



GREATEST MISSES: WRITERS ON FAILURE

Mirror Interview by Benjamin Woodard
(After “Jury Duty” by Lydia Davis)

Q:

A: Not fiction, necessarily. Some stories take years, but if it’s meant to be, they usually find a home. But definitely one specific nonfiction piece.

Q:

A: My great-grandfather on my dad’s side, who died in 1950.

Q:

A: He held several positions in my hometown in central Massachusetts. He was the water commissioner, the chief of police. He opened the area’s first garage. Built one of the town’s meeting houses.

Q:

A: And he led the local chapter of the Klan.

Q:

A: The Ku Klux Klan.

Q:

A: Yes.

Q:

A: You’re not alone in thinking that. The Klan were all over New England in the early 20th century, especially in rural areas like my hometown.

Q:

A: Post Birth of a Nation.

Q:

A: If you look at small town newspapers from the 1920s, you’ll see mention of meetings and rallies. Lots of controversy, to put it mildly.

Q:

A: If not the leader, then one of the heads.

Q:

A: Formal documentation of members was never a priority, but a few years ago, I found a news clipping that mentioned my great-grandfather as the person renting a space for a Klan meeting.

Q:

A: March of 1925, I think.

Q:

A: Oh, let me back up. Because my father still has my great-grandfather’s Klan sword.

Q:

A: It was definitely creepy as a kid, knowing it was in our house.

Q:

A: There are little symbols on the hilt: a knight’s head, the Klan initials.

Q:

A: He told me it was part of our family history.

Q:

A: He thought it was better to keep it locked away as a reminder of the horrors that our family took part in than to toss it and have future generations forget.

Q:

A: Exactly. It’s easy to gloss over the past when there are no physical records. I’m sure there are people from my hometown who have no idea their great-grandfathers were part of the KKK, too.

Q:

A: Right, the failure. The “greatest miss.” Sorry.

Q:

A: I’ve tried to write about this sword and my great-grandfather—my shame over the whole thing—at least a half dozen times. And I’m now realizing I lied in my earlier answer, because initially, I went the fiction route with it.

Q:

A: A story about sneaking into a house, stealing the sword, and hurling it into the town pond. Super corny premise.

Q:

A: Flash fiction. That didn’t work, though, so I shelved it. Maybe a year later, I resurrected the idea, but in this version, my avatar/protagonist gets pulled over after stealing the sword. The cop sees the hilt in the backseat, and he lets the protagonist go because he’s into the whole Klan vibe. Again, super corny. A grab for relevancy.

Q:

A: Also, it felt dirty to use this real symbol of hate as a prop in a short story.

Q:

A: Yes, eventually, after enough time, I decided it had to be an essay. So, like I mentioned, I dug in and started researching a few years ago. One of the librarians in my hometown helped, too. We sent our finds back and forth. I ended up amassing quite a bit of material.

Q:

A: That meeting house my great-grandfather built? Its architecture featured a symbol to let other Klan members know it was a safe haven for them. Wild stuff like that.

Q:

A: It is fascinating. Horrible, too.

Q:

A: I wish I could tell you.

Q:

A: Because who would I be writing this for? Would it be for me? For the people my great-grandfather terrorized and drove out of town? What is the audience for such an essay? I guess I’m not sure.

Q:

A: But there’s also that potential cringe factor when a white person writes about this topic, isn’t there? It can feel performative. Anyway, I never found the right foothold on the material.

Q:

A: I certainly don’t want to write anything that appears to celebrate him, but maybe part of me is afraid I’ll do so by accident? **Q:**

A: The story ends badly. My great-grandfather lost everything during the depression. He and my great-grandmother left their kids behind, bought a camper, and drove out to Arizona, where they lived off the land for the last decade plus of my great-grandfather’s life. I don’t think he communicated much with anyone those last years before he died, essentially penniless.

Q:

A: Oh, I relish the fact that his final years were horrible. Karma got him, though he deserved a far worse fate.

Q:

A: The story is one I’m afraid of fully confronting, if I’m being honest.

Q:

A: They aren’t excited. My dad said something about not hurting the family name, though I think he realized how silly that sounded once it came out of his mouth.

Q:

A: There’s always a kneejerk reaction to keep a secret in a family, I think. That’s very New England. We keep our shame close to the vest.

Q:

A: That could be part of it.

Q:

A: When it comes to my fiction, crazy events happen all the time. I don’t care if anyone thinks the stories are weird, or if they then think of me differently. With the truth, though, I don’t know.

Q:

A: Sometime. It is currently a failure, my greatest miss, but there may come a day where I can pull it off. At least, I have to believe there will.

Q:

A: I can’t be a coward forever, right?

Benjamin Woodard is editor-in-chief at *Atlas and Alice Literary Magazine*. His recent fiction can be found in *Pithead Chapel*, *Necessary Fiction*, *Cutleaf*, and other journals. His microfiction has been anthologized in the 2019 and 2021 editions of *Best Microfiction*. A couple of his short essays appear in Run Amok Book’s anthology *Miscellany: Essays by Young(ish) American Voices (From the Fringe)*. Find him online at benjaminjwoodard.com and [@woodardwriter](https://twitter.com/woodardwriter).