

DOLLS. PROSE POEMS BY TOM WHALEN.





# DOLLS

Winner, 2006 CAKETRAIN CHAPBOOK COMPETITION

DENISE DUHAMEL, Final Judge



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PROSE POEMS BY TOM WHALEN

**CAKETRAIN**  
[a journal and press]

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Cover image © 2007 MATTHEW FEYLD

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GRATEFUL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT IS MADE TO THE FOLLOWING PUBLICATIONS:

*Another Chicago Magazine*: “From the Life of the Doll”; *Gargoyle*: “Incompatibility,” “In an Antique Shop Window”; *Ghoti Magazine*: “Dolls Dolls Dolls,” “The Doll’s Alienation,” “Once a Doll Was Exploring Her Intestines”; *Mississippi Review*: “A True Story,” “All This,” “Woman and Dolls”; *Poetic Inbalation*: “The Lover of Dolls”; *Sentence*: “The Tenacity of Dolls,” “Belief,” “The Test,” “Instructions on How to Wind a Doll,” “Romanticism and Dolls,” “On Love and Dolls,” “Dolls and Kant,” “The Doll’s Suicide,” “The Last Word on Dolls”; *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (Paul Rosheim, Ed.; Obscure Publications, 2004): “All This,” “The Doll Performs Surgery,” “The Doll Writes to Her Mother,” “Obsession,” “The Origin of Dolls,” “Four Visitations.”

Printed on acid-free paper in Kearney, Nebraska, by MORRIS PUBLISHING

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How little I knew, then, of the windings of the labyrinth which were still to mislead me!

—*The Woman in White*, Wilkie Collins



## THE DOLL'S ALIENATION

---

TO COUGH IN THE CLOSET AND KNOW NO ONE HEARS YOU.  
Dinners with stuffed animals, wooden inanimates. She would write a letter, but who would bother to read it? Will she feel at home tomorrow? The next day?

The doll's roach-infested dress. Her smudged make-up. Last night she did not dream. Or the night before.

On the top shelf, in the dark, she listens to the child making love to someone else.

## THE DESIRES OF DOLLS

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DOLLS WANT TO CALL UP ANOTHER WORLD. They want to be Japanese. They want to tell your mother and father what you did to them last night, the little things, the secret things, in your dreams. They want the moon to take your eyes, the earth your heart. They want you to lose yourself in some dark alley, to call out for their help which they cannot give even if they wanted to, which they don't. They want you to tease them with your little doll lies, to strip and display them, memorize and mark them. "O look at my little dollie. Isn't she pretty? Isn't she mean?" They want you to burn them. They want you to blow on them. Because they love you, they want your indifference, your disdain. Whatever you can't give, that most of all they want.

ONCE A DOLL WAS  
EXPLORING HER INTESTINES

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ONCE A DOLL WAS EXPLORING HER INTESTINES AND FELL IN. What? The doll could not be dreaming. Dolls do not dream. The walls were wet and of stone that sparkled. Oh, I am lost, I am lost. But dolls don't know where they are. A man with a moustache in the shape of an anopheles mosquito passed by her. His clothes and shoes were made of scrap metal. Next she encountered a rat carrying a toy truck in its mouth. What, what? Then an unlit candle and a dead alligator were carried off by a beetle.

Night descended. The child put her to bed. The dog peed in the corner. Dolls do not pee, at least not proper ones. Still, she went on exploring, saying What, what, I am lost, I am lost, while the dog slept on and the child released from her vagina a large bright red goldfish.

*for Gisèle Prassinos*

## A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE

---

HAPPINESS, FOR KAFKA, COMES IN MANY SHADES. Somewhere he speaks of breaking his leg as the most wonderful experience of his life.

Once I found a child's doll in a black ravine. Her clothes were torn, her limbs ripped apart and scattered in the weeds. When I lifted her head off the ground, I saw that someone had put cigarettes out on her forehead and cheeks, someone had gouged out her eyes, someone had ripped off her ears, and someone (I turned my face away) had pissed on her.

Poor doll!

That night, for the first time in days, I slept peacefully.

## LITANY

---

THAT, THOUGH SHE LOVED HER DOLL, she made it pray beside her bed each night...

That she held the doll's tongue between her thumb and forefinger and squeezed as hard as she could...

That god is of a wickedness unknown to man, for which she loved the doll...

That one day, like Nerval his Aurelia, she overheard the name of Jesus on her doll's lips...

That the music she hears is not of this world, nor the tongues she speaks, nor her eyes...

That when asked by guests what she wanted to be when she grew up, shouted, "Many! Many!" then peed in her panties...

## DOLLS DOLLS DOLLS

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THE DOLL WHO SEVERED HER RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHILD once  
the child became a mother.

The doll who severed her own head and left it to drown in the  
rain.

Dolls falling from roofs only to get up, climb the stairs back to  
the roof, leap off again.

Once there was a doll so old she no longer knew her mother, no  
longer knew her name.

Doll torn apart by child's dog.

Doll prayed over, shat upon, set aflame.

Dolls dolls dolls.

Some nights I break into the store of dolls, wander the aisles  
and stare at the dolls asleep in their little coffins, but never steal  
anything.

TOM WHALEN'S poetry and prose have appeared in *AGNI*, *Caketrain*, *Fiction International*, *Gargoyle*, *The Georgia Review*, *Hayden's Ferry Review*, *The Idaho Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Marginalia*, *Mississippi Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Northwest Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Quarterly*, *Sentence*, *Seattle Review*, *Sonora Review*, *The Southern Review*, and elsewhere, as well as in several anthologies. His books include *An Exchange of Letters*, *Roithamer's Universe*, *Elongated Figures*, and *Winter Coat*. He lives in Stuttgart, Germany.

“Baudelaire wrote that ‘the overriding desire of most children is to get at and see the soul of their toys.’ Rilke claimed that when children realize that their dolls are inanimate, that their toys have no souls at all, they grow disgusted with their dolls. Enter Tom Whalen....these beautifully crafted prose poems are as animated and frightening as voodoo dolls—think the American Girl collection in the hands of Cindy Sherman. *Dolls* delighted and scared me beyond belief.”

DENISE DUHAMEL, author of *Queen for a Day*

“As a boy, I did horrible things to my sister’s dolls. But nothing so cruel as to bring them to life; to make them suffer, yearn, procreate, seek, secrete, and contemplate mortality. Tom Whalen is a virtuoso of personification (the sacred purview of the prose poet) and a sadist of playthings. *Dolls* is an entrancing and playfully disquieting collection.”

PETER CONNERS, author of *Emily Ate the Wind*

“If you like your dolls haunted and licentious, you’ve come to the right place. Tom Whalen’s preternatural creations remind me of Hans Bellmer’s fetish dolls, as possessed by the Bride of Chucky....Don’t dare to read these voodoo poems on a rainy night in a creaky old Victorian house. And if you try, remember that I warned you.”

RICHARD PEABODY, co-editor of *Mondo Barbie*

“Tom Whalen’s book is malign and unsettling and darkly outré—he re-Wittgensteins the world that used to be the case through the impassive, but vigilant, eyes of his dolls, and returns it to us strikingly changed.”

SVEN BIRKERTS, editor of *AGNI* at Boston University

*Dolls* was the winning manuscript in the 2006 Caketrain Chapbook Competition, as judged by Denise Duhamel.

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Cover image by Matthew Feyld