

## Shucking an Oyster by Will Walton

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Joe twists the knob on the tank—propane hisses from the mouth of the coiled hose like an awakened Diamondback. He strikes a match, holds it up to the burner—the controlled flame flails like a forked tongue, inhaling information. He grabs an old half-rusted fifty-gallon-drum lid, lays it on top. The calcic shells start sizzling the second they hit the heated steel.

How do you know when they're done? I ask.

When they start popping, he says.

I tell him this is my first time eating oysters.

Well, you're in luck. Steamed oysters are the best. Raw's good, too.

Raw!?

Oh yeah, he says. They slide right down your throat. Grab that glove right there and that oyster knife—these are done.

He puts them on a cookie sheet, and sits it on the picnic table. With my thick leather work glove on, I pick one up. I try working the rounded-off tip of the blade in through one of the small openings, but it keeps ricocheting.

Let me show you.

He grabs the oyster from my hand, takes my knife, wedges it between the back hinge, and twists his wrist, prying it open.

Now stick this on a saltine, dab a little hot sauce on top, and tell me what you think.

Oh yeah... That's good, I tell him. Really good!

He pulls a fresh one from the cooler. He pops it open, leans his head back, drops it in his mouth, and gulps it down.

See... You don't even have to chew'em.

Now, twenty years and four stages of lung cancer later, I sit with him, visiting, while his wife injects vanilla Ensure from a sixty-milliliter syringe into a G-tube sticking out of his abdomen.

Sorry to have to do this while you're here, he says.

What!/? Get out-a here! It's no bother.

I turn and look away, commenting on the pictures of his grandkids, hanging on the walls. His wife leaves the room after he's finished his dinner.

Breaking the silence, I say, Hey... That's even better than raw oysters—not only do you not have to chew, you don't have to swallow either.

He laughs.

You still remember that?

Of course... I say. You taught me how to shuck an oyster that day.

Well..., he says. I'm glad I taught you something worth remembering. Who knows... Maybe someday you'll put it in one of those stories you're always writing.

**Will Walton** attends NC State's MFA program in Creative Writing/Poetry. He has received a Harold Gulliver Award and an Academy of American Poets Prize honorable mention. Most recently, his work has appeared in or been accepted for publication by *Faultline*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *The Evansville Review*, *Chiron Review*, *Sou'wester*, and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*, among others. He's also a musician and songwriter. His song, "I Believe," is featured in the film, *The Fix*.