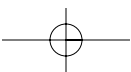
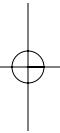
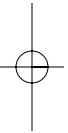


ALSO BY JOSEPH COULSON

*The Vanishing Moon*



JOSEPH COULSON

*Of* SONG and WATER

A NOVEL

*archipelago books*

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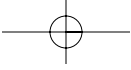
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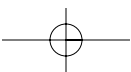
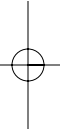
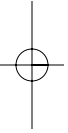
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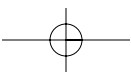
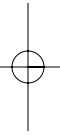
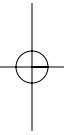
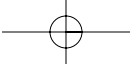
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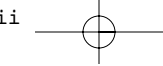




*for Stephen Tudor, 1933–1994,  
lost on Lake Huron*





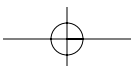
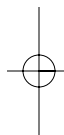
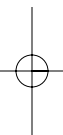


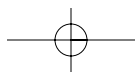
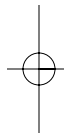
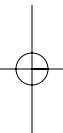
### *Acknowledgments*

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Other indispensable resources were *Richardson's Chartbook and Cruising Guide for Lake Huron* and also *Lake Erie, The Practical Mariner's Book of Knowledge* by John Vigor, *The Sailor's Illustrated Dictionary* by Thompson Lenfestey with Captain Thompson Lenfestey, Jr., and *Images of America: Detroit, 1930–1969* by David Lee Poremba.

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And there he tried three times  
To throw his arms around his father's neck.  
Three times the shade untouched slipped through his hands,  
Weightless as wind and fugitive as dream.

Virgil, *The Aeneid, Book VI*

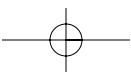
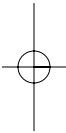
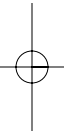
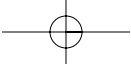
And, then, pulling out all the stops, describing her eyes,  
Her forehead where the golden light of evening spread,  
The curve of her neck, the slope of her shoulders, everything  
Down to her thighs and calves, letting the words come,  
As if lifted from sleep, to drift upstream,  
Against the water's will . . .

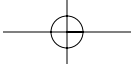
Mark Strand, "Orpheus Alone"

Coming up under the bridge into  
you, Huron, at Sarnia, the first  
time was the same as entering an  
ocean. But that's not true now. I  
cannot love the finite with that

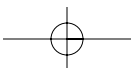
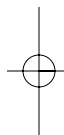
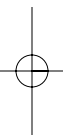
infinite love I'd saved for the  
ideal. I know you too well.

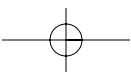
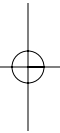
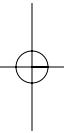
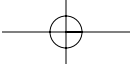
Stephen Tudor, "North of the Blue Water Bridge"

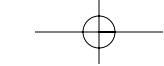




# *Of* SONG and WATER







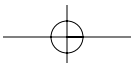
*chapter one*

HE CLIMBS without faith, the ladder unsteady, the wooden rungs brittle, each step filling the air with the sound of old bones. Don't look down, he thinks, watching the slow drift of his shadow, seeing its darkness on the long white surface of the hull.

He stops, checks his grip, and struggles to turn his head, the cramp in his neck burning. He strains again, harder this time, until something moves – a snap – at the base of his skull. The stiffness gives way. Clusters of stars whirl, trail off, and vanish.

He reaches the top and steadies himself before loosening the cover. Two days ago, he found the boom tent dusted with snow. Tonight, it's dark and dry. He waits for the smell, the heavy scent that begins with canvas, a strange mingling of wood smoke and old skin, but it doesn't come. Too cold, he thinks. He clambers onto the deck and crouches on one knee, listening to the stillness.

From his perch, he looks toward the channel. Everything visible is white, silver, or gray. Untouched snow covers the buildings and docks; it clings to the



empty cradles and the towering hoist. Snow reflects the light from a few tired lamps, imbuing the dark with a spectral glow. Swirls of low-lying fog, impossible in such cold, rise up around rusty trailers and fuel tanks, moving through the marina like men in long coats. The shifting outlines make him uneasy. The ghosts of sailors, he thinks. They're here to pass judgment. Call him an imposter. Tell him to give it up.

He's in Michigan, downriver from Detroit. It's the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Though it can't be seen, he knows that HUMBUG MARINA, in letters large enough for a roadside billboard, hovers above him. He marvels at the correctness of the name.

HUMBUG: the word under which he labors; the word that in winter seems inescapable; the word that in his coming and going is always the first and the last.

His grandfather used to say that a great name guarantees success. "It shouldn't be a placeholder," he insisted, "or a catchall for loose ends. It shouldn't be given lightly, whether to a boy, a boat, or a business, not when dreams, even fate, hang in the balance."

He rubs the top of his right hand behind the knuckles. On some days the pain is general, difficult to pinpoint or describe. On other days it grows like a rolling fire, waves of misery that pressure and pills cannot relieve. He finds it intolerable when both hands go off at once, because then the most familiar routines – shaving, taking a shower, putting on shoes – deplete what little he has in terms of humility and patience. When the pain is constant, he sweats to make deliveries, the hours dragging, and by the time he punches out and gets to Humbug, having stopped at Blue Moon for a bottle, his fingers are cramped and rigid, too clumsy for the simplest chores.

The only safe haven is Humbug, he thinks, especially for a guy with bum

hands. It's a refuge of faded glory, an anchorage filled with practical buildings and unfashionable clientele, a business that takes pride in being cheaper than the Ford Yacht Club. He mentions the savings whenever he calls Maureen to ask her for more time.

Alone in the cold, kneeling on the white deck, he hears her voice. "You can't do this anymore," she says. "You're late six months out of twelve. What am I supposed to use at the grocery store? My good looks?"

"You could," he says, almost smiling. He still thinks of her as beautiful.

"That boat," says Maureen, "is more important than your daughter."

"Not true," he says.

"But it makes no sense. For God's sake, Jason, you don't even like sailing."

"You'll get the money," he says. "Nothing comes between you and your money."

"Humbug," says Maureen.

He regards it as mean-spirited, her refusal, after marriage, divorce, and child support, to call him by his adopted name – his stage name. From the beginning, she took sides with his mother, insisting that he be Jason, overruling the friends and strangers who braved late hours and bad weather just to hear him play. To those people he was Coleman Moore.

He is Coleman Moore.

HE REMEMBERS his first lesson – though no one would've called it that when it happened – having seen the guitar with its black body and ebony neck resting in a silver stand and then picking it up without thinking and trusting the weight of it in his hands and knowing, as if by communion, that it was already under his skin, that he felt more like himself just holding it, though his fingers were at a loss for what to do.

He sat on a stool, the guitar cradled in his lap, and looked up at Mr. Young,

a man with dark eyes, coffee-colored skin, and yellow teeth. He heard Mr. Young's voice, raspy but melodic. "That'd be Lucille's sister. She's been here since before you were born."

He nodded, feeling grateful, realizing in a flash that seeing the guitar and touching it were matters of pure chance. He'd started to walk off, taking his pay for cutting the grass, when Mr. Young said, "You got a minute? I could use some help in back."

So he followed Mr. Young down the hall and through the kitchen and out the back door to the small shanty that sat in the corner of the yard.

After moving two or three boxes, he saw that the shanty was some sort of studio stuffed with sound equipment, microphones, and tapes. A few records were framed and hanging on the walls. Then he walked over to the guitar and picked it up, forgetting to ask permission.

"I'll teach you," said Mr. Young. "You need a guitar?"

"Yes."

"All right. We'll use that one until you find your own."

"I don't know, Mr. Young. Getting my own may be a long shot."

"You can drop the Mr. Young routine. Call me Otis."

He remembers the way Otis made him feel at home and the first notes on Lucille's sister and the lessons, week after week – once his father agreed and talked to Otis about what instrument to buy – and then the hours of practice between the lessons, losing himself in the scales, the grips, and the patterns. He believed that learning music would make him a better person – that it would change him in some essential way so that he could move beyond his neighborhood, beyond the wishes of his mother and father, beyond the lives of the people he knew.

After each session, he'd ask Otis one question after another, careful to call him Otis rather than Mr. Young, wanting to know more about the black-and-white photos that cluttered the studio, about the old days, the gigs with Duke

Ellington or Dizzy Gillespie, about working as a sideman with John Coltrane – names that had little or no meaning to an uninitiated boy. More often than not, the stories ended abruptly, usually in midsentence. “What are you waitin’ for?” Otis said then, his voice like sandpaper. “That’s all there is to it. Don’t count on a second ending.”

HE FEELS his legs aching. He drops into the cockpit and sits on the starboard seat, unzips his coat pocket, and pulls out a flashlight. He sets it down, the beam pointing toward the stern. He reaches into his other pocket and carefully unloads a pint of vodka and rests it on his thigh. He tries to open it but the fingers of his left hand seize up. He clamps his teeth on the cap and turns the bottle.

Maureen is constant, he thinks. She takes for granted the solidity of things. He sees her now much as he did before, a woman of disciplined habits living without indecision or clutter. She appears to be the same person in the morning and in the afternoon, at work or at home, at the post office and at the grocery store. He judges this to be a monumental, if unnatural, achievement. The self he sometimes knows as Coleman seems to waver, to change pitch, to move faster or slower depending on the conversation, the weather, or the room.

Maureen calls him unstable. “I’ve spent my entire life in Gibraltar,” she says, “but you didn’t stay long enough to be a husband or a father. I’m telling you, a lack of routine makes a person thin and indefinite.”

When he did materialize, she took it as a blow to her system. “You don’t understand,” she said. “Each time you step through that door, you’re a man I can’t quite recognize.” She attributed the changes to his itinerant profession, to the convenient and well-heeled women, to the harsh lights.

He listened to her judgments but didn’t believe that his poorly defined self had anything to do with music or the ways of a musician. It went back almost to the beginning. He was a joker in math, a vandal in chemistry, and a dreamer

in English. He could be any combination of these traits even then. The years had only added to the list. He didn't cultivate these qualities as some sort of perverse game. This was simply the way he was. The way he is.

ONCE, after he'd cried all the way home, unable to pull himself together, he got obsessed with the idea that his cheek would never stop burning, so he opened the faucet and ran water into the flower bed until the rich, black soil turned to mud. Then, sinking to his knees, he plunged his hands into the wet darkness and smeared his face with it, the earthy smell filling his nostrils. With his chin dripping, he ran into the house, rushing past the washed-out faces of his mother and father, and locked himself in the bathroom, staring into the mirror like an actor worried about his makeup, wetting his fingers and trying to cover the blank spots, but all of it looking worse for the effort as the mud dried and became brittle.

He remembers how his cheek kept stinging and his heart continued pounding and his breathing wouldn't slow down, having been caught off guard after Levina, a girl he barely knew and would never see again, had invited him in, and her mom had poured two glasses of milk and arranged fresh cookies on a plate. Levina had said, "This is Jason. He lives close to the water and has two sailboats, and he says that someday I might be able to go out on the big one with him and his grandfather."

"Are you sure?" said Levina's mom. "Why would anyone need two boats?"

"One belongs to my dad," he said. "The other one – the big one – belongs to my grandfather. He keeps it here but lives in Saginaw."

"Oh, I see," said Levina's mom. "But my baby girl can't swim."

He gulped his milk and put down the glass. "I'll swim for both of us," he said.

They finished their cookies and Levina walked him to the front door. In the hall were photographs filled with black faces, most with dark hair and others with white.

“See ya,” he said.

“When?” said Levina. “When school starts, you won’t come around.”

“Why wouldn’t I?” he said.

He was already on the front walk, having heard the door close behind him, when Levina’s big brother, a muscular boy with a midnight face, decided to block the way.

“You’re Jason Moore,” said Levina’s brother. “What are you doing here? You slumming?” He narrowed his eyes. “My sister ain’t for sale.”

He didn’t like the smell of the older boy’s breath. He didn’t know what to do or say, so he stepped back and began to smile. That’s when the boy slapped him, the open hand landing with enough force to turn the head of a statue.

THE VODKA warms the back of his throat. He considers the chores that need doing, but now, after the exertion of climbing aboard, he’s lost his ambition.

He sits here two or three evenings a week, smelling the canvas and drinking vodka. He looks forward to it. He likes the boat resting in its cradle, no pitching or rolling. No immediate demands. With tanks cleared, engine drained, and compartments left open to the air, it’s a good place to think, to hunker down. He likes being hard to find.

He comes to the marina straight from work in an effort to avoid the kids who collect signatures or sell magazine subscriptions, to escape the bow-tied Christians who, for the redemption of his soul, say that they’ll provide a personal introduction to Jesus. There’d been no talk of solicitors, religious or otherwise, when he submitted his application for the house – a two-bedroom ranch with an attached garage – and the landlord, a woman anxious to reveal her spiritual fervor, had kept her ecstasy under wraps, kept things low-key until she had a signed lease and the first month’s rent.

He’d lived in the house for forty days when, as a concerned proprietor, she made her first unannounced visit. She wore a white tank top over a deep,

coconut-oil tan. The slope of her breasts led to a book, a Bible, which she squeezed with both arms like a child. She created a place for the Bible on the kitchen table after brushing bread crumbs and granules of salt onto the floor.

Later, when she came by again, her tan darker and her hair shorter than before, she remarked that the Bible hadn't been moved. She put a sticker on the wall above the phone. "This is my number," she said. "For emergencies."

On her third visit, she wore tight shorts and a thin T-shirt and asked him if he'd accepted Jesus as his personal savior.

Now he tries to avoid her by leaving the house in darkness and going to the boat as often as obligations and weather allow. On some nights, he conjures up the scent she left behind and the moist warmth of her breathing, but in Humbug's yard, surrounded by snow, he drops the fantasy and sails high and dry. He keeps an almost perfect solitude.

HEATHER'S the only one who visits him here, and he suspects, though she'd hardly admit it, that duty is a large part of her devotion. What choice does she have? "You're my dad," she's fond of saying, "for better or worse."

He feels too often that she's trying to save him, if not from loneliness then from the bald realization that he's a middle-aged failure. Exactly when she became so wise and sophisticated is impossible to say.

His daughter, already seventeen, drives her own car and waits tables at the Lighthouse Diner, a young woman so blessed with her mom's best features that it makes him wonder what part he played in bringing her into the world. Her figure is Maureen's – only more so. She has her mother's red hair, her freckles, and her green eyes. Their smiles are the same too, but lately Maureen obscures this detail with a fixed expression, an artful mix of disappointment and disgust. Naturally, she reserves this face mostly for him – for terse meetings in coffee shops where they talk about parenting or money and where she stubbornly calls him Jason, as if Coleman had never been.

Heather, on the other hand, smiles easily. She's in the habit of stopping by on weekends. When she doesn't catch him at home, she drives over to Humbug and usually finds him on the boat.

He wants her to turn up now, despite it being the middle of the week, a school night, but he knows the notion would go against her better judgment. He moves his foot and knocks over a plastic bottle; it rolls across the floor of the cockpit. It's the one Heather brought up here on Saturday, he thinks.

She held out the bottle as soon as she came aboard. "Want some? It's spring water from a faraway mountain."

"Too pure for me," he said.

He led her down into the cabin and they sat across from each other at the teak table, an electric heater keeping out the frost and damp. She spoke in a low, soothing voice, as if she were visiting a sick friend in the hospital. She touched the top of his hand and the swollen joints of his fingers. The warmth of her skin astonished him. She went on about her plans for college and made a passing reference to her new boyfriend. The part of him that felt fatherly pushed for taking a little interest in the guy, but the larger part, the not-so-fatherly side, argued for writing the kid off. As always, he skirted the issue, choosing to avoid questions that showed him up as defensive or absurdly jealous.

Heather reached into her bag. "I bought you a present," she said, pulling out a CD. "I know you don't listen to music anymore, but I heard this and thought of you."

Maybe a year ago, when they were looking at his old LPs, he'd made the mistake of telling her that he'd stopped listening to music. Since then she'd bought him a dozen or so albums, an attempt, no doubt, to stave off his precipitous decline.

"And the next time we're at the house," she said, "would you play me a song? Something ancient and slow."

"It's hard to do," he said, rubbing the heel of his left hand.

“You’re lying,” she said.

“Maybe. I haven’t changed the strings in a while.”

“You told me old strings are bad for a guitar.”

“That’s right.”

“And rough on the ears, too.”

“I guess no one listens better than you.”

She smiled. “That’s what you always say.”

Too much talk about music, he thought. He longed to give her some useful advice, a few words she could save for later. “As for college,” he said, “you’ll figure out the right move. Don’t worry about me or your mother. Take yourself as far from here as you want – as far as you can. Don’t look back.”

“NOT so fast,” says the sandpaper voice. “There’s more to it than speed. When I say attack, it isn’t about fighting. It’s about feeling.”

He plays the phrase again, slower this time, alert only to the sensation of strings beneath his fingers. For a moment, the sound flows from him like water. When he starts pushing the tempo, Otis shakes his head.

“You’re like those boys in the Big Apple,” says Otis. “In a hurry. You think you got somewhere to go.”

He wonders how Otis could live in a place like New York and then give it up and settle here. Why would you do that? he thinks. If I ever get to a city, I’ll stay there. There’s no place to play in a little town.

After collecting his sheet music and closing his guitar case, he points to a picture on the wall. “Is that New York?”

Otis rubs the gray stubble on his face, his hand a little unsteady. “That’s Grand Circus Park,” he says. “Detroit.”

“Why don’t you live there?”

“I would – I was born just a few blocks away. But I left when I was your age, and when I finally went back, it was gone.”

He looks at Otis looking at the picture.

“You have to find a safe haven,” says Otis. “If you can’t find a real place, then you have to make one, up here.” He taps his temple with a long finger.

“See you next week, Mr. Young – I mean – ” The screen door of the studio slams. “I appreciate your time.”

On this day, like all the others, he stops and glances back to see Otis standing at the door in his crisp white shirt and black pants. The silence is awkward. He wants to fill up the space, say something to ease the tension, but always in that moment the old man turns and disappears.

LATER, three of his classmates surround him in the school lavatory.

“We saw you,” says one of the boys. The others look on with suspicion.

“So what?”

“You’re supposed to be cuttin’ grass.”

“So what?”

“Cuttin’ his grass is bad enough. Now you’re goin’ inside.”

He dries his hands and steps toward the door but can’t get by the others, big boys with strong Midwestern shoulders.

“Are you that nigger’s nigger?” says the tall one.

The boys laugh.

“What do you do in there?”

“Nothing.”

“Does he take you out to his little shack?”

“No.”

Putting his head down, he tries to squeeze between two of the boys, but sharp fingers dig into his arms.

“For Christ’s sake, Jason, we know you’re lying. I suppose when you’re out there on the edge of town you think we can’t see you. But we can. We’ve all seen you, even when you said you weren’t going.” The boy pretends to be

thinking hard. "I know, maybe you can clear up a little rumor we've heard. Is that man your real daddy?"

The lavatory rings with laughter.

"No."

"You can't deny everything," says the first boy who spoke. "How do you expect to stay in our good graces if you don't tell us the truth?"

He struggles against their grip. "He's a teacher," he says, staring at the floor, one arm pinned to his side, the other twisted and cramped. "He's teaching me to play guitar."

"That coon's a picker?"

He nods slowly.

"Well. All right then. The man's an entertainer. You should've said so in the first place."

"I'm taking lessons." He looks at the faces of the three boys. "But only until I can afford someone better."

The fingers let go. The boys nod approval.

Two of them disappear into stalls and urinate while the third waits. The boys flush, zip, and check themselves in the mirror; then the one waiting opens the door and the three leave together.

HE BRINGS the vodka to his lips. No wind tonight but something in the air sounds like a muffled voice. Heather won't be here anytime soon. He thinks of her now, sleeping in her mother's house, dreaming the dreams of the young.

He remembers his first leave-taking, turning away from his father, driving to the East Coast in a rusty Dodge and looking for a place off campus.

He arrives late for orientation and sits beside a woman wearing a white jacket. "I'm Jennifer," she says. Her long straight hair is black, swept to one side, and secured with a silver clip.

They meet for coffee and later she listens to him play. After a while, she

offers a corner room, a single bed that's been pushed against the wall and covered with thick pillows.

He sleeps with her and cooks oatmeal in the morning, smells the sweetness of her body in his own clothes, and they stay in the tiny room for days at a stretch, especially in winter, lighting candles while the snow swirls and drifts in the street below.

The rhythm of her body, her movement, stirs in him new sounds and he composes with perfect ease, ignoring the changing light, making melodies that tumble and turn like clear water.

She comes through the door with a bag of groceries, unpacks the fruit and vegetables, and puts a small bottle of vodka on the table. He pours a shot into a short glass, feels the bite on his tongue.

There's no memory as sharp as this, he thinks. She will not go away, even in the face of inexplicable years.

His frigid legs rest heavy on the fiberglass seat. The chill seeping into every inch of the boat and into his bones is familiar. He lifts one foot and then the other to keep his blood moving and pictures again how their love affair begins in winter and ends in winter, the cold streaming in under the door.

She walks with him to the station, hands in her pockets, shoulders hunched in the blowing snow. He carries his guitar and a tattered suitcase. She's silent until they reach the bus.

"Can't you postpone it?" she says. "Why should I spend the day apologizing for you? C'mon, Cole, I want you to be there with me."

"I have to go," he says.

"If they're serious, they'll wait. It's a tryout, not a job."

"If I don't show up for the audition, they'll use somebody else."

"But you'll miss –"

"Miss what? A lousy band?"

"Miss me."

“Have fun at the wedding,” he says. “Tell your sister I’m sorry.”

Departures and arrivals echo through the station.

“I work here,” she says. “It isn’t so easy to leave.”

“I’m not asking you to quit,” he says. “It wouldn’t make sense anyway. This whole thing’s a long shot.”

“I know that,” she says.

Jen stands in front of the door, shivering in her thin jacket. She doesn’t say anything about the nausea or the test.

A blast of wind pushes him against the bus. “It’s time,” he says.

“Are you going?”

He’s struck dumb by her stubbornness. He kisses her on the mouth and then steps onto the bus. She begins to follow him, moving like a sleepwalker, but he turns and the shock of his turning startles her. She backs away from the door and another passenger rushes aboard.

The boat beneath him seems to lurch. Still no sound except for a vague whisper. “It’s bitter cold,” he says out loud. His words trail off and disappear. He slips the bottle of vodka into his pocket. “It’s bitter cold,” he says again.

The flashlight flickers, begins to fade. He picks it up and bangs it on his leg. It goes out. He unscrews it a little, setting off slow waves of pain in his fingers. He tightens it up and pushes the switch back and forth. “Jesus,” he says.

A faint glow creeps in where the boom tent is open. All the rest is darkness. In the absence of light, the canvas above him appears to recede; it becomes for him an immense black ceiling, a night sky without stars. He searches for a point of reference, peering at the empty heavens, unable to comprehend the meaning of his position. Something like this has happened before. He feels the familiar strain on his neck, knows that in looking up he will see nothing but a blank slate. A touch of vertigo washes over him then, spins him slowly at first. He’s aware of the deck rolling beneath his feet, the fixed objects of his world sliding away, and a weight on his body, not so much gravity now as water, as if he were drowning, caught in the vortices of a sinking ship.

HE SEES himself as a boy, as Jason, kneeling on the starboard seat of his father's sloop, a stiff wind out of the northwest making him shiver.

His father says, "Prepare to come about – use the winch handle."

He tries but turns it the wrong way. He knows where the edge of the lake should be, but he can't distinguish between sky and water. There's only one light in the distance.

"Jason," says his father, "I don't want you going below. Your grandfather's not there."

The galley's dark. The mark to be fetched is Port Austin Reef. The boat leans and picks up speed.

He realizes that if not for his grandfather, he would still be in bed – no order to tumble out, no reason to set sail in the middle of the night. He feels anxious and out of sorts and hears his dad saying for the second time, "Your grandfather has no face."

He looks up. No moon. Not a single star. Barely visible is a low ceiling of gray clouds. The sky shudders from one horizon to the other. No face, he thinks. Heaven has no face and my grandfather has no face. Dad says it's so.

The eyes in the photograph, fixed on something outside the frame, are discerning and troubled. He likes the mustache and believes that in the future he'll grow his own. Someone printed H.M. in the corner of the picture. Handkerchiefs and cuff links bear the same letters. So do the trophies in the glass case. On the trophy for the singlehander's race is HAVELOCK MOORE. It's a strong sound. He says to almost everyone he meets, "Havelock Moore is my grandfather's name. My dad calls him H.M." He suspects that H.M. is the only man his father fears.

"There'll be no going below," his father says again. "I need you to give a hand."

He wants to get out of the wind, but with the weatherboards in place and the hood closed and latched, he's stuck. He accepts the fact that Havelock's not

in the cabin. Havelock's not in his berth – the old man's sleeping somewhere else.

Over the wind, he hears his father say, "If you found H.M. on the street, you wouldn't know it was him."

He tries to understand, but the words create a white space in his mind. The whiteness scares him. Needing to fill it, he recalls the old photograph – first the initials, then the face, and finally the eyes, black pools touched by a spark of light.

"No stars tonight," he says, looking up.

"Just as well," says his father.

The face in the picture is full of deep sadness. How can it be that Havelock Moore has no face?

"It's gone," says his father.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is."

I'm sailing in a plastic tub, he thinks. It's smaller than my grandfather's ketch. He remembers going in headfirst when the big boat rose and fell. He'd like to do it all over again – prove to everyone, once and for all, that he's no longer a boy.

HE SEES himself on the ketch and his grandfather's face unworried.

"This is an old man's ship," says Havelock. "It isn't for racing. She's made of wood and she's proud. Fiberglass is cheap. You can't call it a boat when it's built of such stuff." He scratches his nose and smiles. "Your dad's sloop is a white whale. I'd call it a plastic tub."

Havelock looms overhead, trying to explain the vagaries of wind. "You must keep your canvas on the verge of luffing," he says. "It's easy to pull in a sail too far by mistake. If you do, the boat'll stall."

They watch the forward edge of the jib.

“A Moore never sinks,” says Havelock.

He smiles at the old man and nods.

Havelock says, “Be proud of your name. A good name guarantees success. Jason was a great hero. He sailed the world looking for the Golden Fleece.” The jib begins to ripple. In the next instant, Havelock makes the correction. “Mind the telltales, too.”

He follows his grandfather’s order and worries that his eyes aren’t big enough. He can watch only one part at a time. He has to know about wind and where he’s going. And somewhere there’s a Golden Fleece. He wonders what it is and whether or not he should be looking for it. On the ketch there’s too much to do, too much to think about.

On land, his grandfather doesn’t do everything at once. He sits at the kitchen table and sorts the mail into three piles: letters, bills, and solicitations. If it’s personal, he holds it in his hand for a while, examines the return address and the stamp. Finally, he opens it with his pocketknife, careful not to damage the envelope. On the water, though, his actions overlap. He trims and steers and checks his bearing all in the same breath.

Conditions on the lake change quickly. There’s no rocking in a steady wind. But in calm, the swells come up and the ketch rolls and the sails flap and jerk. He stumbles and grabs a lifeline.

“Enough noise,” says Havelock. “Lower the sails and let go the anchor.”

He knows he’s too small to help. He’s been out many times, but the sun still hurts his eyes. It’s hot on the water with no wind, he thinks. He enjoys the ketch rising and falling, the deck slanting like a floor in a fun house. He wants to jump when the deck lifts him up to see how high he can spring. On his shoulder, he feels his grandfather’s hand. He turns and finds suddenly that there’s nothing either behind him or below.

He soars spread-eagled through the air and then plummets, all the heat and glare collapsing into cold and dark. He doesn’t thrash or kick. He falls through

water, the lake filling him until he is deaf, until he is mute, and then his body stops, suspended between two worlds. Though it's impossible to explain later, something here takes hold of him, buoying him up, so that slowly at first, through no effort of his own, he starts to climb. An ache for breath, for speech, swells in his throat. He begins to think. He breaks the surface, arms and legs moving, and sees his grandfather's face.

"Sink or swim is the only way," says Havelock. "You can scuttle the boat, but a Moore never sinks."

I'M ON a white whale, he thinks. One hour out and searching for deep water. Havelock's not in the cabin. Havelock's not in his berth. He sees his father looking up, navigating without stars. The wind drives the sloop on a broad reach.

"There's no turning back," says his father. "It won't keep. He'd want it this way."

After the reef, the bottom yawns. The water is deep and goes deeper still. He wonders what depth his father is hoping for. He dreams bright gardens of fish and then a circle of sailboats – red, yellow, and blue – floating on the air. He listens to the hull slicing the lake, to the steady sigh. My grandfather had a face, he thinks. He journeyed upriver, through the narrows, to sail on an inland sea. Huron was the lake he loved.

The boat turns into the wind. It stalls and they douse the sails.

Now the hood slides back and the weatherboards come out. He follows his father down into the cabin. In the berth is a long canvas bag lashed with line and weighted with heavy stones. They haul it up the companionway. They let it rest in the cockpit, catching their breath. Facing each other, they lift it over the starboard winch and balance it on the gunwale. The boat rocks like a cradle. He knows why he is here. He puts one knee on the starboard seat. His father

holds the bag with both hands. "I'm sorry," he says. "You were disheartened on this boat. It should've been the ketch that carried you." And then his father lets go and the bag rolls over into darkness.

HUMBUG feels colder than before. Snowflakes shimmer in the gap of pale light. He shudders. He senses a subtle shift, a change. The refuge he seeks is not to be found. Perhaps he's come here too late on too many nights. Perhaps he's used it up, overstayed his welcome. Somehow, he's ill at ease. The marina's empty, he knows. No cars in the parking lot when he arrived. Not a soul stopping by to check on covers or equipment.

A thud rises from below. It's like a log striking the hull. Sailors are superstitious, he thinks, but I'm not a sailor. He waits. He hears himself breathing and feels the bottle of vodka resting on his hip. A wind starts in from the channel. Maybe that was it – a current of air nudging the boat. Now sheet metal and cinder block drone.

Nearby, three or four boats stand against winter with their masts and rigging in place, and in the wind they make a strange music, shafts and crosstrees keening, stays and shrouds whining, the slapping of loose lines. To the trained ear, these are the sounds of danger, of foreboding, of foul or heavy weather. And these are the very sounds that his father managed to ignore.

Those that sailed with the great Dorian Moore said he could read the sky better than any man. He could taste rain long before it fell. So he defied instinct and experience, made himself deaf to the alarm, when he slipped out at dusk under a press of sail, the storm gathering in the west.

A vessel isn't built to be empty. It's appalling to see it, to bear down on a grounded boat and find everything in place but its captain. It was stranded like a beached whale. He couldn't sail it back with his father adrift – with his father inconceivably lost. It was too soon. Too sudden. A less ghostly disaster

would've been easier. Why not a wreck in the cove at Great Duck Island? Why not a rudder torn away on Hangdog Reef? But a reef, he realized, might've been worse. His father had been very clear about the challenge and temptation of reefs. With a reef dead ahead, a sailor might gamble. He might trust the water to reveal its mystery, risking the hazard of green shapes, gray knees of granite, driven toward lust, greed, avarice, envy, though there's never much warning.

He hears the noise again, a thud from below, a fist hitting a wall or a door closing. He should leave. He wants to sleep, to dream. It's bitter cold, he thinks, and I am sick at heart. Maureen won't find him here. Heather knows where he is, but she sleeps the sleep of the young. He hears the sound of wood groaning, as if the boat were settling for the first time in its cradle. The wind is up. He's had too much to drink. Going down the ladder will be difficult. He slides forward and lifts himself off the starboard seat. Another thud. The cabin calls to him. A black cave.

On the water, he's the embarrassing son of Dorian Moore. He's no better on land. He remembers walking with his father in a city park, where a man in a priest's collar stood preaching beneath a tree. "Lord, create in us changed lives," said the man, "even as we drink deep, and thirst, and drink again – whatever the cost."

He watched his father listening to the prayer.

He saw his father's confidence, the purposeful stride, the steady gaze, and the hands, waterworn but strong, scored by taut lines and the constant hauling.

"The boy's hands," Otis had said, "are made for a fingerboard and strings."

His father worried out loud. "Whatever skill or talent you're given," he said, "use it for its own sake. Don't cheapen it. Don't use it to go somewhere or get things."

He stares into the dark cabin. He can't see his hands. He rubs them together. Chewed up and worthless, he thinks.

He works his way to the opening in the canvas. He crouches on the deck and peers at the windswept yard. A footfall thumps in his ear. Someone is on the companionway.

He turns. He sees his father climbing up from below.

He shuts his eyes and tries to clear his head. When he looks again, his father is still there, water dripping from his face.

He gasps. He puts out his hand but fears losing his balance, tumbling backward and down the ladder to be found beneath the keel in a broken heap. He believes that he's gone too far, spent too many nights sitting on the starboard seat drinking vodka. What will Heather do when she catches her foot on a frozen lump? Or will he shatter, scattering across the ground like the pieces of a tedious puzzle? What can he do but choose? The only way is to choose – take sides with truth or memory, sanity or madness, the real or the imagined.

He opens and closes his hand. He wants to lean toward the companionway and touch the shadow that's standing there. But then, in the next moment, it fades. There's nothing now but black, gray, and silver. He listens. Not a breath of wind. Even the shrouds are silent.