

BRIAN PHILLIP WHALEN

## The Mother Cup

In class today, the teacher was asked about his mug. The mug was a gift from his mother, a Christmas present many years ago. The mug was brown with a long green handle. It was a good mug, a heavy mug, a mug made of clay. His students enjoyed the fact that he drank out of the same mug every day; no matter what uncertainties they were faced with in their outside lives, there sat the teacher, there his mug: three times a week, like clockwork.

When asked about the mug's significance, the teacher replied, "It holds my tea." The student – a young woman, from Israel – said, "I mean, the *history* of the mug. Where it came from." Sitting at his desk in a circle of twenty others, in a small room in a large university, with the overheads turned off and the windows open, the teacher took a slow, calculated sip of lapsang souchang (his students recognized that brew, its smoky aroma) and he thought about his mother.



As a young boy, for Christmas, he'd given his mother a cookie jar shaped like a penguin. It was the first gift he'd ever bought with his own money (five one dollar bills, each a lost tooth). His mother filled the jar with homemade macaroons, reserved a place for it atop the microwave. She loved the jar and told him often, and at night he would climb down the stairs in the dark of the house, stare at the jar by the faint glow of the microwave's digital clock, the scent of toasted coconut in the air, and be flush with a feeling he could not articulate until much later in his life: a reverent feeling, a feeling of *home*.

Less than a month passed before he broke the jar. He was playing "sock hockey" on the kitchen's smooth linoleum (his father's putter for a stick, a tuna can puck) when he slid sideways into the microwave cart, an accidental hip-check the impact of which set the penguin wobbling, like a poorly spun coin, until it toppled, fell between his outstretched arms, and crashed headlong at his feet. The penguin landed in such a way that the broken pieces of its skull were covered by its bottom, which rested, still intact, upside down on the floor.

Unaccustomed to the fault of misplaced value, the child ached with incipient hurt as he stared at the ruins. His father, noting the headless butt of the

penguin, improvised a joke about an ostrich, a mood his mother reinforced, telling a story of a special penguin who dug holes in and peered beneath the surface of ice rinks, hungry for krill. The boy was inconsolable.

~

What to tell a 21 year old? Show the teachable moment, the lantern in the darkness, the verbal yoga to instruct such things. As their teacher, he could quote the masters, he could ring those old bells, he could quiet the room with cadence and pomp. But no. She, his student, had asked for *history*: the mug, the mother, the taught red throat of rising action, the pollinated hush of denouement. He could narrate the thing in his sleep, removed from the pain of his experience – the years, the loss, the dead – detached and proper, dispassionate, *true*.

With this in mind, the teacher took a long, deep breath, savoring the wood-fire scent of his tea; he then set the mug on his desk, balled his fist, scanned the room until he'd met each pair of eyes in the circle, and with his knuckles he began slowly to push the mug over the surface of the desk, inching it nearer and nearer to the desk's ledge, the pace of his movements dictated by the weight of the mug's resistance, careful not to spill its contents, while his students, rapt, leaned in, their soft bodies bending toward the center of the ring of desks, their eyes on the mug, a few among them lifting a hand as if to stop something.

Brian Phillip Whalen's most recent work appears in *The Southern Review*, *Spillway*, *Inch*, and *Blue Earth Review*. Brian received his MFA from Iowa State University and his PhD from SUNY Albany. He lives in upstate NY with his wife and daughter.