frame he wore trousers and a cotton shirt. His feet were bare. "And in those years I have gathered the wisdom of pain from all persons of all ages. I know the innocent sufferings of children as well as the guilt-ridden pity of adults. I know grief, fisherman, for I have carried the misery of thousands in this boat and dipped into their oceans of tears with these oars. I have served as Death's midwife for as long as I care to remember."

The boatman studied the old man for a moment, saw that he was listening, engaged, and began telling what had been barren of an audience for a long, long time.

"The old ones, such as yourself, are the easiest to row. The initial shock seems diminished by their years, and most of them greet me as if I am the friend of an old acquaintance. They usually make the passage in a patient silence, or share one or two moments of their lives with me. For most of them
it seems like they have a pleasant, almost relaxing trip. It is for me.

"But if I have a passenger who is of middle age, then the journey is likely to be a long and tedious one. 'Why me?' they always ask, and keep asking, until I part with them on the other side. Very few of them accept their fate; most feel guilt of some sort and spend the entire voyage arguing to me (with these types I am mute) and avoiding as much self-realization as they can. I point to the bow when they first step in, so when I am pulling the oars, my back is to them."

The boatman paused, propped the oar handles under his shoulders and stared into the mist.

Placing his fishing pole on the dock, the old man put his elbows on his knees and leaned forward. "Did you give passage to my grandson?" he asked. "He was killed several years ago, overseas. But then, you've carried so many..."

"Aye, old man, I've carried many, too many like your grandson. For with youth, I am the one who suffers most. It is with them that the oars seem heaviest, the handles more splintered, the water thicker.

"One, there is one from that war that I cannot shake from my memory. He was floating in a marsh, his head and chest breaking the surface, with shoots of wild rice and reeds clinging to his neck and shirt. His eyes were as wide as I've ever seen, and they didn't blink; they were locked open, staring. When he got in the boat, I saw that the leeches and maggots had already found the hole in his side. He sat in the stern, in front of me, staring with those milky eyes right through me, beyond the bow, into the blackness. And he kept trying to move his lips — his lips were swollen — as if he were calling a name... It looked like he was trying to speak to me, as if I was someone else. That was the most difficult passage I have rowed. It has stayed with me a long time."

The fisherman asked, "What about the children? How do they fare on the journey?"

"What do children know of Death? They have no fears, for they haven't been taught to dread the unknown. They
are in love with the world, but they have not become attached to it yet. For most of them, the world is a giant carnival, maze of surprises. And when they see my boat, they see another surprise, another adventure. Their curiosity stifles any fear they may have. They've never had a chance, a choice, from the beginning." The boatman said all of this very quickly, as if it were a hasty retort to a foolish question. But when he finished, he buried his face in his hands and wept.

After a moment, the boatman looked up. "Old man, I know Death better than any man. Escorting the chosen to the other side, I see its pain in the lost bewilderment of their faces. I feel its weight with each stroke across the distance. I do not speak much, for I am seldom spoken to. Most of my passengers sit silently in the bow, waiting.

"I do not steer. To call me the true pilot would be mistaken. I have no rudder because I have no use for one. I am here alone to bear the burden of misunderstanding, to shoulder needless grief, to swallow as much tears and as many fears as I can. I row until we arrive, that is all..." The boatman paused, and then looked hard at the man on the dock.

"That is how I know your grief, fisherman. Shall we go?"

The old man stepped into the ancient craft, sat in the bow, and waited in silence as the boatman heaved against the oars. They were swallowed by the mist, as the moon dropped below the western trees.